

Mrs. C. L. Anderson

THE COUNTESS DE CHARNY



"'YES, MONSIEUR,' SAID HE, 'I AM THE KING!'"

Dumas, Vol. Ten

THE WORKS OF
ALEXANDRE DUMAS
IN THIRTY VOLUMES



THE
COUNTESS DE CHARNY



ILLUSTRATED WITH DRAWINGS ON WOOD BY
EMINENT FRENCH AND AMERICAN ARTISTS



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THE COUNTESS DE CHARNY.

CHAPTER I.

THE INN OF THE BRIDGE OF SÈVRES.

THE well-known manufacturing village of Sèvres lies somewhere about half-way between Paris and Versailles. At the door of the inn adjoining the bridge a personage was standing who is to play an important part in our narrative.

He was forty-five or forty-eight years of age. He was dressed as a workman, that is to say, had velvet breeches with leather facings at the pockets, like those worn by locksmiths and blacksmiths. He wore gray stockings, and shoes with copper buckles, and had on a woolen cap, like that of a lancer cut in half. A perfect forest of gray hair escaped from his cap and hung over his eyes, which were large, open, and intelligent, and flashed so wildly and so quickly that it was impossible to define their color. The other features were a nose rather large than small, heavy lips, white teeth, and a bronzed complexion.

Though not large, his figure was admirable. He had delicate limbs, a small foot, and his hand would have seemed so, too, had it not the bronze tint of that of all who work in iron.

Ascending from the hand to the elbow, and thence as far as the rolled-up sleeve suffered it to be visible, it might have been seen, in spite of the volume of muscle, that the skin was soft and fair.

This man had come an hour before from Versailles. In reply to questions asked by the innkeeper when he brought him a bottle of wine, he had said : The queen, with the king and dauphin, was coming ; that they set

ont about noon, and they were about to occupy the Tuileries, the consequence of which would be that Paris, having in it "the baker, his wife, and the baker's boy," would not want bread.

He was waiting to see the cortège pass.

The assertion might be true, yet it was easier to see that he looked oftener toward Paris than toward Versailles.

After a few minutes he seemed satisfied, for a man clad almost as he was, and apparently of the same condition, was seen to approach the inn.

The newcomer walked heavily, like one who had made a long journey. His age might be that of the unknown man, that is to say, as people usually do, that he was on the wrong side of forty. His features betokened him to be a man of common inclinations and vulgar instincts.

The stranger looked curiously at the newcomer, as if he wished at one glance to measure all the impurity and wickedness of the man.

When the workman who came from Paris was about twenty paces from the man who awaited him, the latter poured out the first glass of wine into one of two glasses which stood on the table.

"Ah ! ha !" said he, "it is cold, and the journey is long. Let us drink, and warm ourselves up."

The man from Paris looked around to see who gave him this invitation. "Do you speak to me ?" said he.

"Whom else should I ? There is no other person present," was the reply.

"Why offer me wine ?"

"Why not ?"

"Ah !"

"It is because we are of the same, or nearly the same trade."

"Everybody may be of the same trade. It is necessary, however, to know whether one be companion or master."

"Well, we will drink a glass of wine, chat, and find out which is the case."

"Very well," said the workman, advancing toward the door of the inn.

The stranger led the newcomer to the table, and gave him the glass.

"Ah!" said he, "this is Burgundy."

"Yes; the brand was recommended to me, and I do not regret that I ordered it. There is yet wine in the bottle, and other bottles in the cave."

"What are you about now?"

"I am from Paris, and await the coming of the royal cortège, which I intend to accompany to Paris."

"What mean you?"

"The king, queen, and dauphin return to Paris with the market-women, two hundred members of the assembly, and the National Guard under the command of Lafayette."

"La Bourgeois has then resolved to go to Paris?"

"He had to do so."

"So I thought, at three last night, when I left for Paris."

"Ah! I was curious to know what would become of the king, especially as I know him. This is no boast. A man who has a wife and three children must feed them, especially when there is no longer a Royal Forge."

The stranger said only, "Then business took you to Paris?"

"Yes; and on my honor, I was well paid for it." As he spoke, the man rattled several coins in his pocket. "The money, however," said he, "was given me by a servant; what is worst of all, by a German servant. That was wrong."

"Ah," said the stranger, like a man who advances slowly, but yet advances, "you are on a business which is important, and well paid for?"

"Yes."

"Because it is difficult?"

"It is."

"A secret lock—hey?"

"An invisible door."

"An invisible door! I imagine a man in a house, who finds it necessary to hide himself. Well, the bell is rung.

Where is monsieur ? he is not in ? No, he is ; look for him. He is looked for. Good evening. I defy any one to find monsieur. An iron door with oak paneling, you understand, few can tell the difference."

" But if any one touch it ? "

" Bah ! just make the oak an inch thick, and no one can tell. I could not myself."

" Where made you that ? "

" Aha ! "

" Then you will not tell ? "

" I cannot, for I do not know."

