

LOUISE, DUCHESSÉ DE LA VALLIÈRE, CARMÉLITE

IN a long narrow gallery of Versailles seldom opened to the public hangs a picture by Noret of Louise Duchesse de la Vallière in court dress of the late seventeenth century. There is something strangely haunting about the beautiful aristocratic face with its great sad eyes ringed by dark circles. For all her fine parure she has the air of one whose nights are spent in weeping. And now her life has been written by one who seems to have crept into her very heart and learnt its whispered secret; a work so different from the usual ones on Louis XIV's mistresses, and justly crowned by the Académie Française.¹

Here is the story. In 1661, the sixteen-year-old Madame Henriette d'Angleterre married Louis XIV's brother. Among her ladies-in-waiting was Mlle. Louise de la Baume le Blanc, of Blois, aged seventeen. She had fair hair and innocent almond-shaped blue eyes, 'ses yeux longs,' and though she limped slightly, she was very exquisite. Madame herself said she was 'douce, précieuse, admirable' . . . 'dans ses beaux yeux une douce langueur.' As a little girl in Tours and at Blois, she had been greatly neglected by her mother and allowed to run wild. She had seen the King for the first time on his way to marry the Spanish Infanta. It was strange that on the high chimney of her chateau was the device: *Ad principem ut ad ignes amor indissolubilis* which by a strained translation is interpreted as foretelling her love for Louis and then its sacrifice to the fires of a greater love.

There was so much beauty to intoxicate—the acting, the radiant clothes (of which we get such charming glimpses in paintings and engravings), gondolas and bathing at night at Fontainebleau to the sound of Lulli's airs for the violin. The King, a jewel sparkling in a fine setting, was looked upon as a god; it is small wonder if Louise fell most deeply

¹ *Les deux pénitences de Louise de la Vallière.* By Gabrielle Basset D'Auriac.

in love with him. Louis, whose manners had been influenced by reading tales of romance and heroism, was very fascinating. The mask of wax by Benoist shows him with sensual, disdainful lips and a finely carved nose with sensitive nostrils. He was extremely good-looking and distinguished, his clothes magnificent and his bearing dignified. He could dance beautifully. Despite his weaknesses, Louis had a noble mind, disdaining any mean and petty action, and he always kept his word. He was not used to being loved for himself alone, and when he learnt that Louise loved him, he was touched to the depths of his heart. One day he was seen under a tree to shelter her with his hat from a spring shower. On the morrow the other ladies-in-waiting saw that she wore diamond earrings which she tried to hide, as if she were ashamed of them. From that day on she walked in remorse of conscience. Directly the Queen and the Queen Mother heard that the King wanted her to go everywhere with him, they added to the sufferings of her own soul by showering insulting slights upon her. But her love was strong enough to bear all this. The Abbé de Choisy says in his *Mémoires*: 'She wanted to be with her lover always, or if alone, to think of him and so neglect her old friends.'

She did not please at court because she was not intriguing or ambitious enough to secure her own position by patronising a band of satellites. Her rivals made plots against which her candour and inexperience had no defence. They tried to come between the two lovers, and sometimes succeeded, for Louis had an imperious temper. Indeed, once Louise was so heart-broken after a quarrel, that she ran away to a convent at Chaillot and begged for admittance. The extern sister refused to open the door as it was Lent and was on her guard against this lady all in tears. In the evening the King came to fetch her back.

Very soon afterwards the Queen was informed of all this and the whole affair became more open. The King furnished for Louise a tiny house near the garden of the Palais Royal, and it was there on December 18th, all alone among

strangers, that she bore her first child. It was immediately taken away from her. Five days later she arose, dressed in fine clothes, put rouge on her cheeks, and attended Midnight Mass with the whole court, so that no suspicions should be aroused. They found her 'very pale and changed.'

Thenceforward she was openly despised by the two Queens, whose fury had been aroused by Louis' assiduities. There seemed no limit to his generousities. He gave instructions to Colbert for an out-door feast to be prepared in her honour at Versailles. The collation was served by the Seasons and there was a procession to the sound of flutes. A great crescent-shaped table was covered with crystals and surrounded by two hundred motionless torch-bearers. The diversions included a procession of elephants and many other animals and a lottery of precious gifts. It is ironic that at this feast Louise was seated opposite Mme. de Montespan, her rival; and indeed, in the future, as her health and looks became more and more affected by her sorrows, coupled with the rigours of court life to which Louis with his glorious health was impervious, this woman did all she could to supplant her. Saint-Simon, who had fallen under the spell of the Montespan's charms, describes the originality of her speech, her mordant wit, which so impressed itself on the members of her entourage, that they unconsciously imitated her and thus formed a school of wit. He does not mention that this same caustic, vitriolic tongue made the courtiers avoid walking in the gardens before her windows when she was with the King, for she made fools of them all and spared none. Her beauty, according to Mme. de Sévigné, was something remarkable, and she had all the recklessness and elegance of aristocracy and pride of birth. Small wonder if her magnificence began to eclipse the 'shy violet,' Louise, in the eyes of the King. The Montespan sought the aid of La Voisin, sorceress and poisoner. The mystery of how far she was implicated in the accusation of this famous woman has never been successfully unravelled by her biographers. About this time Louise had another

child. She arose shortly afterwards for a midnight feast, followed by a ballet. She sat all sad and drooping, while the cruel Athenais was smiling in her triumph. Louise realised that her day was over and that she had lost the heart of him whom she loved more than all the world, more than honour even. Then followed a terrible period in which the Montespan covered her sins in the eyes of the court by sacrilegious Confessions and Communions, thereby deceiving even St. Simon, for he says she was truly religious. She threw dust into the eyes of the Queen by pretending to sympathise with her. Louise, suffering and ill, pursued the King in his Flanders campaign, despised by him and all the court.

