

Mr. Dobson's "Four Frenchwomen"

BETWEEN COVERS of more than usual attractiveness appear the lives of 'Four Frenchwomen,' to the retelling of which Mr. Austin Dobson has brought his consummate literary workmanship. The actors of the great national tragedy of France, culminating in 1789, who, during its opening scenes, danced their gavottes and tossed their epigrams unheeding the coming crash, lose nothing of their interest as time goes on. Extenuating naught, and yet tenderly, the author sketches for us the story of those two grim heroines of the Girondins, Charlotte de Corday and Mme. de Roland, who carried their stoicism to the gallows' foot, and cowed their accusers under the shadow of the knife. They were of stone, those two, and Deucalion though Mr. Dobson be, he cannot give them the breath of humanity that would make them of our kin, to be wept over in their extremity. More touching is his pathetic picture of her who was the staunch friend of the hated 'Autrichienne'—the hapless Princesse de Lamballe. Of the beauty of this lady he quotes, and declares untranslatable, the description of the MM. de Goncourt, containing this striking passage:—'Il n'y avait pas un pli, une nuage sur son beau front, battu de ces longs cheveux blonds qui boucleront encore autour de la pique de Septembre.' And from the poignant chapter of her brutal murder, culminating in the parade of that dainty, ghastly head, we are led, with a sigh of relief, to the brighter spectacle of a *précieuse* in her native atmosphere. Mme. de Genlis, whose memoir completes the number selected for this volume, was one of those wonderful women of old France whom Time could not wither nor custom stale in the eyes of their fellow-countrymen. 'Une femme auteur, le plus gracieux et le plus galant des pédagogues,' Ste.-Beuve gallantly describes her; and then inserts in his 'Galerie des Femmes Célèbres' a portrait of the lady which is to confound biographers. 'This could never be the epicene genius whom Rivarol had twitted—the omniscient matron who had reserved for her old age the task of re-writing the Encyclopédie!' cries Mr. Dobson. 'A sham *bergère* . . . a sidelong, self-conscious, wide-eyed head, with a ribbon woven in the well-dressed hair—with the complexion of a miniature and the simper of Dresden china. . . . "Je suis excessivement jolie," she seems to say.' The scroll of her life, enduring till well past eighty years, and spent continually 'in society,' is so written and rewritten with historical events, incidents, scandals, meetings with celebrated folk in France, England and Germany, as to be in her own interminable Memoirs almost too tedious to decipher. In a few brilliantly worded pages, Mr. Dobson has given us the best of this 'Comedian, School-Mistress, Prude, Pietest and Politician.' If she could come back from the grave to do so, the countess would undoubtedly confer upon her latest biographer an approving pat with her fan, and immediately set to work to write a volume in his praise. (\$1.25. Dodd, Mead & Co.)