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Marie-Louise-Victoire and Marquise de La Rochejaquelein

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Memoirs of the Marchioness de La Rochejaquelein

Marie-Louise Victoire de Donnissan, Marquise de la Rochejaquelein (1772–1857) was brought up at Versailles, a god-daughter to Louis XVI. At the outbreak of the French Revolution, she married her cousin, the Marquis de Lescure. After the execution of the king, she accompanied Lescure to La Vendée where a Royalist insurrection was waged from 1793 to 1796. Widowed in 1793, she later married Lescure's cousin, Louis, Marquis de La Rochejacquelein, brother of one of the Royalist leaders. Her memoir, first published in 1815 and translated and reprinted many times, remains one of the most authentic records of this period. Although understandably partisan, she reports atrocities carried out by both sides with great immediacy. This reissue is taken from the 1827 Edinburgh edition, with a preface by Sir Walter Scott. Scott draws parallels between the Vendéen insurrection and the civil war in Scotland waged by the Covenanters.

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Memoirs of the Marchioness de La Rochejaquelein

MARIE-LOUISE-VICTOIRE
MARQUISE DE LA ROCHEJAQUELEIN
EDITED BY SIR WALTER SCOTT



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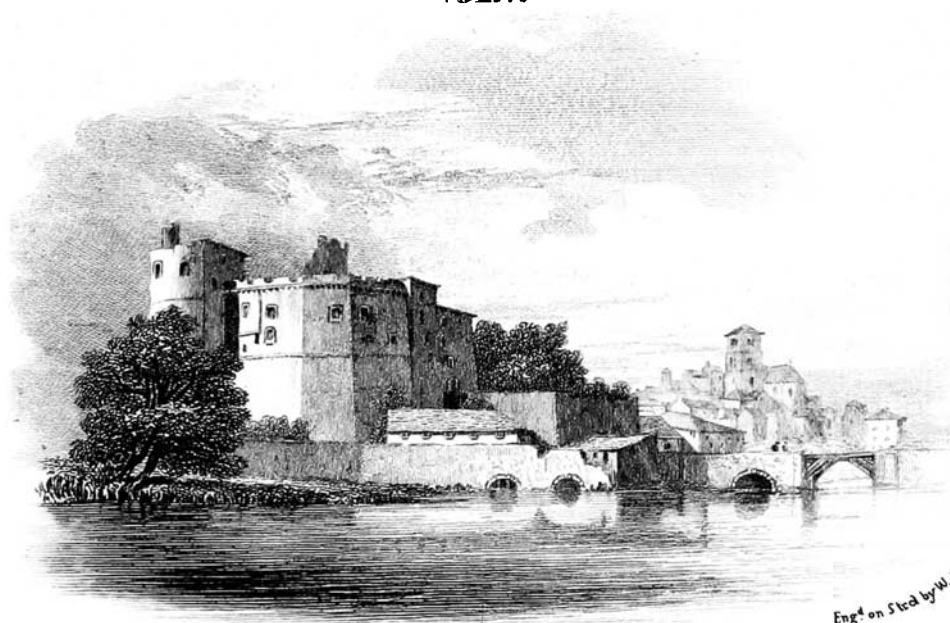
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MEMOIRS

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PREFACE.

THE civil war of La Vendée forms one of the most interesting events of the Revolution in France. It was little known in this country while it was raging, and there is much room for censuring the ministers of Britain, who did not avail themselves of the opportunities which it afforded, of obtaining the most important advantages for the allied cause. We knew, indeed, generally in England, that the Royalists had a force in part of Poitou, and that they had several encounters with the Republicans, which had terminated to their advantage. But few English, if any, were fully aware, that while every other province in France submitted more or less patiently to the dominion of Robespierre and his associates, La Vendée, a province hardly known to us by name, had on foot large armies which fought pitched battles,—gained decisive victories,—took fortified towns, and more than once might, with a moderate degree of assistance from troops

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and money, have perhaps ended the Revolution by a march to Paris. It was reasonable to infer that a country capable of such exertions in a cause almost deserted by all France besides, had something peculiar in its circumstances; and when we consider the nature of these peculiarities, they will be found to form a great lesson both to princes and people.

No one will venture to deny, that in the last years of Louis XVI. some great change in the old despotic constitution of France was become absolutely necessary. The burdens of the state, which should have been equally discharged by all its subjects, in proportion to their means, were thrown entirely on the class of the commons, while the clergy and gentry paid nothing to the support of the general expenditure. The finances were in a state of virtual bankruptcy; the subjects generally irritated at their rulers, and desirous of reclaiming those rights of freemen from which they were debarred by the old feudal laws. This was not a state of things to be endured in the eighteenth century; and, accordingly, a change was loudly and generally called for. Designing and ambitious men took advantage of the national fervour of the French people, to drive this spirit of laudable reformation into all the excesses of the most furious revolution which the world ever saw. Instead of restoring to

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the people their just liberties, and securing the king, the church, and the aristocracy, in possession of such rights as might be consistent with a settled and well-balanced government, they rooted up and pulled down everything which was established, overthrew the throne, banished the nobility, disowned not their church only, but their religion and Deity, and, by the direction of the vile miscreants who had created this anarchy, committed the most horrible cruelties under the pretext of preserving liberty.

