

THE WOMEN OF THE FRENCH SALONS

By Amelia Gere Mason

PREFACE

It has been a labor of love with many distinguished Frenchmen to recall the memories of the women who have made their society so illustrious, and to retouch with sympathetic insight the features which time was beginning to dim. One naturally hesitates to enter a field that has been gleaned so carefully, and with such brilliant results, by men like Cousin, Sainte-Beuve, Goncourt, and others of lesser note. But the social life of the two centuries in which women played so important a role in France is always full of human interest from whatever point of view one may regard it. If there is not a great deal to be said that is new, old facts may be grouped afresh, and old modes of life and thought measured by modern standards.

In searching through the numerous memoirs, chronicles, letters, and original manuscripts in which the records of these centuries are hidden away, nothing has struck me so forcibly as the remarkable mental vigor and the far-reaching influence of women whose theater was mainly a social one. Though society has its frivolities, it has also its serious side, and it is through the phase of social evolution that was begun

in the salons that women have attained the position they hold today.

However beautiful, or valuable, or poetic may have been the feminine

types of other nationalities, it is in France that we find the

forerunners of the intelligent, self-poised, clear-sighted, independent

modern woman. It is possible that in the search for larger fields the

smaller but not less important ones have been in a measure forgotten.

The great stream of civilization flows from a thousand unnoted rills

that make sweet music in their course, and swell the current as surely

as the more noisy torrent. The conditions of the past cannot be revived,

nor are they desirable. The present has its own theories and its own

methods. But at a time when the reign of luxury is rapidly establishing

false standards, and the best intellectual life makes hopeless struggles

against an ever aggressive materialism, it may be profitable as well as

interesting to consider the possibilities that lie in a society equally

removed from frivolity and pretension, inspired by the talent, the

sincerity, and the moral force of American women, and borrowing a

new element of fascination from the simple and charming but polite

informality of the old salons.

It has been the aim in these studies to gather within a limited compass

the women who represented the social life of their time on its

most intellectual side, and to trace lightly their influence upon

civilization through the avenues of literature and manners. Though the

work may lose something in fullness from the effort to

put so much into
so small a space, perhaps there is some compensation in
the opportunity
of comparing, in one gallery, the women who exercised
the greatest power
in France for a period of more than two hundred years.
The impossibility
of entering into the details of so many lives in a
single volume is
clearly apparent. Only the most salient points can be
considered. Many
who would amply repay a careful study have simply been
glanced at, and
others have been omitted altogether. As it would be out
of the question
in a few pages to make an adequate portrait of women who
occupy so
conspicuous a place in history as Mme. De Maintenon and
Mme. De Stael,
the former has been reluctantly passed with a simple
allusion, and
the latter outlined in a brief resume not at all
proportional to the
relative interest or importance of the subject.

I do not claim to present a complete picture of French
society, and
without wishing to give too rose-colored a view, it has
not seemed to
me necessary to dwell upon its corrupt phases. If truth
compels one
sometimes to state unpleasant facts in portraying
historic characters,
it is as needless and unjust as in private life to
repeat idle and
unproved tales, or to draw imaginary conclusions from
questionable data.
The conflict of contemporary opinion on the simplest
matters leads
one often to the suspicion that all personal history is
more or less
disguised fiction. The best one can do in default of
direct records
is to accept authorities that are generally regarded as
the most

trustworthy.

This volume is affectionately dedicated to the memory of my mother, who followed the work with appreciative interest in its early stages, but did not live to see its conclusion.

Amelia Gere Mason Paris, July 6, 1891

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. SALONS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Characteristics of French
Woman--Gallic Genius for Conversation--Social
Conditions--Origin of the
Salons--Their Power--Their Composition--Their Records

CHAPTER II. THE HOTEL DE RAMBOUILLET Mme. De

Rambouillet--The
Salon Bleu--Its Habitués--Its
Diversions--Corneille--Balzac--Richelieu--Romance of the
Grand Conde--the Young Bossuet--Voiture--The Duchesse de
Longueville--Angelique Paulet--Julie d'Angennes--Les
Precieuses
Ridicules--Decline of the Salon--Influence upon
Literature and Manners

CHAPTER III. MADEMOISELLE DE SCUDERY AND THE SAMEDIS

Salons of the
Noblesse--"The Illustrious Sappho"--Her Romances--The
Samedis--Bons Mots
of Mme. Cornuel--Estimate of Mlle. De Scudery