" You were then blindfolded ? "

" Exactly. There was a carriage at the gate ; they said, ' Are you So-and-so ? ' ' Yes,' said I. ' Well, we awaited you. Get in.' I did. When in, my eyes were bandaged, and the carriage was driven for nearly half an hour ; at last the door of a great house was opened ; I stumbled at the first step, and then went up ten steps into the vestibule. There I found a German servant, who said to the others, ' It is well ! Go away ; there is no longer any need of you.' The others left, and the bandage was taken from my eyes, and I was told what I had to do. I set to work, and in one hour all was done. They paid me in good louis d'or. My eyes were again blindfolded. I was put in the carriage, and taken back to the place whence I was borne."

" The bandage must have been very tight to prevent one from telling the right from the left."

" Heu ! heu ! "

" Come, then," said the stranger, " tell me what you really saw."

" When I stumbled I took care, in a slight degree, to derange the bandage."

" And when you had done so ? " said the stranger, with equal vivacity.

" I saw a row of trees on the right, which made me think the house was on the boulevard, that is all I know."

" All ? "

"On my word of honor."

"That gives little information."

"The boulevards are long, and there are many houses with wide doors on them."

"Then you would not recognize the house?"

The locksmith thought for a moment, and said, "No, I would not."

The stranger, though his face did not seem to say what he really wished to utter, appeared satisfied, and said: "Well, then, it seems there are no locksmiths, since people send to Versailles for one to make a secret door."

He then filled the glasses again, and knocked on the table with the empty bottle, that the innkeeper might bring a full one.

"Yes, there are locksmiths in Paris, but there are masters and professors."

"Ah, I see; like St. Eloi, you are one of the latter."

"I am. Do you belong to the trade?"

"Something of the sort."

"What are you?"

"A gunsmith."

"Have you any of your work about you?"

"Do you see this gun?"

The locksmith took the gun, looked carefully at it, tried the lock, and approved of the click of the springs, then reading the name on the breech, said:

"Impossible, my friend. Leclerc cannot be older than twenty-eight. Do not be offended, but you and I are close on fifty."

"True, I am not Leclerc; but I am just the same."

"How so?"

"I am his master."

"Ah! that is just as if I had said I am not the king, but his master."

"What mean you?"

"Because I am the king's master."

"Ah! have I the honor to speak to Monsieur Gomain?"

" You have, and if I could, I would serve you," said the locksmith, delighted at the effect he had produced.

" Diable ! I did not know I was talking to a man of such consequence."

" Ah ! "

" To a man of such consequence," repeated the stranger.
" Tell me, is it pleasant to be a king's master ? "

" Why ? "

" I think it very humiliating for one man to be forced to call another ' your majesty.' "

" I did not have to do so. When at the forge, I called him Bourgeois, and he called me Gamain. We spoke together familiarly."

" Yes, but when dinner-time came you were sent to eat with the servants."

" Not a bit of it ; a table ready served was brought to me at the shop, and at breakfast he often said : ' Bah ! I will not go to see the queen, for then I will not have to wash my hands.' "

" I do not see."

" Why, when the king worked in iron as we do, his hands were like ours. That does not, however, keep us from being honest people ; but the queen used to say : ' Fy, sire, your hands are dirty.' Just as if one could work in a shop and have clean hands. I tell you, he was never happy, except when in his geographical library, his study, or when he was with me. I think, though, he liked me best."

" Such a pupil as a king must have been a famous business for you."

" Not a bit ; you are mistaken. I wish devoutly it was so ; for though the master of Louis XVI., the Restorer of France, while all the world thinks me as rich as Croesus, I am poor as Job."

" You poor ? What on earth does he do with his money, then ? "

" One half goes to the poor, the other half to the rich, so that he never has a penny. The Coigny, the Vaudreuil, and Polignac gnaw the poor fellow away. He wished to

reduce Coigny's salary, and made Coigny come to the door of the shop, and after about five minutes, he came in as pale as possible, saying, 'On my honor, I thought he would beat me !' 'But his salary, sire,' said I. 'Oh, I let it stand as it is. I could not help it.' A few days afterward he sought to make some remarks to the queen about the pension of Madame de Polignac; only think, three hundred thousand francs; a nice thing."

" Bah ! it was not enough. For the queen made him give her five hundred thousand. Thus, you see, these Polignacs, who a few years ago had not a sou, are about to leave France with millions. That would be nothing had they any talent, but give the whole of them an anvil and sledge, and not one can shoe a horse or make a key. They, however, like knights, as they say they are, have urged the king forward, and now leave him to get on as he can with Bailly, Mirabeau, and Lafayette; while to me, who would have given him such good advice, his master, his friend, who first put the file in his hand, he has given only fifteen hundred crowns a year."

" But you work with him, and something good falls in from day to-day."

" What ! I work with him ? No. It would compromise me. Since the taking of the Bastile, I have not put my foot inside of the palace. Once or twice I met him, the street was full of people, and he bowed to me. The second time was on the Satory road, and he stopped his carriage. ' Well, poor Gamain,' said he, ' things do not go on as you wish them to. This will, however, teach you. But how are your wife and children ?' ' Well, very well,' said, I. ' Here,' said the king, ' make them this present for me.' He searched his pockets, and all the money he could find was nine louis. ' This is all I have,' said he, ' and I am ashamed to make you so poor a present.' You will agree with me that a king who has nine louis only, and who makes his comrade so poor a present, must be badly off."

" You did not take them ?"

" Yes, I did. You must always take, for somebody else

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