These demagogues could not have possessed the power over the passions of the populace necessary to the execution of their criminal schemes, if, previous to the Revolution, the French aristocracy had been in the habit of discharging those duties towards the lower classes of the community, which are necessary for cementing the union betwixt the various ranks of society. The nobleman or gentleman of property ought, in ordinary cases, to reside, for a certain season at least, on his estates. He is the natural superior, and the best patron, of his farmers and his poorer neighbours. The expenditure of his income among them is one source of their prosperity,—his bounty ought to relieve them in cases of distress—he is umpire of their disputes—they are companions and assistants in his field-sports. Amidst the interchange of mutual good of-

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PREFACE.

fices, the chains by which the feudal system binds the plebeians to the nobles, are naturally superseded by the gentle and honourable ties of mutual affection for mutual kindness.

Unhappily, this order of things had been totally changed in France. A fatal policy, first practised by Cardinal Richelieu, had seduced the wealthier and more dignified part of the French nobles, *La Haute Noblesse*, as they were termed, to place their importance in a constant residence at court, and in their successful intrigues for the royal favour. The management of their estates was left to stewards; and the tenants neither felt the favours, nor feared the displeasure, of a landlord, who left all to his deputy, and whose existence they knew only by his draining them of money. When the two principal classes of society lived in this state of disunion, it was easy to sow dissension between them, and to exasperate the lower orders against the nobility and gentry, from whom they neither received favours nor experienced influence. There were honourable individual exceptions to this general error, but it prevailed over the kingdom at large, and was the principal cause of the French Revolution extending beyond the limits of wholesome and moderate reformation. Far from being able to raise in the provinces and on their estates such a force

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as might have enabled them to stem the torrent of Jacobinical fury, the nobles found often their worst foes among their own peasants, and were driven from their estates by the insurrections of their very tenants, who, in other circumstances, would have been their surest protectors. This tended much to the increase of emigration ; a fatal measure in itself, as seeming to unite with the armies of strangers those proprietors, who had, by birth, the deepest interest in the country about to be invaded.

La Vendée and the neighbouring districts stood in a peculiar degree exempted from that discord between the peasants and the nobility, which caused such melancholy consequences through the rest of France. This arose, in a great measure, out of local circumstances.

The extensive country of which La Vendée is the centre, comprehends a much larger space than properly bears that name, as it includes a considerable portion of the departments of Maine and Loire, of Loire Inferieure, and of Les Deux Sevres, as well as La Vendée Proper. The soil is not fit for the plough, but admirably adapted to the raising of cattle, and lies divided into pastures of small extent, but very rich in produce, which are scattered among groves and forests so extensive, that the whole district is known by the name of the *Bocage*, or Thicket. The peasants inhabited each his

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little separate farm, all were easy and independent, and none possessed overgrown wealth. They were little oppressed by the public burdens, having a dispensation from the heaviest, on condition of their maintaining the various cuts and canals by which their country is drained. These canals, joined to the extreme badness of the roads, the intervention of numerous hedges and thickets, and the frequent rains, render La Vendée very inaccessible unless to the natives, who, familiar with these difficulties, are accustomed to bound over the obstacles, by means of a pole or quarter-staff guarded with iron, which they are wont to carry, and which, in the course of the war, they sometimes used as a formidable weapon. They were a religious, moral, and contented race, desiring nothing more than to possess the enjoyment of the faith, laws, and possessions, which had belonged to their fathers.

The noblesse, or, as we should say, the gentry of La Vendée, had, like their dependants, a character belonging to the ancient, rather than to the modern world. They lived much on their properties, and in a state of primitive simplicity. Even such as went occasionally to Paris, had the good sense to lay aside the manners of the metropolis, and resume their provincial simplicity, so soon as they returned to the Bocage. When the ladies went abroad, it was on horseback, or

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in carriages drawn by bullocks. When the Seigneur went to the chase, which was frequent in that woodland district, the peasants attended, and attained considerable dexterity in the art of shooting, besides enjoying the sport with an appetite equal to that of their master himself. The payment of rent and their management of farms, were upon a footing highly favourable for the continuation of mutual regard between the proprietor and tenant, as the interests of both were common. The tenant managed the stock of cattle, and accounted for a proportion of the profit to the landlord; and thus they shared together the prosperity or adversity of the season. The farms seldom exceeded five-and-twenty or thirty pounds in rent, and he was a great proprietor who had twenty or thirty such farms; so that, among great and small, there was but little wealth, and no poverty. A holiday was a scene of mutual hospitality to gentleman and peasant. The family of the latter danced in the court-yard of the chateau, and the Seigneur and his family usually joined in the amusement. Thus, in sport and in business, in pecuniary interests and in the rites of religion, the gentry and peasants were united together; and the better-instructed understandings, as well as the natural superiority, of the proprietors, preserved that influence over the minds of the lower classes, which else-

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where through France had been generally lost.

