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Marie-Louise-Victoire and Marquise de La Rochejaquelein

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS, &c.

CHAPTER I.

MY BIRTH—COALITION OF POITOU—MY MARRIAGE
—ORDER TO REMAIN AT PARIS—PERIOD WHICH
PRECEDED THE 10TH OF AUGUST 1792.

I WAS born at Versailles the 25th of October 1772, only daughter of the Marquis de Donnissan, gentilhomme d'honneur of Monsieur (now Louis XVIII.) My mother, daughter of the Duc de Civrac, was (dame d'atours) lady-in-waiting of Madame Victoire. The goodness, I had almost said friendship, of this Princess, rendered her the protector of all our family, and I had the honour of being her god-daughter, and that of the King.

I was educated in the Palace of Versailles, till the 6th of October 1789, at which epoch I set out in the carriage of the Princesses, who followed in the train of the unfortunate Louis XVI., then dragged to Paris. They obtained permission to stop at Bellevue, under the guard of the Parisian troops.

The first misfortunes of the Revolution affected my mother extremely. She anticipated the most horrible consequences, and begged Madame Victoire to permit her to pass some time on her estate in Medoc. My father obtained the permission of Monsieur, and we set out the end of October. I had been destined in infancy to be the wife of M. le Marquis de Lescure, born in October 1766. He was son of a sister of my mother's, who died in childbed. His father, dying in the year 1784, left him 800,000 francs of debt, which broke off our marriage. The greatest part of the fortune was then in the hands of the Countess de Lescure, his grandmother. Although advised by lawyers to renounce the succession of his father, he had the delicacy, as well as the Countess de Lescure, to become answerable for the whole ; and they practised such strict economy, that, at the age of twenty-four, M. de Lescure had only 200,000 francs of debt, and the certainty of an income of 80,000 francs. My parents now consented to a union which had been equally desired by us all. M. de Lescure had entered the military school at thirteen years of age, and left it at seventeen. Among the young people of his own age, none were better informed, more virtuous in every respect, more perfect in short ; he was at the same time so modest, that he seemed ashamed of his own merit, and his endeavour was to conceal it. He was timid and awkward, and although of a good height and figure, his manners and unfashionable dress might not be prepossessing at first. He was born with strong passions, yet, notwithstanding the general example, and particularly that of his father, whose habits were irregular, he conducted himself with the most

M. DE LESCURE.

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perfect correctness. His great piety preserved him from the contagion, and insulated him in the midst of the court and of the world. He took the sacrament every fortnight. The constant habit of resisting his inclinations and all external seductions, had rendered him rather unsocial and reserved ; his opinions were strongly fixed in his mind, and sometimes he showed himself pertinaciously attached to them. At the same time, he had the most perfect gentleness, and being entirely free from anger or even impatience, his temper was always equal, and his calmness unalterable. He passed his time in study and meditation, from taste and not from vanity, for he only wished to enjoy what he knew ; of which I shall mention an example. One day at the Duchess de Civrac's, our grandmother, he had, according to his custom, taken a book, instead of joining in the conversation. My grandmother reproached him with it, adding, " that since the book was so interesting, he ought to read it aloud." He obeyed ;—at the end of half an hour some one looking over him, exclaimed, "*Ah, it is English ! Why did not you say so ?*" He answered, with a disconcerted look,—“ My good grandmother not understanding English, it was necessary that I should read in French.” His father, although a good-natured man, was unhappily addicted to dissipation and play. He had for a companion in his irregularities the governor of his son ; but that son was so remarkably rational and gentle, that they often confessed their faults to him, seeking advice and consolation. Notwithstanding this unnatural situation, he always preserved towards his father a respectful attachment.

M. de Lescure came to the house of my parents

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in the month of June, 1791. He then belonged to a very important confederacy, that had been formed in Poitou ; and could command 30,000 men. Almost all the gentlemen of the country had engaged in it, and they thought they might depend upon a great part of the inhabitants of the province. The event proved them in the right. They had gained two regiments, with one of which they formed the garrison of Rochelle, and the other was at Poitiers. On a given day they were to pretend orders from the government ; the regiments were to unite ; and, in concert with all the gentlemen, they were to operate a junction with another confederacy forming towards Lyons, and wait for the Princes, then in Savoy. The flight of the King, and his subsequent arrest, disconcerted all these projects. M. de Lescure, learning the departure of his Majesty, left us to go where his duty called him, but returned a few days after, because the noblesse of Poitou, perceiving that the purpose of their confederacy had failed, resolved to emigrate as others had done : Although far from being persecuted on their estates, many of them commanded the local national guard, and every day the peasants came to ask permission to arm themselves against the republicans. The Princes knew the state of things, and did not imagine that the Poitevins would emigrate ; but the young people were determined to follow the torrent. It was in vain represented to them, that they ought to remain where they might be useful, and that, having the happiness to belong to a faithful province, they ought not to leave it. Listening to nothing, they would not even wait the return of two persons who had been sent to receive the definitive orders

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COALITION OF POITOU.

