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LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

I

THE PARTISAN

THE AUTHOR of the *Maximes* was born in 1613 and, until his father's death in 1650, was known as the prince de Marcillac. He then became, as eldest son and heir, François VI, duc de La Rochefoucauld. The Christian name, François, was first adopted to commemorate a notable event in the domestic annals of the family—the appointment of one of its members as godfather to the infant king, François Ier. However, the origins of this ancient feudal house go back to Foucauld I, seigneur de La Roche in the province of L'Angoumois, who flourished under king Robert at the beginning of the eleventh century. The grandfather and great-grandfather of our La Rochefoucauld, it is interesting to note, were fanatical Huguenots, though the former subsequently went over to Catholicism, whilst François V obtained a dukedom for his ruthless suppression of the Protestants in Le Poitou.

Most of what we know about La Rochefoucauld's life is derived from his own *Mémoires* which embrace the period 1624 until 1652, that is to say, from his eleventh to his fortieth year. For the rest, we have to rely on his somewhat meagre correspondence, on sundry references in the letters of his friends or enemies, and, finally, on two *portraits* written in the manner of the time. One is by the author himself, the other occurs in the memoirs of De Retz. The latter had good reason to hate La Rochefoucauld whom he portrays, nevertheless, with a surprising absence of rancour.

Eleven seems at first a rather precocious starting-point for a book of political reminiscences until we learn that, a

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fifteen, La Rochefoucauld was already a husband. In 1628, he married Andrée de Vivonne whose father was Grand Falconer to Louis XIII. Unhappily, only two of her letters have survived destruction, but from these it seems that she was a devoted wife and mother. Like most excellent châtelaines, Mme de La Rochefoucauld has no history. 'On sait assez', we read in one of her husband's maxims, 'qu'il ne faut guère parler de sa femme.' And both in the *Mémoires* and in his *Correspondance* La Rochefoucauld observes this precept.

La Rochefoucauld spent the days of his boyhood, which was pathetically brief, amidst the most lovely scenery in France. This was in L'Angoumois, where his father had several country houses and in Le Poitou, of which he was governor. Perhaps a wistful memory of those days lies enshrined in the maxim that runs: 'L'accent du pays où l'on est né demeure dans l'esprit et dans le cœur comme dans le langage.'

The lad received the education of a French seventeenth-century nobleman, so that probably little attention was devoted to book-learning and a great deal to deportment, riding and swordsmanship. In one of his letters, La Rochefoucauld modestly confesses that he was a poor Latinist. On the other hand, he seems to have taken a keen interest in the literature of his day, especially in the long-winded romances then in vogue. Of these his favourite was *L'Astrée* which he reread every year with unfailing delight. In the main, however, his training was vocational and practical rather than academic: its object was to turn out officers and gentlemen, not scholars. In the case of La Rochefoucauld this was perhaps not a bad thing since, at sixteen, he left, on his first campaign, for Italy with the Regiment of Auvergne.

When La Rochefoucauld made his début at court, Richelieu was at the height of his power. Having escaped political annihilation by a hair's-breadth, the Cardinal found himself,

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at the close of that exciting day known as *La Journée des Dupes*, master of the destiny of France. With characteristic energy he proceeded to execute his policy, which had three objectives: to establish the absolute power of the sovereign by liquidating the Huguenots; to abolish the threat of Austrian hegemony and, finally, to humble the great feudal seigneurs.

This third objective must be kept in mind since it explains, if it does not justify, the subsequent conduct of La Rochefoucauld. From earliest childhood, he tells us, it was impressed upon him that Richelieu was a tyrant and the natural enemy of his class. In consequence, he associated at court with the Cardinal's opponents and, because he was young and chivalrous, ardently championed the cause of the Queen, Anne of Austria, regarding her as the pathetic victim of a shameful persecution. To La Rochefoucauld, the Queen's intrigues with the enemies of France and her clandestine love affair with the brilliant Duke of Buckingham were but the natural and spirited reactions of a woman tied to a weak and suspicious monarch who allowed himself to be dominated by an odious minister. Years later, when he sat down to compose his *Mémoires*, La Rochefoucauld acquired a more accurate picture of the situation and, in a few lines, paid just tribute to the achievements of Richelieu. But meanwhile, the young courtier, dazzled by the interest shown in him by the Queen and by her ladies, Mlle de Hautefort and Mlle de Chemerault, and above all, by the Queen's favourite, the beautiful and dangerous Mme de Chevreuse, surrendered himself eagerly to their influence. He fell in love with Mlle de Hautefort not only for her wit and beauty but also because he had as a rival no less a person than the King of France. La Rochefoucauld also cherished a *tendresse* for the fascinating and clever Mlle de Chemerault. She was even cleverer than he suspected, for this lady was one of Richelieu's most efficient domestic spies.