It was not, however, the influence of the nobles which at first raised the insurrection, of which the following pages contain an interesting history. Two other circumstances more immediately occasioned the rising of La Vendée.

The National Convention had imposed upon the Catholic clergy an oath, which, as it declared them independent of the supremacy of Rome, was in direct contradiction to the religious vows which they had taken upon entering the church. The great body of the clergy resigned, or were forcibly deprived of their cures, in consequence of their refusing this oath; and the Vendéens saw, with great indignation, the curates, upon whose religious instruction they relied, and who had discharged their office with much paternal zeal, displaced and exiled, and their room supplied by persons less scrupulous in conscience, and consequently less correct in morals. This gave great and general dissatisfaction amongst the peasants of the Bocage.

Another cause which more immediately instigated the inhabitants of La Vendée to assume arms, was the attempts to enforce the conscription, and to send the youth of their country to recruit the armies engaged in foreign conquests. For this purpose, a compulsory levy of two hundred thousand

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men was enforced over all France. As the Vendéens took no interest in the revolutionary motives by which other provinces were actuated, and regarded with aversion and horror the steps taken against the established church and the person of the king, they were inaccessible to the motives which induced France at large to submit to this severe measure; and the attempts to resist it in different quarters, were the first cause of their taking up arms. When assembled in great force of numbers, they chose officers chiefly, though not exclusively, amongst the nobility, gave battle to the regular forces of the republic, were not only repeatedly victorious, but showed great alertness in rallying after defeat, and did infinitely more damage to the Republicans than was achieved by the best troops of the allied armies. In their case, as in many other instances, the intelligence of those whom they chose to be leaders, together with the desperate courage of the Vendéens themselves, formed a peculiar species of tactics, adapted, at the same time, to the character of the troops, and local circumstances of the country. This proved on many occasions superior to the discipline of regular forces, which, against determined and active men, does not always give the expected advantages. Their principal mode of attack was by a species of bush-fighting. By a manœuvre, which they termed in their

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dialect *S'égailer*, they spread themselves like a party of sharp-shooters, on every side of the close columns of the enemy, who, advancing through a country in itself extremely difficult, found themselves assailed by a destructive and well-aimed fire from every quarter, while they saw no tangible point on which they might direct an attack with any chance of decisive success. The cries of the insurgents, the continued fire on every point, and their dispersion over so large a space, appeared to double their numbers; and if at any point the Republicans disbanded, or showed symptoms of confusion, the Vendéens, led by their most spirited chiefs, did not hesitate to rush on and complete, by a close attack, the terror which they had inspired by their more distant style of fighting.

It is needless to observe, that the dispersing and rallying necessary for such a mode of warfare required the highest degree of individual zeal and intelligence in the troops who practised it, since every small body of marksmen, nay, in some degree, every individual, acted on his own responsibility in the choice of his position, and the selection of the favourable moment of advance or retreat.

While the Vendéens were in arms, and triumphant, there was also a large army of Bretons on foot for the monarchy, command-

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ed by the celebrated La Charrette, and which gained many successes. It was unhappy for their cause, that the chiefs of these independent armies do not appear to have acted with cordiality, or upon united views; otherwise more important advantages might have been derived from their frequent victories. It was also unfortunate for them that the British ministers seem, as already mentioned, not to have been aware of the benefits which might have accrued from supplying them with arms and ammunition, as well as with a body of auxiliary forces. When the royalists were in possession of the isle of Normoutier, this could have been accomplished without difficulty. The only serious attempt made to encourage these brave men was by the ill-concerted expedition of Quiberon, undertaken after the royalist cause in Bretagne was entirely lost.

The insurrection of La Vendée began in March 1793, and, considering it as a great and general war, terminated upon the defeat at Quiberon, on 20th July 1795.

The mind is naturally led to draw comparisons between the civil wars of England during the middle of the seventeenth century, and the revolution of France in the end of the eighteenth; and, in doing so, is struck with the similarity betwixt the insurrection of La Vendée and the war con-

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ducted by Montrose and the Scottish Highlanders in the preceding century.

