The Dauphin

A Short Story based on Fact

By Maryanne Peters

Where is the Dauphin Louis Charles, son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and heir to the throne of France? He was supposed to have died in June 1795, almost three years after his father Loius XVI of France was executed and less than two years after his mother Marie Antoinette faced the guillotine in October 1793. But this was never proved.

What we know is that the person who was declared dead in prison was not the Dauphin. Earlier this year – the year of our Lord 1846, I had the body exhumed and examined by two doctors. They both confirmed that it was the body of a young man of 15 or 16 – not a boy of 10. The bones have been reserved for further examination at some future date, but the opinion of these gentlemen must be considered sound. We have the statements of the woman gaoler who attended to the young prisoner in 1794 and who claimed that she had been party to a plan to substitute a deaf mute of similar age for the young prince. On her death bed before the nuns and before her God she said: “My little prince is not dead”. Why would she lie?

Then we have those who produced this evidence and more including M. Petitival, murdered together with his whole family – why if not for to conceal the truth? The death certificate was false. We have all this fabrication built up to confirm his death, but none of it appears true. The truth must be that his death did not happen at all. So, the prince lived then, so what happened to him?

With the collapse of the Bonaparte regime and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy there were plenty of claimants. It seemed that France was awash with dauphins. Many a young man in his thirties stepped forward. The official count was 27, but by my own count it is closer to 50. Most were buffoons and easily dismissed.

An early claim of apparent substance was made by Baron de Richemont, affiliated to a minor aristocratic family, might be the dauphin. His story was that a female assistant to the gaoler had smuggled him out in a basket, with the deaf mute being substituted who as dying of scrofula. Richemont made his first claims in 1828 during the reign of Charles X the second monarch of the restoration. He was arrested and brought to trial as an imposter. He was sent to prison for twelve years but escaped (possibly assisted by some who backed his claim to the throne) and fled the country. He returned to France a few years ago but with the proclaiming of Louis Philippe as King of the French the Bourbon dynasty was over and his claim irrelevant.

Then in 1833 came the claim by one Karl Wilhelm Naundorff, a clockmaker from Spandau in Germany. The strange thing about his story is that he claimed to have been smuggled out of France as a child not by the gaoler but by General Paul Barras. Barras was one of the Directory of the First Republic and a man who had been among those approving of the execution of aristocrats, although he was a minor one himself. It seemed as if this claim could only be made after the death of Barras a few years before, when if it had been made before the restoration it would have been more advantageous to the claimant.

At almost 40 years on it seemed unlikely, but the nurse to the Dauphin’s claim to recognize Naundoff as the child grown to 50 years, and some attesting to his resemblance to members of the royal family, encouraged the man to make a claim for the hollow title by civil court action. But officials were not pleased. Naundorff was arrested and expelled from France. He went to London, where he sought out a champion in my grandmother, as a well-known supporter of the French aristocracy who had helped to rescue many during the reign of terror in France.

My grandmother was Charlotte Atkyns – actress and spy. She was an indomitable woman and had acquired no small amount of fame for her efforts to rescue the French Royal family and other aristocrats from imprisonment and execution during the revolution there. She was born Charlotte Walpole, a cousin of Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, and she had a short career on the London stage before marrying my grandfather Sir Edward Atkyns and moving to France.

After the outbreak of the French revolution, she was recruited as a “spy” and an agent for the counterrevolutionary royalists. Between 1791 and 179, she was active in this role in Paris and was to later become known for her attempts of trying to aid the members of the former royal family to escape from prison. In 1793, following the execution of the King she made repeated attempts to try to help Queen Marie Antionette on one occasion by visiting her in prison dressed as a national guard with the plan of changing clothes with her.

It was well known that she also tried to free the former royal children from the Paris Temple, the imposing fortress built by the Knights Templar in the 12th century. It was said that she spent large sums of money in this venture but had no success. For all that she achieved it was her failure to liberation the dauphin that saw her marked as a mere eccentric by present day historians.

But it was unsurprising perhaps, that Naundorff came to London in 1835 when my grandmother was 78 years old. As her grandson I considered myself her protector. The truth is that I had a great admiration for her, given her exploits and remarkable woman that she was. I received this Herr Naundorff myself and listened to his story. I suggested to my grandmother that she meet him, but she was dismissive. When I pointed out that he having travelled a great distance just to see her, she relented and I invited him to my father’s home to meet her.

He entreated her to support his claim to be the dauphin, although he suggested to her that she may never have met the boy he claimed once to have been.

I will never forget what she said to him. She said: “That is not so. I have met the Dauphin of France. Through my efforts that person is free today, and very much alive, and you are not that person.”

This man Naundorff was shocked. And so was I. But after initially protesting that she must be mistaken she was so adamant that he must be an imposter that he retreated from the house, and we never saw him again.

I had to ask my grandmother about whether it was really true, and what had transpired in France all those years ago. She told me that if I was seriously interested that she would show me. She said that if I was able, we should travel to Paris and I could meet the Dauphin, or the person who had once been the Dauphin, in person. She said that she longed to see Paris again before she died. She insisted that she was fit for the journey, and despite her age, I never doubted it. But as it turned out she would never again return to London.

There was never any doubt for me that I should take the trip, and so we did. My grandmother had me sworn to secrecy. She explained that the Dauphin was leading a new life, and a happy one. That happiness was based upon anonymity, and nothing more was to be said about it until our forthcoming meeting which my grandmother arranged by a letter dispatched to an address in Paris.