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From 1635 to 1636, La Rochefoucauld was too busy fighting as a volunteer officer in Flanders to get into political mischief. Yet, on his return, he was sent to join his father in the provinces for having criticized too indiscreetly the conduct of military operations in the north. But he himself preferred to see in this disgrace clear evidence of the jealousy of Louis XIII. Very soon, however, La Rochefoucauld returned to court where at once he became entangled in a web of feminine intrigue. The Queen, aided by that adventuress, Mme de Chevreuse, was then in secret correspondence with Spain, Austria and England. Needless to say, this was directed against the schemes of Richelieu who quickly uncovered the situation and, as quickly, took action. The Queen was interrogated and threatened not merely with prison but with the dissolution of her marriage. The duchesse de Chevreuse hurriedly took flight, aided to some extent by La Rochefoucauld who was summoned to the Cardinal's presence. According to the *Mémoires*, the young conspirator adopted a rather truculent attitude and was given a week in the Bastille. His letters, however, reveal a badly scared youth anxious to prove his complete innocence and his devotion to the Cardinal. I do not think that Richelieu, who was not renowned for his indulgence, ever took La Rochefoucauld very seriously as a political opponent.

It is easy, indeed, to imagine the rôle assigned to this Galahad of twenty-four by the Queen and Mme de Chevreuse who were both on the shady side of thirty-five. True, he affirms that Anne of Austria begged him to abduct her and Mlle de Hauteville and thus to rescue them from the persecutions of the King. Guez de Balzac, however, laughs at this story, attributing it to an imagination inflamed by too many novels. Possibly, the abduction was actually discussed if only half in earnest, for this was an exciting Alexandre Dumas period in French history, sometimes outromancing romance. Take, for instance, the escape of Mme

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de Chevreuse to Spain. The Queen and she had a secret code, a book of Hours. If it arrived bound in green, all was well: if in red, the favourite was to look to her safety. Of course, the colours got mixed and the affrighted duchess, assisted by the Archbishop of Tours, bolted. But in her haste, she forgot her passports and itinerary so that she turned up at Verteuil, one of the La Rochefoucauld country houses, disguised as a man and tried mysteriously to attract the attention of her young admirer. This alarmed his friends who suspected an affair of honour, and stoutly refused to let him out of their sight. She then tried, through an intermediary, and with more success, to hand La Rochefoucauld her jewels for safe keeping. The result of all this was to bring the secret police to the region, with unpleasant consequences for the family.

After two years' exile—a rather misleading name for a pleasant holiday spent in his native province—La Rochefoucauld volunteered for the front which, at the moment, was near Arras. He did so well that Richelieu thought of rewarding him. But, like a true paladin, he refused all favours so as to be free to help the Queen against her arch-enemy. He was not, however, involved in the plot against the life of the Cardinal which cost Cinq-Mars his head; but he did expose himself to very grave risks by aiding two of his friends to escape from the Cardinal's Gestapo. Both of them, Montrésor and Béthune, were wanted in connection with the Cinq-Mars affair.

The death, in 1642, of Richelieu, the declining health of the King and the emergence of Cardinal Mazarin introduced an era of chaos in the domestic affairs of France. La Rochefoucauld, like all those who had sided with the Queen's party, thought that, at last, his galleons had come to port. The immediate focus of interest and of intrigue was the appointment of the Regent. Some of the court placed their hopes on Monsieur, the Duke of Orleans. Others, amongst

