

The End of This Day by Charlotte Lafargue Henderson – 3rd Place Winner

Let's make from our clasped hands

At the end of this day

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A chain of love.

“Choral des Adieux”

“Entrails! Give us her entrails!”

Someone shouted from the dusty rafters of the crowded chamber. With angry scowls and fearsome hatred on each face, the inflamed crowd jostled and swayed above her. The peasants hung over the balcony bellowing and shaking their fists. Gentry and merchants, honored denizens of the ground floor, surged toward the courtroom bench. Their howls and slurs filled Marie's ears with angry, spiteful words that brought her to tears again. Terrified, she watched as the multitude, packed shoulder to shoulder, jostled each other for the chance to view the prisoner. After two days of the trial and accusations, she felt claustrophobic, felt as if the walls were closing in and there was nothing she could do about it.

Exhausted, Marie stood silently on the platform while the courtroom murmuring fell, then rose to a roaring protest. Listless, she cast her blue eyes to the filthy floor in resignation. Fingering the dingy lace on her gown, she recalled her first fête, with the music and frivolity and handsome young men surrounding her with their smiles. Life was wonderful then. She opened her eyes.

Her tattered lavender gown, once resplendent and worn in joy, now sagged against her sweating legs and torn stockings, outlining her gaunt figure. Her blonde hair, roughly shorn in anger by one of her supposedly loyal chamber maids, was now and tangled with dirt and no longer framed her face in either grace or fashion. She tasted the blood that seeped slowly across her lips, raw from mindlessly raking her chipped teeth over them. Her ribs hurt. The geôliers had been rough enough on her, shoving her from one prison cell to another. At least they hadn't raped her.

Her dry throat made swallowing the lump of fear difficult. Once, these were her beloved countrymen. Now they had her bound and trussed like the squab she once feasted upon so delicately. Marie huffed softly and felt like the entrée in this courtroom of starving rabble. Soon enough

their urges would be satisfied, she thought. Soon enough this ordeal would end. But not soon enough, she feared, shuddering.

The stench of sweating unwashed bodies filled her nose, and she might have vomited, but the dry heaving she'd had in the dark cell before being hauled out like a criminal was all she could manage. Her stomach, like her heart, was empty and pinched. Hunger had become a familiar companion, a pain she could focus on amid all the frightful noise.

“Order! Order! Order!” the tribunal judge stood, slamming the gavel angrily on the desk. His wig slid partway off in the effort, and Marie might have laughed if she wasn't the main course to be served to this mockery of justice. His gavel wasn't enough to get their attention, and he stood and scowled at the packed audience, but the murmuring in the background somehow never stopped. As the plump appellate for the tribunal approached, Marie wished once again that this was all over.

The appellate smirked, folded his hands behind his back and walked in a semi-circle around Marie. He turned then, unsmiling, to face the boisterous crowd, but spoke to Marie. She thought she saw him wink at the crowd. “Is it not true, your...ahem...highness...that in addition to the crimes I have already listed, that you also participated in orgies in Versailles?”

And if I did, what of it?

The crowd jeered and yelled obscenities.

“Do you admit you and your husband sent millions of livres of French treasury money to your homeland, Austria?”

No, she thought. You don't know what you're talking about. He was supporting—

Feet drummed the flooring, and Marie could feel the thrumming through her body.

“Didn't you plot to oust the venerable Cardinal de Rohan from court?”

Marie shook her head slowly, even knowing it did no good to deny anything. A tomato, rotten and stinking, struck her breast. It hurt, but Marie couldn't bring herself to cry, even in shame.

“These crimes and more, you have perpetrated, Madame, including poisoning your first son!” He spread his hand and waved it in a flamboyant gesture toward the crowd.

Never! Marie curdled inside. *Never! You lie!*

“Puitan!”

“Chienne!”

“Meurtrier!”

Whore, bitch, murderer. This is what it comes to. Marie closed her bloodshot eyes, and with a twist in her already-ravaged heart, pictured her precious Louis-Joseph. His dark curls were plastered against his fevered little forehead. She held and rocked him in her arms in the awful final hours before his death only four short years earlier. That wretched, horrible day her second baby coughed his little lungs out, coughing blood, coughing, always coughing. He was only seven years old! They’d had to pry him from her grip, she remembered. She would never, ever forget that day. How could they say she murdered her baby boy?

Listening to the crowd shouting, a thought came to her and she suddenly felt cold. In front of her was something more terrifying than these false accusations about her son. If this crowd of commoners overtook the courtroom, these animals would not hesitate to tear her apart with their vengeful hands, as Marie had heard about what the mob did to Madame Lamballe. When Lamballe refused to swear an oath against her friend the queen, Lamballe was literally ripped apart by the crazed rabble, and what was left was mounted on pikes and paraded through the streets. Bile rose in Marie’s throat and she trembled at the memory. *Mon Dieu, s’il vous plaît pardonne moi.* Dear God, please, please forgive me.