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of the Princes. Thus the whole confederacy of Poitou was dissolved. They emigrated in crowds, and those who were of a different opinion, found themselves obliged to imitate the rest. M. de Lescure set out from Gascogne, with the Count de Lorges, our cousin-german. They encountered risks in going out of France, were obliged to take guides among the smugglers on the frontiers, and to travel on foot by circuitous roads.

M. de Lescure, the day of his arrival at Tournay, learned that his grandmother had had an attack of apoplexy, and was near expiring. He asked permission from the chiefs of the emigrants to return to Poitou, which being granted, he returned to Madame de Lescure; and, seeing there was still some hope of her life being prolonged, he thought of rejoining the emigrants; but wished to see me first, and to pass a day with us. My mother had consulted, respecting M. de Lescure's intended emigration, M. le Count de Mercy Argenta, former ambassador from Austria in France, her friend. He was in the confidence of Prince Kaunitz, and knew better than any other person the disposition of the cabinet of Vienna. He said they were not ready for war;—that the different governments would not begin, unless they should be forced to the measure;—and that M. de Lescure might very well pass the winter in France. But he had already set out when this answer arrived.

Madame de Chastellux, my aunt, who had followed the Princesses to Rome, had sent from the Pope the dispensation necessary for my marriage. It intimated that it could not be celebrated but by a priest who had refused the new oath, or who

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MY MARRIAGE.

had retracted it. This was, I believe, the first time the Pope had declared his opinion upon the subject. Many priests in the neighbourhood, on hearing it, retracted the oath they had taken. There was found also, by great chance, a priest in our parish who had not been sworn, L'Abbé Queyriaux. The new constitutional bishop had at first appointed another curate; but he was a German, who, not being able to make himself understood by the peasants of Medoc, withdrew. The parish, finding themselves without a curate, demanded another of the bishop. As he was but an unbeliever, and attached no importance to the diversities of religious opinions, he told the inhabitants to engage their old curate to return provisionally to his parish. He was there often insulted by worthless people; but he supported his situation with piety and courage.

All these circumstances, and, still more, the mutual sentiments of M. de Lescure and myself, determined my mother to conclude my marriage.

M. de Lescure learned, upon his arrival, that our banns were published; he saw M. de Mercy's letter, and remained with us. Three days after, on the 27th of October, we were married. I was then nineteen, M. de Lescure twenty-five. He heard, three weeks after, that his grandmother had another attack, and we both went to visit her. She passed two months between life and death, in continual vomitings, frequent attacks of apoplexy, and with an open cancer. She articulated with difficulty a few words to pray to God, and to thank us for the care we took of her. Never did any one die with a resignation so angelic. Her titles could no longer be engraven upon her tomb; but the peasants inscribed upon it, "*Here lies the mother of the poor;*"

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ARRIVAL AT PARIS.

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—a truly glorious epitaph. M. de Lescure regretted her extremely. Eleven years before her death, she had made a will, such as her situation then admitted of. It was burdened with a great number of legacies. Had she been able to reflect on the debts her grandson had to pay, and the effects of the Revolution upon his fortune, she would certainly have changed her intentions. The will wanted some necessary formalities, and was, therefore, not binding. But M. de Lescure scrupulously conformed to it. He even wished that the domestics, who had since that time deserved reward, but who were not mentioned in the will, should not imagine themselves forgotten; and he gave all of them donations in the name of his grandmother, as if they had been left by her.

In the month of February 1793, we took the resolution of emigrating. M. Bernard de Marigny accompanied us. He was the relation and friend of M. de Lescure, a naval officer, and Chevalier de St Louis, and had distinguished himself in his profession. He was extremely handsome, tall, and possessed great bodily strength; was gay, spirited, loyal, and brave. Never have I seen any person so obliging; ever ready to do what was agreeable to others; and to such a degree, that I remember, as he had some knowledge of the veterinary art, all the peasants of the canton were in the habit of coming to ask his advice when they had sick cattle. He was extremely lively, and, when excited, his spirits became almost immoderate. As his name will have to appear frequently in these Memoirs, I thought it necessary to make him known. He was then forty-two years of age.