Paris at the time was entering a new phase of renewal. It would be some years before the grand rebuilding of the city, but the revolution and Napoleonic rule had left their mark on the lifestyle. There were now the houses that the called “restaurants” where the consumption of food rather that liquor was the primary purpose, items of clothing were sold from shops rather than tailors and dressmakers, and money rather than social position dictated how well you might be treated.

When we arrived in the city, we saw the first steam locomotive passenger service in the city. It is true that France was well behind Britain in rail services but here was a service available to the general public for a fairly modest fee.

The deprivation that had brought about the revolution seemed to have been replaced by industry and optimism. The writer Balzac was penning the first modern novel, machinery was in use, and money ruled everything.

Parts of the city seemed squalid and in need of demolition, but the area near Saint Antoine where we went by carriage was refined – the homes of the new bankers and other men of wealth without title or estates. In the heart of this area was the home that we were seeking – it was behind a large wall and gate to the street and a courtyard with an old but imposing stone building in the far side and a smaller gate beside it leading through to fully enclosed gardens.

A servant let us in, and I helped my grandmother across the stones to the door being opened for her.

A woman rushed out to greet my grandmother. I thought her about 40 years old, but as I later learned she was over 50. She had a fine figure with the bound in waist becoming so popular. She had long honey brown hair arranged on top of her head with some curls hanging down. The most remarkable this was her eyes - large and slightly hooded, and blue grey in color. She had a flawless complexion with the only hint of age being the lines by the eyes that my grandmother always said were a mark of a lifetime of laughter.

They embraced and they spoke in French. I had learned a little of the language but the exchange was beyond my abilities. It was clear that this friendship must have gone back a long way. I assume that the woman was the wife of the man we had come to see.

My grandmother then remember me and gave my name to the lady. I tool her dainty hand and kissed it.

Then my grandmother introduced her. She said: “This is Marie, the Countess of Barras, married to the son of General Paul Barras. Marie is the one I have been talking about my boy. Up until the age of ten, she was Louis-Charles, the Dauphin of France. So you see, that German was a liar.”

I was amazed. For a moment I was unsteady on my feet. While she was older than me, there was the baser humanity inside me that found her appearance fascinating in an almost sinful way, and now I had learned that she was not a woman at all. She just smiled, and that made her even more alluring.

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| To my surprise she then spoke to me in English. She said that she had learned to speak the language to thank all those who had supported my grandmother and others in the efforts to save her mother and her family, and other aristocrats. So many people had died at the hands of the revolutionaries for no other reason that the fact that they were born into the upper classes, and the only support that could be counted on was from England, where those same upper classes had a growing fear that a similar insurrection might follow over there.But why a woman? And how? And now that it was over, why continue? | There is no doubt that when you look at the surviving portraits of the Dauphin, the resemblance is evident. The earliest portrait is of the prince aged about five, with long blonde hair, adorned with roses and looking more like a girl than a boy.The second portrait that I had seen was of him aged about eight – just before the revolution. The hair was a little shorter, but they were her eyes, without doubt, beneath the same delicately arched brows. With the bare chest bordered in lace – this was the Countess of Barras. |

She said that it was a story of fear and a story of love.

The story told but Naundorff was a lie, but he must have had some information to understand that it was truthful in one respect. No, the young ten-year-old prince was not smuggled out in a basket by gaolers, he was “moved to another location” by the revolution’s key general Paul Barras. As I have explained despite the fact that he was a minor aristocrat he joined the mob early and rose to a position of power. He oversaw many executions, but as the Countess explained to me, he was felt uneasy about seeing a severed head with a pretty face – male or female.

I have since learned more about Paul Barras. Before the revolution he made a name for himself as a soldier in French India, fighting the British in that distant place, before returning to France. He was always a democrat, believing that people should choose their own leaders, so at the outbreak of the Revolution he offered to become an administrator in his home province of Var. From there he took a seat at the National Council and was one who voted for the execution of King Louis XVI. He also served in the Revolutionary Army and was responsible for promoting Napoleon Bonaparte.

But Paul Barras was most famous for his personal life. He was the one who introduced Josephine d Beauharnais to Bonaparte as she had been his mistress for years. It was well known that he had many mistresses and in addition many male lovers. His “immorality” was well known and often cited as an example of the new liberties, but it ultimately played a part in the collapse of the Directory and its replacement by the Consulate. But this was all well after the escape of the Dauphin.

Barras considered the young prince to be a very pretty boy – far to pretty to die. He was the one who substituted the dying youth and carried the boy to safety, putting him is skirts and taking him into his home as his “niece”. While he had not married, also living in his home was his son by an earlier mistress - Marcel, then 5 years older than the new arrival, Whether or not Marcel had the same flexibility in sexual partners that his father had, or not, over time he fell madly in love with the young royal, now renamed Marie.

What became clear was that Marie reciprocated. As she explained it to me, she resisted at first, considering such a relationship to be perverted and sinful, but as she reached her teens she decided that she no longer wished to be male and had steps taken to ensure that she did not.

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| General Barras said that as she could no longer assure an heir her position was irrelevant. She should simply live a good life as his son’s wife, which exactly what she chose to do.My grandmother had been there while all of this had happened, but when she discovered how much in love the pair were, she agreed to keep secret the survival of the Dauphin, even though it forever marked her reputation as a failure on her part. She just felt that I needed to know before she died, which she did there in Paris, surrounded by those who adored her, only a few months later.It would not have mattered to me. As I have said, I was enormously proud of my grandmother. She was the most remarkable woman I have ever met, followed closely by Marie, the Countess of Var, the wife of Marcel BarrasThe End© Maryanne Peters 2021 | Text  Description automatically generated |