

Memoirs of the Comtesse du Barry

by

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Special Introduction by Robert Arnot

Up to the time of the Du Barry the court of France had been the stage where the whole political and human drama of that country was enacted. Under Louis XV the drama had been transformed into parades--parades which were of as much importance to the people as to those who took part in them. The spectators, hitherto silent, now began to hiss and be moved. The scene of the comedy was changed, and the play was continued among the spectators. The old theatre became an ante-chamber or a dressing-room, and was no longer important except in connection with the Cardinal de Bernis and the Duc de Richelieu, or Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry.

The monarchy had still a step to take towards its downfall. It had already created the *Parc aux Cerfs* (Louis XV's seraglio), but had not yet descended to the Parisian house of prostitution. It made this descent leaning on the arm of Madame du Barry. Madame du Barry was a moral sister to Manon Lescaut, but instead of taking herself off to Louisiana to repent, she plunged into the golden whirlpool at Versailles as a finish to her career. Could the coaches of a King mean more than the ordinary carriage of an abandoned girl?

Jeanne Vaubernier--known in the bagnios by the name of Mademoiselle Lange--was born at Vaucouleurs, as was Jeanne d'Arc. Better still, this later Jeanne said openly at Versailles--dared she say otherwise?-- that she was descended in a straight line from the illustrious, the venerated, the august, sacred, national maid, Jeanne. "Why did Du Barry come to Paris?" says Leon Gozlan in that account of the Château de Lucienne which makes a brilliant and learned chapter in the history of France. "Does one ever know precisely why things are done? She obeyed the magnet which attracts to Paris all who in themselves have a title to glory, to celebrity, or to misfortune. Du Barry had a pretty, provincial face, bright and charming, a face astonished at everything, hair soft and ash-colored, blue eyes, veiled and half open, and a skin fair with rose tints. She was a child of destiny. Who could have said, when she crossed the great town in her basket cart, which rolled lazily along on its massive, creaking wheels, that some day she would have equipages more beautiful than any of those which covered her with mud in passing, and on her arms more laces and diamonds than any of these ladies attended by footmen in liveries?"

When Jeanne left the provinces to come to Paris, she found her native country. She was granted the freedom of the city, and expanded in her joy like a delicate plant transplanted into a hothouse. She found herself at home for the first time; and felt that she could rule as a despot over all frequenters of the streets. She learned fashion and love at one and the same time. Gourdan had a hat made for her, and, as a reward, initiated her into the customs. But she was called to other destinies.

One day, when she was walking in the Tuileries, a lunatic--and lunatics have second sight--asked her favor when she should become queen. Du Barry said to

herself: "This man is mad." But then she thought of the Pompadour, blushed--it was the only time-- and turned her eyes towards Versailles.

But Versailles was an unhoped-for shore to such a girl as this, a girl known to all Paris. Would the King care to be the lover of one who had ruled all his courtesans? Who could say? The King often wearied of what he had. Had not a poet already been found who compared her to Venus:

O Jeanne, thy beauty seduces
And charms the whole world;
In vain does the duchess redden
And the princess growl;
They know that Venus rides proudly
The foam of the wave.

The poet, while not Voltaire, was no less a man than Bouffiers.

While the King was seeking a mistress--a nocturnal reverse of Diogenes, fleeing from the lanterns of the wise--he found Jeanne Vaubernier. He thought he could love her for one evening. "Not enough," said she, "you must love me until broad daylight." So he loved her for a whole day. What should one eat in order to be loved by royalty? Was it necessary to have a coat of arms? She had them in number, because she had been loved by all the great names in the book of heraldry. And so she begged the Viscount Jean du Barry to give her the title of viscountess. "Better still," exclaimed Jean, "I will give you the title of countess. My brother will marry you; he is a male scamp, and you are the female. What a beautiful marriage!"

So they were united. The newly made countess was solemnly presented at court by a countess of an ancient date, namely, the Countess de Bearn. King Voltaire protested, in a satire entitled "*The Court of King Petaud*" (topsy-turvy), afterwards denying it. The duc de Choiseul protested, France protested, but all Versailles threw itself passionately at the feet of the new countess. Even the daughters of the King paid her court, and allowed her to call them by their pet names: Loque, Chiffe, and Graille. The King, jealous of this gracious familiarity, wished her to call him by some pet name, and so the Bacchante, who believed that through the King she held all France in her hand, called him "La France," making him a wife to his Gray Musketeers.

