



A medieval castle

THE CASTLE OF CHARNY

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A perplexing notice in Courtépée* says that the castle of Charny was "demolished under Louis XIII around 1614". In that year, the King of France was only thirteen years old; and he who so systematically had castles demolished was Richelieu, whose real power dates from 1624 when, as Prime Minister, he took affairs of state into his own steely hands. One of the three aims pursued, and successfully, by Richelieu was to break the power of the "Grands"; princes, nobles, rich seigneurs who had risen in revolt against the crown. But the count of Charny, Charles Chabot, seigneur of Tanlay, was loyal to Louis XIII and for King and Church gave his life at the battle of Montauban (1621).

The seigneurie of Charny had been elevated to a comte by Duke Philippe the Good, around 1456, in favor of Pierre de Bauffremont, who had married the duke's natural daughter, Marie de Bourgogne.

Referring to the official acts of a 1638 court proceedings, Courtépée quotes a few lines, and the description of the chateau is prefaced by *jadis*, formerly, in days gone by: Formerly the keep was provided with ten towers built of freestone, with a covered passage; the main buildings had two wings; a vast outer bailey; wide and deep moats. Moreover, "Time seems to have respected the chapel; from very far, one side can be seen, which announces its solidity and the past grandeur of its masters." Courtépée wrote the Charny notice between 1779 and 1781, when he sent the first draft of his book to the editor.

Charny caps the top of a hill which rises abruptly above the plains. A good road from the plains begins to slope steeply upward, passing the scattered houses of Villeneuve-sous-Charny; along this stretch, stone walls, strangled in briars, mark the outer defenses of the medieval village. The crest of the hill, at 530m, commands a vast panorama over fields and plains, joyous in summer fertility, under a sky which is clearly heaven's forecourt. Over the endless circle of the plains, no enemy could advance unseen, even had there been more forest than today. Far in the distance,

* COURTÉPÉE ET BÉCUILLET: *Description du Duché de Bourgogne*, vol. IV, 3rd Edition, Guenegaud, Paris 1968, pp. 112, 128, 166.



The well.

one can see the XIIth century church of St. Thibaut; one of its benefactors in 1257 was Elizabeth de Charny, Lady of Thil. Behind Charny the bare plateau begins to rise. A single-track road from Thorey-sous-Charny winds up to the highest level (570m), marked by a tall stone cross dedicated to St. Thomas; this was one of the relay points on which a bonfire would be built as a signal in case of some important event. From there, the road descends quickly to Mont-Saint-Jean (392m), one lieue (4 mi.) from Charny.

There is nothing at Charny except a few neat farmhouses skirting the edge of some long-buried foundations. In 1980, forty-five aging inhabitants were going about their ancient chores. The younger generations had moved away to neighboring towns, where life had not decelerated. Some vestiges of the castle still stand along the flank of the ridge, facing the panorama.

Why was Charny castle demolished? Because deliberately it was; no natural forces could so effectively have rased it to the ground.

The rubble of stone and masonry which fell clogs iron-barred windows, half-exposed above the earth. A few courses of stone trace the line of the outer walls, here and there studded with massive tower-stumps. The only thing still intact is what appears to be a small sentry tower, in which a farmer now stores his beetroots, fed to cattle; a stairway has been blocked off, as it led to empty space. Brambles billow around the spring-fed well; elderly farmers told me that when they were boys they used to toss stones into it. Trees and bushes have grown so thick in the moat that the unattended explorer must be extremely cautious not to disappear forever. If any vestige remains of the chapel mentioned by Courtépée, it could not be found. Perhaps the present church stands in its place. No one in Charny could remember when services were last held in this small church. The windows were trellised in vines; under the weather-worn door, tall grass had sprouted; the handle and hinges were cased in rust; no one knew if there was a key.

In the little cemetery, sprinkled with the mourning purple of wild pansies, big and beautiful as butterflies, the earliest grave was dated 1872, the latest in the 1970s.

We can never be certain that in this very chateau-fort Geoffroy de Charny was born; or that he passed his earliest childhood under these soaring skies. We can only surmise that he was sent, as custom was, to serve as a page to some great nobleman, perhaps the Count Raoul d'Eu, under whose banner Geoffroy first saw battle, as *bachelier*, , in 1337. But to invest with some substance the personal history of that "perfect knight" whose name is written for all time in the annals of the Holy Shroud, we can go no farther back than this. And when the last house around the ruins is left vacant and creeping vegetation smothers the last trace of Charny, there will still be one rough rock-fragment, fallen from the crumbling wall, which I pensively saved from the webbing weeds.