We arrived at Paris. The disrepair of our car

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PARIS.

riage detained us there a considerable time. I could not be presented to the King, as, since his Majesty had come to Paris, all presentations had been suspended. I went to the Tuilleries, to the house of Madame la Princesse de Lamballe. She was the most intimate friend of my mother, and she received me as if I had been her daughter. The next day, M. de Lescure went to the Tuilleries. The Queen condescended to say to him, "I know you have brought Victorine: There is no court now; but I wish to see her notwithstanding. Let her come to-morrow at noon to the Princesse de Lamballe's." M. de Lescure gave me this flattering order, and I went to the Princess. The Queen embraced me, and we all withdrew into a closet; and, after some words full of goodness, her Majesty said to me, "And you, Victorine, what do you intend to do? I suspect you are come here for the purpose of emigrating." I replied, it was the intention of M. de Lescure; but that he would remain at Paris if he thought he could be useful to her Majesty. The Queen reflected for some time, and said to me, in a very serious tone, "He is a good subject; he has no ambition, let him remain." I replied to the Queen, that her orders were laws. She spoke to me afterwards of her children. "It is a long time since you have seen them; come to-morrow at six to the house of Madame de Tourzel, and I will bring my daughter there." She at that time found consolation in superintending the education of Madame Royale; and Madame de Tourzel had the charge only of M. le Dauphin.

After the departure of the Queen, Madame la Princesse de Lamballe expressed to me how much she rejoiced in the reception I had met with. I

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said I felt the full value of it, and that M. de Lescure would certainly remain. She recommended the greatest secrecy upon what had passed.

The next day I went to Madame de Tourzel's. The Queen entered with Madame Royale. She came to me, and said, in a low voice, warmly pressing my hand, "Victorine, I hope you stay with us?" I answered, "Yes." She again pressed my hand. She then went to converse with Mesdames de Lamballe and de Tourzel, and raising her voice in the course of the conversation, said, "Victorine remains with us." After that, M. de Lescure went every day to the Tuilleries, and on each day the Queen addressed him.

Yet we soon felt uneasy in our situation. The emigration increased rapidly; M. de Lescure was blamed for not joining in it, and it seemed to me that his reputation would suffer. On coming to Paris, he had announced his design of emigrating; and it happened that he had changed his resolution precisely two days after the decree for confiscating the property of the emigrants. This was a terrible circumstance;—everybody wrote to him in the strongest terms. In my anxiety, I desired Madame de Lamballe to speak again to the Queen. Her Majesty desired her to repeat to me word for word her answer. "I have nothing more to say to M. de Lescure; it is for him to consult his conscience, his duty, his honour; but he ought to remember, that the defenders of a throne are always in their proper place when near their King." I then became easier, certain that the Princes would approve of those who remained to defend the King. Their cause was the same, and they were in constant correspondence.

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PARIS—THE COURT.

When M. de Lescure knew the answer of the Queen, he hesitated no longer. "I should be contemptible in my own eyes," said he to me, "if I could balance an instant between my reputation and my duty. I ought above all to obey the King. I may suffer from it, but at least I shall have no self-reproach. I esteem the emigrants too much not to believe that each of them would conduct himself as I do were they in my place. I hope I shall be able to prove, that if I remain, it is neither from fear nor avarice; and that opportunities will occur here, as well as out of France, to prove it. If they should not, I shall have sacrificed my honour also to the King, but I shall only have done my duty."

Two months after, M. de Calvimont Saint-Martial came from Coblenz to pass some days at Paris. I obtained permission to desire him to inform my uncle of Lorges that M. de Lescure had private orders.

M. de Marigny, seeing that M. de Lescure did not set out, and that he was constantly at the palace, said to him, that, without demanding any confidence, he esteemed him too much not to follow his fate. We answered for him to Madame de Lamballe; and she succeeded in procuring him orders to remain. She gave them in charge to M. de Lescure; but the most absolute secrecy was always enjoined, not to give suspicious to the National Assembly.

We lodged at the hotel Diesbach, and received no company. M. de Lescure was often at the Tuilleries. Whenever he feared any commotion, he passed the whole day there.

On the 20th of June, I went alone to the Princess de Lamballe's. I was in court-mourning on