Oh, that happy time! Du Barry and Louis XV hid their life--like the sage--in their little apartments. She honeyed his chocolate, and he himself made her coffee. Royalty consecrated a new verb for the dictionary of the Academy, and Madame du Barry said to the King: "At home, I can love you to madness." The King gave the castle of Lucienne to his mistress in order to be able to sing the same song. Truly the Romeo and Juliet *de la main gauche*.

Du Barry threw out her fish-wifely epithets with ineffable tenderness. She only opened her eyes half way, even when she took him by the throat. The King was enchanted by these humors. It was a new world. But someone said to him: "Ah, Sire, it is easy to see that your Majesty has never been at the house of Gourdan." Yet Du Barry was adored by poets and artists. She extended both hands to them. Jeanne's beauty had a penetrating, singular charm. At once she was blonde and brunette--black eyebrows and lashes with blue eyes, rebellious light hair with

darker shadows, cheeks of ideal contour, whose pale rose tints were often heightened by two or three touches--a lie "formed by the hand of Love," as an anthology puts it--a nose with expressive nostrils, an air of childlike candour, and a look seductive to intoxication. A bold yet shrinking Venus, a Hebe yet a Bacchante. With much grace Voltaire says:

"Madame:

"M. de la Borde tells me that you have ordered him to kiss me on both cheeks for you:

"What! Two kisses at life's end

What a passport to send me!

Two is one too much, Adorable Nymph;

I should die of pleasure at the first.

"He showed me your portrait, and be not offended, Madame, when I tell you that I have taken the liberty of giving that the two kisses."

Perhaps Voltaire would not have written this letter, had he not read the one written by the King to the Duc de Choiseul, who refused to pay court to the left-hand queen:

"My Cousin,

"The discontent which your acts cause me forces me to exile you to Chanteloup, where you will take yourself within twenty-four hours. I would have sent you farther away were it not for the particular esteem in which I hold Madame de Choiseul. With this, I pray God, my cousin, to take you into His safe and holy protection.

"Louis."

This exile was the only crime of the courtesan. On none of her enemies did she close the gates of the Bastille. And more than once did she place a pen in the hands of Louis XV with which to sign a pardon. Sometimes, indeed, she was ironic in her compassion.

"Madame," said M. de Sartines to her one day, "I have discovered a rogue who is scattering songs about you; what is to be done with him?"

"Sentence him to sing them for a livelihood."

But she afterwards made the mistake of pensioning Chevalier de Morande to buy silence.

The pleasures of the King and his favorite were troubled only by the fortune-tellers. Neither the King nor the countess believed in the predictions of the philosophers, but they did believe in divination. One day, returning from Choisy, Louis XV found under a cushion of his coach a slip of paper on which was transcribed this prediction of the monk Aimonius, the savant who could read all things from the vast book of the stars:

"As soon as Childeric had returned from Thuringia, he was crowned King of France And no sooner was he King than he espoused Basine, wife of the King of Thuringia. She came herself to find Childeric. The first night of the marriage, and before the King had retired, the queen begged Childeric to look from one of the palace windows which opened on a park, and tell what he saw there. Childeric looked out and, much terrified, reported to the princess that he had seen tigers and lions. Basine sent him a second time to look out. This time the prince only

saw bears and wolves, and the third time he perceived only cats and dogs, fighting and combating each other. Then Basine said to him: I will give you an explanation of what you have seen: The first figure shows you your successors, who will excel you in courage and power; the second represents another race which will be illustrious for their conquests, and which will augment your kingdom for many centuries; but the third denotes the end of your kingdom, which will be given over to pleasures and will lose to you the friendship of your subjects; and this because the little animals signify a people who, emancipated from fear of princes, will massacre them and make war upon each other."

Louis read the prediction and passed the paper to the Countess: "After us the end of the world," said she gaily. The King laughed, but the abbe de Beauvais celebrated high mass at Versailles after the carnival of 1774, and dared to say, in righteous anger: "This carnival is the last; yet forty days and Nineveh shall perish." Louis turned pale. "Is it God who speaks thus?" murmured he, raising his eyes to the altar. The next day he went to the hunt in grand style, but from that evening he was afraid of solitude and silence: "It is like the tomb; I do not wish to put myself in such a place," said he to Madame du Barry. The duc de Richelieu tried to divert him. "No," said he suddenly, as if the Trappist's denunciation had again recurred to him, "I shall be at ease only when these forty days have passed." He died on the fortieth day.