“The fullness of these outrages against the State, I present to the denizens of France, the Committee of Public Safety, and the Holy Catholic Church. To the citizens of France, I ask for your verdict!” the appellate shouted to the courtroom.

“TREASON!” The crowd leaped to its feet, roaring its anger.

Startled, Marie flinched and leaned back, lost her balance and almost fell off the post. A sharp prod from behind forced her to stand up once again in the middle of the platform. Her hands shackled, she could no longer grasp the balustrade for support. The heavy iron rubbing against her wrists was making her fingers numb. Marie didn’t think she could survive much more of this torture.

Two years of imprisonment, separation from her children, and them dying from neglect, what more did they want from her? Marie prayed to her saints for this to end. Her eyelids were so heavy now, she couldn’t lift her eyes, could no longer bear to see the hatred in the faceless crowd. Stunned by the verdict

and numbed by pain, she barely noticed people struggling to get to her, the soldiers blocking them, the shouting of the judges.

The appellate nodded in satisfaction to her. “We all know the sentence for treason, Madame!”

No!

The clamor was deafening as the military trotted toward her. Rotten fruit, dog feces, smelly rags all fell, in turn, on Marie. Someone finally got close enough to spit. She turned her face, but the warm splat against her cheek was close enough to her eye to cause her to squeeze it shut. The sour stench of chewed tobacco combined with diseased gums filled her nose as the spittle dripped from her eye to the side of her nose. With her unaffected eye, she saw a gaunt toothless man nod in malevolent satisfaction at her misery and shame. She rubbed her face against her shoulder, removing only a portion of the slime.

Abruptly someone grabbed her from behind and hustled her toward a doorway behind the judges’ panels. Dazed and numb, she was shoved onto a donkey cart, to find herself paraded through the streets past the frenzied horde. A tiny portion of her mind was grateful for the chance to sit, to be out of the hot courtroom, grateful that this nightmare was finally going to end. She knew the outcome. Her husband’s execution had not been enough.

The open tumbrel cart wobbled roughly across the cobblestone road toward her fate. Marie jounced back and forth in the rickety cart as the donkey was hurried toward his destination, then jerked to an abrupt stop. The on-lookers were in pandemonium, but now Marie no longer cared.

Tears blurred her vision. Marie lifted her eyes to the milieu and wondered, for the last time, how it came to this. The sounds of the crowd dimmed and everything became unfocused. She had been so happy in her beloved Austria before she’d had to marry Louis-Auguste to end the rivalry between their royal families. In the beginning, his people adored her. They wined and dined and partied with her. They loved her beautiful dresses and her shiny blonde hair and sparkly shoes. Somewhere along the way – and it was all the fault of that wretched economy – they turned on her. Didn’t they remember her compassion? Didn’t they remember when she helped that peasant who’d been gored by a stag? What about that poor orphan boy she took in and provided for his education? She loved helping people. What ungrateful wretches these proletarians became. But her babies, her darling girls and little Jean-Louis, they were all lost to her now. And she’d never see Louis again, that curious myopic boy who became her friend and husband and the king of France.

The guard grasped Marie above the elbow, squeezing it tightly. She winced, and scrambled out of the cart. He pulled her unceremoniously up the scaffold and deposited her in front of the executioner, then

retreated. A black cloth covered the executioner's face to protect him from the spirit of Death recognizing his soul when it came to snatch hers. With an effort, Marie straightened her back, tipped her chin up and took in a ragged breath. Slowly approaching the guillotine, she stumbled and accidentally stepped on the executioner's foot.

"Monsieur, I ask your pardon. I did not do it a'purpose," she whispered.

The executioner stood back and bowed, surprising her. "My queen," he said, gently.

Her heart ready to burst, Marie barely managed to acknowledge him. He offered his hand to balance her but she shook her head. She would do this one last thing on her own, as a queen should, she thought.

Lowering herself to kneel, she lifted her chin and refused to look at the leering crowd. When her neck was firmly placed on the lower part of the lunette, the executioner tied her arms and legs against the bascule. Terrified, she started to shake all over. Somehow she remembered something her mother had told her a long, long time ago. "Never fear death, my daughter. Face it as the queen that you are." A forlorn tear dropped to the scaffold.

Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, closed her eyes and softly sang the words she'd sung to her precious Louis-Joseph the night he died in her arms. "Formons de nos mains qui s'enlacent, au déclin de ce jour. Formons de nos mains qui s'enlacent, une chaîne d'amour."

Marie heard the sound the mouton made when the blade was released.

She thought she felt something cold on her neck. She thought she heard the crowd cry out in joy. She thought...