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them La Rochefoucauld, attached themselves more closely than ever to the Queen to whom he suggested an alliance with the powerful duc d'Enghien, better known by his later title of Le Grand Condé. Usually, in the *Mémoires* of La Rochefoucauld, he is referred to as Monsieur le Prince. With the help of Coligny, these overtures met with success, for Anne consented to appoint Condé to all the posts from which she could exclude Monsieur, the Duke of Orleans, without inviting an open rupture. The occasion marks La Rochefoucauld's first essay in the art of negotiation for which, be it noted, he was temperamentally much better equipped than for the rôle of party leader. In his memoirs, De Retz emphasizes this weakness, though he does full justice to La Rochefoucauld's undoubted qualities: his admirable common sense, persuasive charm and knowledge of human nature. 'Il n'a jamais été bon homme de parti' insists De Retz who clearly regards La Rochefoucauld as a *raté* because, with all his gifts, the latter never attained the front rank as soldier, courtier or politician. De Retz surmises that perhaps this failure was due to La Rochefoucauld's habitual irresolution, yet admits that his explanation is not entirely satisfactory. 'Il y a toujours du je ne sais quoi en M. de La Rochefoucauld.' Since then, thanks to the industry of Gourdault and other biographers, we can see La Rochefoucauld in better perspective, though the enigmatic 'je ne sais quoi' which puzzled De Retz has never been entirely dissipated.

La Rochefoucauld was of a melancholy and reflective cast of mind although, if we are to accept as genuine two letters written to a favourite niece about 1664, he possessed a keen and, indeed, a rollicking sense of humour. His self-portrait reveals one who was much more of a scholar and a grand seigneur than a *chef de parti*. In conversation he became readily animated, often vivacious, both in gesture and speech though inclined, as he confesses, to lapse into

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fits of silent meditation. His intimates found him lovable and exquisitely polite. But to strangers he seemed timid or reserved and, because of his 'air fier et chagrin', haughty and distrait. Actually, he was less timid than diffident, shrinking instinctively from the obligatory contacts of public life. Ambition, he maintains, never tormented him and that is probably true, though he made strenuous efforts to improve the fortunes and prestige of his family. La Rochefoucauld, on the other hand, never intensely desired the kind of fame which was courted and attained by his associates of the *Fronde*. Indeed, in the *Maximes* he warns us against that kind of ambition when he writes: 'avant que de désirer fortement une chose, il faut examiner quel est le bonheur de celui qui la possède.' Not that he ever knew the astringent flavour of sour grapes: envy was not one of La Rochefoucauld's failings. Does he not say convincingly that the chief quality of a great man is lack of envy? The greatness he really desired was that which he finally earned, not in the dust and clamour of factional strife, but in the calm and studious pursuit of knowledge. Yet even in this sanctuary he was haunted by the fear of publicity and refused a *fauteuil* in the French Academy 'parce qu'il était timide', explains his friend Huet, 'et craignait de parler en public'.

If La Rochefoucauld, until the age of forty-six, led an active and exciting life, it is because this was an eventful period of French history. Circumstances made it impossible for him to stand aloof from the *mêlée*. He was a feudal lord and the privileges of the feudal nobility were at stake. A courtier, he remained loyal to the Queen until it was clear that, under the influence of Mazarin, she had no intention of rewarding her former henchmen. As a soldier, it was almost inevitable that he should throw in his lot with Condé, the hero of Rocroi, whom he so intensely admired. La Rochefoucauld has been harshly judged for his treasonable conduct

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during the *Fronde* or Civil War. But, as we shall observe, until Louis XIV began to reign in person, there were many eminent Frenchmen of the nobility and bourgeoisie who did not consider it odd to combine respect for the monarch himself with armed hostility to the Crown as represented by the Queen Regent and the detested foreigner, Mazarin. Moreover, in considering the behaviour of La Rochefoucauld, one must also take into account the influence exerted by the passions of love and resentment.

In 1642, as we have seen, Anne of Austria entered into negotiations with Condé, a brilliant soldier but a selfish and unscrupulous man. On the death of Louis XIII she became completely reconciled with Mazarin and made him her prime minister. La Rochefoucauld, with some reason, felt that his future was now assured. But, unfortunately, though not in sympathy with the anti-Mazarin cabal known as the *Importants*, he had enough friends among them to render him suspect to the Cardinal who did not, on the other hand, consider La Rochefoucauld sufficiently dangerous to be feared or placated. Neither did the Queen, though she consented, at his urgent request, to recall from exile her old favourite, Mme de Chevreuse. She insisted, however, that the duchess must be warned not to alienate Mazarin. Accordingly, La Rochefoucauld travelled to Roye where he begged Mme de Chevreuse not to presume upon her former ascendancy over Anne. Times had changed, he urged, and the best way to regain her influence over the Queen was by winning the favour of the Cardinal. All this, it may be imagined, was labour lost. The impetuous duchess, too obtuse or too vain to observe that the Queen's former warmth of affection had cooled into mere friendliness, began at once to intrigue with the *Importants* who were trying to oust Mazarin and replace him by Châteauneuf. Ignoring the advice of La Rochefoucauld, she played into the hands of the Italian and of her other enemies by importuning Anne