Du Barry believed neither in God nor in the devil, but she believed in the almanac of Liege. She scarcely read any book but this-- faithful to her earliest habits. And the almanac of Liege, in its prediction for April, 1774, said: "A woman, the greatest of favorites, will play her last role." So Madame the Countess du Barry said without ceasing: "I shall not be tranquil until these forty days have passed." The thirty-seventh day the King went to the hunt attended with all the respect due to his rank. Jeanne wept in silence and prayed to God as one who has long neglected her prayers.

Louis XV had not neglected his prayers, and gave two hundred thousand livres to the poor, besides ordering masses at St. Genevieve. Parliament opened the shrine, and knelt gravely before that miraculous relic. The least serious of all these good worshippers was, strange to say, the curate of St. Genevieve: "Ah, well!" said he gaily, when Louis was dead, "let us continue to talk of the miracles of St. Genevieve. Of what can you complain? Is not the King dead?"

At the last moment it was not God who held the heart of Louis--it was his mistress. "Ask the Countess to come here again," he said.

"Sire, you know that she has gone away," they answered.

"Ah! has she gone? Then I must go!" So he departed.

His end drew forth some maledictions. There were insults even at his funeral services. "Nevertheless," said one old soldier, "he was at the battle of Fontenoy." That was the most eloquent funeral oration of Louis XV.

"The King is dead, long live the King!" But before the death of Louis XVI they cried: "The king is dead, long live the Republic!"

Rose-colored mourning was worn in the good city of Paris. The funeral oration of the King and a lament for his mistress were pronounced by Sophie Arnould, of

which masterpiece of sacred eloquence the last words only are preserved: "Behold us orphaned both of father and mother."

If Madame du Barry was one of the seven plagues of royalty, she died faithful to royalty. After her exile to Pont aux Dames she returned to Lucienne, where the duc de Cosse Brissac consoled her for the death of Louis XV. But what she loved in Louis was that he was a king; her true country was Versailles; her true light was the sun of court life. Like Montespan, also a courtesan of high order, she often went in these dark days to cast a loving look upon the solitary park in the maze of the Trianon. Yet she was particularly happy at Lucienne.

I have compared her to Manon Lescaut, and I believe her to have been also a sister to Ganesin. All three were destroyed by passion.

One day she found herself still young at Lucienne, although her sun was setting. She loved the duc de Brissac, and how many pages of her past romance would she that day have liked to erase and forget!

"Why do you weep, Countess?" asked her lover.

"My friend," she responded, "I weep because I love you, shall I say it? I weep because I am happy."

She was right; happiness is a festival that should know no to-morrow. But on the morrow of her happiness, the Revolution knocked at the castle gate of Lucienne.

"Who goes there?"

"I am justice; prepare for destiny."

The Queen, the true queen, had been good to her as to everybody. Marie Antoinette remembered that the favorite had not been wicked. The debts of Du Barry were paid and money enough was given to her so that she could still give with both hands. Lucienne became an echo of Versailles. Foreign kings and Parisian philosophers came to chat in its portals. Minerva visited shameless Venus. But wisdom took not root at Lucienne.

For the Revolution, alas! had to cut off this charming head, which was at one time the ideal of beauty--of court beauty. Madame du Barry gave hospitality to the wounded at the arrest of the queen. "These wounded youths have no other regret than that they have not died for a princess so worthy as your Majesty," she said. "What I have done for these brave men is only what they have merited. I consoled them, and I respect their wounds when I think, Madame, that without their devotion, your Majesty would no longer be alive. Lucienne is yours, Madame, for was it not your beneficence which gave it to me? All I possess has come to me through the royal family. I have too much loyalty to forget it."

But negro Zamor became a citizen like Mirabeau. It was Zamor who took to Du Barry her lover's head. It was Zamor who denounced her at the club of the Jacobins. "The fealty (faith) of the black man is white," said the negro. But he learned how to make it red. Jeanne was imprisoned and tried before Dumas.

"Your age?"

"Forty-two years." She was really forty-seven. Coquetry even at the guillotine.