Thenceforward began Louise's long martyrdom, her *première pénitence*. Of those days she would say afterwards to Mme. de Maintenon, that whenever she suffered in Carmel she would only have to remember what she had endured at court, at the hands of 'those people,' and then she could count it as nothing. The King decided that he would use Louise as a cloak for his guilty relations with the Montespan, and he would allow everyone to think that he was with Louise when he had really passed through her room into the 'appartements' of the Montespan beyond. Before great receptions Louise was obliged to dress her rival, who was sweetly and falsely affectionate to her, and who yet incited the King to ridicule her.

All this acute mental torture and humiliation brought Louise to the turning point of her life, her conversion to the True King—'His Majesty' as St. Teresa loves to call Him. In her despair she began to read philosophy, and as she was untrained she lost her faith as a result. In her lovely house near the Tuileries, she fell ill with grief. As she lay in her great bed, mysteriously stricken, and surrounded by a crowd of people who had come more from curiosity than from pity, she saw in delirium that the Jaws of Hell were opening before her and she repented. When she was well, she tried to escape again to the Convent at Chaillot, but God's time had not yet come—her frail and

new found virtue must be matured by further suffering. The King persuaded her to return. He and the Montespan both laughed at her and the long martyrdom began again, accentuated this time by a conflict in Louise's heart between the claims of *Le roi du ciel*, newly discovered and most precious, and *le roi de France*, so beautiful and winning, whom she had never ceased to love.

Just at this point, when it would seem that she could bear no more, the sweet Providence of God gave her a friend to help her complete the journey. This was the Maréchal de Bellefonds, an adventurous young man who was in the habit of going to La Trappe for long periods of retreat and who loved prayer and the interior life. He was a nephew of the Carmelite prioress of the Grand Carmel in Paris, and he spoke often to Louise of this great and ancient Order and its contemplative life. All this seemed to meet her desire to give herself to her new-found and faithful Love, and after a last period of struggle and indecision, in which the Maréchal and Monseigneur Bossuet supported her with great tenderness, she decided to leave the Court for good, and to enter the desert of Carmel.

Louise's departure is dramatic and romantic. She bade good-bye to the King and begged pardon on her knees to the plain little Spanish Queen, who forgave her and kissed her lovingly, and the next day, arrayed in a dress of violet silk, she drove from Versailles to the Grand Carmel between balconies of silent people.

The Grand Carmel in old Paris was situated in a quiet street which rejoiced in the name of rue d'Enfer. In the neighbourhood were several other famous monasteries—Port Royal, the Benedictines, the Trappists. Their quiet gardens adjoined and they could hear each other's bells ringing for Office. What a delightful spot! The history of this famous priory and its illustrious foundress has been sketched by M. Bremond in his *Histoire Littéraire du Sentiment Religieux en France*.

He tells us that these Frenchwomen, with their vivacious manners, found it difficult at first to please their grave

Spanish novice-mistresses. At the time of Louise's entry, it was peopled with many beautiful and distinguished women who had seen through the hollowness of Court life. Mère Agnès met her at the gate and Louise knelt and gave her liberty into her hands. Then as Louise de la Miséricorde she was brought into recreation—in her beautiful dress—and according to a delightful Carmelite tradition was bidden to sit on the floor amid all her simple-hearted sisters and sing a couplet.

The new life delighted Louise and she wrote enthusiastic letters to the devoted Bellefonds.

The desert of Carmel! The very words conjure up the great bare cloisters, the spacious breath of silence and peace, the cell with its hard couch under the black cross on the white wall. The very nudity of the cell, the stark texts on the walls symbolise that detachment from created things which St. John of the Cross requires of the threshold of the mystical life.

Louise learnt to love the garden with its many shrines. She delighted even in the heavy habit, the long prostrations on the cold floor, the many austerities and hardships.

On her clothing day, the whole court, deeply moved, came to bid farewell to one who never did a hurt and whose only fault in their eyes had been her shyness. Never had she appeared so beautiful as, clothed in her dress of purple silk, she walked up to the altar before entering the enclosure for the last time. On the other side of the grille she was covered under the pall, symbolical of the sweet grave of Christ, and she rose again to embrace with supernatural charity her new family of the cloister.