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for favours. Thus, to avenge herself on the Richelieu family, Mme de Chevreuse begged the Queen to deprive the young duc de Richelieu of the governorship of Le Havre and give it to La Rochefoucauld. This was Mazarin's opportunity. Perfidiously agreeing that the latter's services entitled him to the greatest rewards, he deplored, however, the effect that would be caused by such an open affront to the house of Richelieu. But perhaps La Rochefoucauld would be content with the post of *général des galères*? La Rochefoucauld, who wanted neither office, was embarrassed and doubly so when the Queen, in her eagerness to be quit of her obligations, offered him the post of *mestre de camp* in her Guards on the retirement of the duc de Bellegarde. All this, he knew, was a malicious game. 'La Reine entrait dans l'esprit du Cardinal pour m'amuser.' Far from appearing unwilling to confer favours, Mazarin deliberately bombarded La Rochefoucauld with offers which it was impossible to accept without offending his friends. On the other hand, by refusing, he was made to seem ungrateful and insatiable. Nor did Mme de Chevreuse help matters by intervening on behalf of La Rochefoucauld with the Queen whom she wearied with her endless complaints and requests.

Meanwhile an incident occurred which drew La Rochefoucauld into closer relations with Condé and, especially, with the latter's sister, Mme de Longueville. This was to have a profound influence upon his character and his fortunes. The duc de Beaufort, the leader of the *Importants*, conspired with his mistress, Mme de Montbazon, to injure the reputation of Mme de Longueville by passing off as proof of her guilty intimacy with Coligny certain loveletters which, in reality, had been carelessly dropped by one of La Rochefoucauld's friends. Thanks to the intervention of La Rochefoucauld, the plot was unmasked and Mme de Montbazon was ordered by the Queen to make a public and most abject apology. Shortly afterwards, Beau-

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fort was arrested by Mazarin's police and the *Importants* dissolved. At the same time Mme de Chevreuse left the court in disgrace and La Rochefoucauld was asked to break off his relations with the exile. La Rochefoucauld, who was loyal to his friends, begged the Queen to reconsider her decision. She did so with reluctance, making it clear, by her manner, that La Rochefoucauld had forfeited her friendship. At the same time, Mme de Chevreuse, far from displaying gratitude, regarded him as an incompetent and officious meddler. And, since troubles never come singly, he also fell foul of Monsieur, the Duke of Orleans, by insulting the latter's favourite, a loathsome creature called La Rivière, whom De Retz, in one of his lapidary phrases, describes as 'l'esprit le plus bas et le plus intéressé de son siècle'. In connection with this same affair, moreover, La Rochefoucauld mortally offended one of his oldest friends, Montrésor.

In the *Mémoires*, La Rochefoucauld asserts that he made love to Mme de Longueville purely from motives of self-interest. He tells us cynically, for instance, that before approaching the lady, he first obtained the consent of her lover, Miossens. 'J'eus, enfin, sujet de croire que je pourrais faire un usage plus considérable que Miossens de l'amitié et de la confiance de Mme de Longueville.' How much of this is true, how much due to *le dépit amoureux* of a jilted lover it is impossible to say; for it must be remembered that when La Rochefoucauld composed the *Mémoires*, he had just been discarded in favour of the duc de Nemours. His allusions to Mme de Longueville are of course so discreetly worded as to make it difficult to gauge the degree of their intimacy and, unfortunately, we have no letters from La Rochefoucauld to his mistress. It is known, however, that he was the father of one of her children.

To most of his friends, La Rochefoucauld seemed to be a man governed, in his amours, by self-interest rather than by passionate ardour. Yet, according to his biographer,

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