The public accuser, Fouquier Tinville, was not disarmed by the sweet voluptuousness still possessed by this pale and already fading beauty. He accused her of treason against the nation. Could the defender of Du Barry, who had also defended Marie Antoinette, find an eloquent word? No; Fouquier Tinville

was more eloquent than Chauveau-Lagarde. So the mistress of Louis was condemned. It was eleven o'clock in the evening--the hour for supper at Versailles when she was queen!

She passed the night in prayer and weeping, or rather in a frenzy of fright. In the morning she said it was "too early to die"; she wished to have a little time in order to make some disclosures. The Comite sent someone to listen to her. What did she say? She revealed all that was hidden away at Lucienne; she gave word by word an inventory of the treasures she had concealed, forgetting nothing, for did not each word give her a second of time?

"Have you finished?" said the inquisitor. "No," said Jeanne. "I have not mentioned a silver syringe concealed under the staircase!"

Meanwhile the horses of destiny stamped with impatience, and spectators were knocking at the prison gate. When they put her, already half dead, on the little cart, she bent her head and grew pale. The Du Barry alone--a sinner without redemption.

She saw the people in the square of Louis XV; she struck her breast three times and murmured: "It is my fault!" But this Christian resignation abandoned her when she mounted the scaffold--there where the statue of Louis XV had been--and she implored of the executioner:

"One moment, Mr. Executioner! One moment more!"

But the executioner was pitiless Sanson. It was block and the knife--without the "one moment!"

Such was the last bed of the Du Barry. Had the almanac of Liege only predicted to her that the one who would lead her to her bed for the last time would not be a King but a citizen executioner, it might have been--but why moralize?

Robert Arnot To the Reader

As the early part of Madame du Barry's career had little to differentiate it from the life of an ordinary courtesan, the editor has deemed it best to confine the memoirs to the years in her life which helped to make history.

--Editor*

*"Editor here means the author, who is assuming the persona of the editor of the Comtesse's memoirs.

Chapter 1

Letter from Lebel--Visit from Lebel--Nothing conclusive--Another visit from Lebel--Invitation to sup with the king--Instructions of the comte Jean to the comtesse

One morning comte Jean entered my apartment, his face beaming with delight.

'Read," said he, giving me a letter, "read, Jeannette: victory is ours. News from Morand. Lebel is coming to Paris, and will dine with us. Are we alone?"

"No, there are two of your countrymen whom you invited yesterday."

"I will write and put them off. Morand alone must dine with Lebel; he ought to have a place at the feast which he furnishes with such good music. Come, my dear girl, we touch the moment of importance, it is in your beauty and power of pleasing that I place all my hopes. I think I may rely on you; but, above all, do not forget that you are my sister-in-law."

"Brother-in-law," said I, laughing, "it is not unnecessary that I should know decidedly to which of family I am married? The custom in France is not that a woman be the undivided property of three brothers."

"That only happens in Venice," replied the comte; "my brother Elie is too young, you must be the wife of Guillaume, my second brother."

"Very well; I am the comtesse Guillaume du Barry; that does famously well; we like to know whom we are married to."

After this conversation, comte Jean insisted on presiding at my toilette. He acquitted himself of the task, with a most laughable attention. During two good hours, at least, he tormented first Henriette, and then the female hairdresser, for I had not yet followed the mode, which began to be very general, of having my hair dressed by a man. Comte Jean passed alternately from my dressing-room to the kitchen. He knew Lebel was a gallant and a gourmand, and he was anxious to please him in all senses at once.

At one o'clock I was under arms, and prepared to receive him on whom my destiny depended. As soon as I reached the drawing-room, comte Jean compelled me to submit to the test of a rigid examination.

His serious air amused me much as he gazed at me some time in solemn silence. At length his forehead relaxed, a smile of satisfaction played on his lips, and extending his arms to me, without venturing to touch me, "You are charming, divine," he said; "Lebel ought to go and hang himself if he does not fall down at your knees."

Soon afterwards the folding-doors were hastily opened, and a servant announced M. Lebel, *premier de sa Majeste*, with M. Morand. The comte went to meet the arrivals, and as I now saw Lebel for the first time, he presented him to me formally.

"Sister, this is M. Lebel, *premier de sa Majeste*, who has done us the honor to come and dine with us."

"And he confers a real pleasure on us," said I, looking smilingly on M. Lebel. My look had its effect, for Lebel remained mute and motionless from admiration at my person. At length he stammered out a few incoherent words, which I

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