Thenceforward her life of atonement. Oblivious of the constant headaches which tortured her and forced her to sit at recreation with her eyelids downcast, she was always asking for penances. She fasted from water—a terrible thing—and arose at three every morning to pray. This meant being up two hours before the rest of the community, in the dark, and in the intense cold of winter. And all for love's sake, more really than for justice. Mlle.

D'Auriac shows us in a flash of rare insight how Louise now would think no more of Louis when she read of *Le Véritable Roi* beloved of St. Teresa. She kept saying she was too happy at Carmel. Her only desire was to be forgotten. This, however, was denied her and the world and its troubles surged in to the very grille. Writers who laugh and say it had become fashionable to go there and sentimentalise, do not realise what sore trials she had to endure in the guest-parlour. Her troubles followed her even there. She felt much anxiety for her son, whose behaviour at one time was shameful and who incurred the anger of the King. And then her daughter, an exquisitely formed and delightful little creature who married at fourteen, conceived a passion for her husband's brother Even the Montespan came to see her in her later years, and this hard woman, in her turn cast out, sought comfort and spiritual guidance from Louise whom she had so cruelly treated. Mme. de Sevigné, whom no one can call a woman of elevated sentiments, had begun by sneering at the sensation which Louise's retirement had caused, but after entering the enclosure with the Queen, she was charmed by her grace and natural courtliness.

The nuns gave her a task which grew very dear to her—that of tending a little altar just behind the High Altar, under the pyx.

'The angels keep their ancient places.' The red angel, golden-haloed, who kept watch over Paris, looked down at three on a June night, at the hour before the dawn. His piercing glance would descry each religious house surrounded by its peaceful gardens. The chestnuts are heavy with fragrance and the air is scented with the sweetness of the dew on the lilies. The Carmelite nuns lie rigid like corpses on their straw mattresses, their folded hands seem carved in ivory. Alone Louise in her white cloak prays in the dark chapel. The angels of Paradise look down and smile on this fair future companion, erstwhile daughter of many tears. Her beautiful lids hide her eyes, but her Luini-smile hints at the secret of her hidden joy.

Another angel, blue-gowned and silver-haloed, keeps watch and ward over Versailles, but a few miles away. Now between the trees of the park the sky flushes with a promise of a rainy dawn. There are contrasts of vivid green and dark shadow. The first long finger of the sun steals into the palace and points accusingly at the high rooms where sinners sleep. There are the high-born, the exquisite, the polished and precious during the day, they of the red heels, waistcoats embroidered with rosy carnations, dresses of gold on twisted gold tied with true-lovers' knots and patterned with gems, high fantastic head-dress, perruque, lace ruffle, rosebud, rouge and patch . . . But ah! when sleep has put vigilance to flight, how different! The ladies-in-waiting lie in stuffy ricketty attics, the others slumber in painted rooms, in great beds topped by dusty feathers. Here is the gambler who is wrecked, there the duchesse of venomous tongue; here is the Maintenon, the schoolmistress in her reproachless repose, the Montespan, her furies leashed for a space, the forlorn little Spanish Queen, weeping; the great Louis himself, the Sun's namesake, lying without his wig and unutterably jaded, turns in uneasy slumber. The warnings of Monseigneur Bossuet's last sermon echo with vague threatenings far away in his mind. Does the ghost of the Louise he knew and once loved so dearly haunt his room? Does he remember the first time she was pointed out to him by a jesting courtier and he teased her for being in love with him? Does he remember her frail beauty in her Court robes and she gliding down the attic stairs, afraid of the sly glances and whispered comments which might follow her shameful tryst?

The valet wakes, the dog stirs, the thief in the little town goes into hiding. In Paris Louise sighs and folds them all in the flame-white cloak of her interceding love.

The winter of 1709 was so severe that all the perfume-flasks burst in the rooms at Versailles. What must it have been at Carmel, where there is no fire, to her who was used to the 'downy muffs and the great log fires at St. Germain and Versailles'?

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One day she fainted on the way up to an attic while carrying a basket of wet linen, and still she would not relent in her austerities. Severe internal trouble set in, echoes of the hardships she had endured as a young woman, and in June 1710 she died in great pain. Following the custom of the Order, they brought her body to the choir before the High Altar.

It is recorded that on the eve of her death, the King spent all the day with his confessor and on the morrow made his Communion. His thoughts must have turned to her, his bedeswoman, who now lay crowned with white roses. The crowd pressing eagerly to the grille held its breath, beholding a face so pure and grave—the lids of one whose nights were spent in weeping but whose dawn was in the Joy of the King.

MARGARET TROUPER.

IRREQUIETUM COR NOSTRUM

Limbs of Orion light the Southern deep,
The harness of the quiet Hunter stars,
With braced belt and spaced and lifted spars,
The walling dark; around, aloft the steep
And vault of earth-eye's roving rounds our keep,
Benighting this lone beacon of our mind,
Island awake, a-wonder in the blind
Besieging silence of the cosmic sleep.

Why sleep the worlds and silent on the wing
None wake, none whisper? Questions a clamorous heart,
By these blind fires and brilliant dust unheard,
Searches the soaring eagle his own kin,
Imperious mind imperial counterpart
And intellectual splendour of the Word.

FRANCIS FOSTER.