The parallel, doubtless, is not exact in all its points. The Highlanders were brought to the field by their natural love of war, by their habitual use of arms, and by their patriarchal attachment to their chiefs. The Vendéens, a peaceful race, were driven to arms by aggressions on their religion and personal liberties. The Highlanders, commanded by the supereminent genius of one, of whom Du Retz said, that he best filled up his ideal sketch of the heroes of Plutarch, extended their victories more widely, and improved them more successfully, than the Vendéens, but sunk under a single defeat. The inhabitants of La Vendée, commanded by different chiefs, did not evince the same energy in improving success; but, relying less on the fortune of one man, they rallied, and were again victorious, after repeatedly sustaining the greatest reverses. The mode of fighting of the Highlanders and the Vendéens was different; the marksmen of the Bocage relying upon bush-fighting, while the mountaineers, after giving one volley, charged in small but compact columns upon different points of an extended line, and trusted to their superior use of the broadsword in close combat. Religion, which made a great feature in the Vendéen war, was not among the motives which instigated the army of Mon-

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trose. These are the points of difference, but those of resemblance are more general and more strongly marked.

On both those memorable occasions, a sequestered and primitive race arose against the regular force of the rest of the nation, in defence of the ancient institutions which had been handed down by their fathers. In both cases, high courage, natural sagacity, hardiness of constitution, and activity of person, rendered the insurgents superior to their disciplined adversaries, in fierceness of onset, judiciousness of combination, celerity of marches, and the power of enduring the fatigues of war. In both cases, they obtained splendid victories against every odds of numbers, aggravated by want of suitable arms, and especially of ammunition.

These foresters of the Bocage equally resembled the Scottish mountaineers, in the disadvantages which attended their peculiar mode of warfare. Being all volunteers, and serving without pay, they conceived themselves at liberty to leave the army when they pleased, and a victory was, more frequently than a defeat, the signal for a diminution of their force. The Vendéens, like the Highlanders, were unskilled in the attack of fortified places; and several of their greatest reverses were sustained in consequence of rash enterprises of this nature. In an open country, favourable for the action of caval-

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ry, these primitive warriors engaged with less advantage than in strong and inclosed grounds. The number of independent chiefs and commanders was apt to introduce discords into their councils, which sometimes disorganized even the plans of Montrose, and almost always paralyzed the exertions of the Vendéens. To conclude; a war which did so much honour to the leaders who conducted it, terminated in both cases in their ruin and extinction. Many died by military, execution, or the form of judicial process; their families were exiled or disinherited; and they left behind no other fruits of their success, save the glory they had won.

The accomplished and amiable authoress of the following Memoirs was born and bred up in the precincts of a court, yet writes with the virtuous simplicity and quiet dignity of a matron of Rome. Her style is entirely free from a species of literary coquetry, that is sometimes to be found in the very best species of French composition, which is generally more marked by ingenuity than by simplicity. Her person was always delicate, and so feminine as to seem incapable of sustaining the personal difficulties and privations in which she was involved, and which the manner she was bred up in must have rendered less endurable. She was herself sensible of this, and said to an English lady, who had been anxious to be introduced to

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so celebrated a person, “ You must allow, you expected to see something more like a heroine.” Her character in private life was, as might have been expected from the pure and virtuous style of her writings, totally unblemished.

It is remarkable, that two other female historians, Mesdames Bonchamps and Sapi-
naud, were, like Madame de la Rochejaque-
lein, widows of distinguished leaders during
the disastrous war of La Vendée.

ABBOTSFORD, *February 1, 1826.*

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TO MY CHILDREN.

It is for you, my dear Children, that I have had the resolution to finish these Memoirs, begun long before your birth, and many times abandoned. I feel a mournful pleasure in recounting to you the glorious history of the life and death of your parents and friends. Other books may acquaint you with the principal actions by which they were distinguished ; but I have thought that a simple recital, written by your mother, would inspire you with a more filial and tender sentiment for their illustrious memory. I regarded it also as a duty, to render homage to their brave companions in arms. But how many traits have escaped me ! I had no notes. What remained on my memory of the deep impression received at the time, has been my only resource. Far from being able to write the complete history of La Vendée, I have not even related all that passed during the times I witnessed. I have to regret the omission of many interesting facts, and many names worthy of being recorded ; but I felt both unable and unwilling to relate anything beyond my immediate recollections, and did

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not preterd to write a history of the Civil War. I fervently hope that other pens, better qualified than mine, will undertake the melancholy task.

I availed myself of an opportunity I had, of submitting these Memoirs to persons in our army, in whose accuracy I could confide, and by their means corrected some errors. M. Prosper de Barante undertook the revisal and correction of the whole, but without any attempt to improve the extreme plainness of the style, which, perhaps, accords best with the simple truth. The description of the country in the Third Chapter is entirely his.

DONNISSAN DE LA ROCHEJAQUELEIN.

August 1, 1811.