CHAPTER IV. LA GRANDE MADEMOISELLE Her Character--Her

Heroic Part in the
Fronde--Her Exile--Literary Diversions of her Salon--A
Romantic Episode

CHAPTER V. A LITERARY SALON AT PORT ROYAL Mme. De Sable--Her

Worldly Life--Her Retreat--Her Friends--Pascal--The

Maxims of La
Rochefoucauld--Last Days of the Marquise

CHAPTER VI. MADAME DE SEVIGNE Her Genius--Her Youth--Her
Unworthy
Husband--Her Impertinent Cousin--Her love for her
Daughter--Her
Letters--Hotel de Carnavalet--Mme. Duplessis Guengaud--
Mme. De
Coulanges--The Curtain Falls

CHAPTER VII. MADAME DE LA FAYETTE Her Friendship with
Mme. De
Sevigne--Her Education--Her Devotion to the Princess
Henrietta--Her
Salon--La Rochefoucauld-- Talent as a Diplomatist--
Comparison with Mme.
De Maintenon--Her Literary Work--Sadness of her Last
Days--Woman in
Literature

CHAPTER VIII. SALONS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
Characteristics of
the Eighteenth Century--Its Epicurean Philosophy--
Anecdote of Mme. Du
Deffand--The Salon an Engine of Political Power--Great
Influence of
Woman--Salons Defined--Literary Dinners--Etiquette of
the Salons--An
Exotic on American Soil

CHAPTER IX. AN ANTECHAMBER OF THE ACADEMIE FRANCAISE The
Marquise de
Lambert--Her "Bureau d'Esprit"--Fontenelle--Advice to
her Son--Wise
Thoughts on the Education of Women--Her Love of
Consideration--Her
Generosity--Influence of Women upon the Academy

CHAPTER X. THE DUCHESSE DU MAINE Her Capricious
Character--Her
Esprit--Mlle. De Launay--Clever Portrait of her
Mistress--Perpetual
Fetes at Sceaux--Voltaire and the "Divine Emilie"--
Dilettante Character

of this Salon

CHAPTER XI. MADAME DE TENCIN AND MADAM DU CHATELET An
Intriguing
Chanoinesse--Her Singular Fascination--Her Salon--Its
Philosophical
Character--Mlle. Aisse--Romances of Mme. De Tencin--
D'Alembert--La Belle
Emilie--Voltaire--the Two Women Compared

CHAPTER XII. MADAME GEOFFRIN AND THE PHILOSOPHERS
Cradles of the New
Philosophy--Noted Salons of this Period--Character of
Mme. Geoffrin--Her
Practical Education--Anecdotes of her Husband--
Composition of her
Salon--Its Insidious Influence--Her Journey to Warsaw--
Her Death

CHAPTER XIII. ULTRA PHILOSOPHICAL SALONS--MADAME
D'EPINAY Mme. De
Graffigny--Baron D'Holbach--Mme. D'Epinay's Portrait of
Herself--Mlle.
Quinault--Rousseau--La Chevrette--Grimm--Diderot--The
Abbe
Galiani--Estimate of Mme. D'Epinay

CHAPTER XIV. SALONS OF THE NOBLESSE--MADAME DU DEFFAND
La Marechale
de Luxenbourg--The Temple--Comtesse de Boufflers--Mme.
Du Dufand--Her
Convent Salon--Rupture with Mlle. De Lespinasse--Her
Friendship with
Horace Walpole--Her Brilliancy and her Ennui

CHAPTER XV. MADEMOISELLE DE LESPINASSE A Romantic
Career--Companion
of Mme. Du Deffand--Rival Salons--Association with the
Encyclopedists--D'Alembert--A Heart Tragedy--Impassioned
Letters--A Type
Unique in her Age

CHAPTER XVI. THE SALON HELVETIQUE The Swiss Pastor's
Daughter--Her
Social Ambition--Her Friends Mme. De Marchais--Mme.

D'Houdetot--Duchesse
de Lauzun--Character of Mme. Necker--Death at Coppet--
Close of the Most
Brilliant Period of the Salons

CHAPTER XVII. SALONS OF THE REVOLUTION--MADAME ROLAND
Change in the
Character of the Salons--Mme. De Condorcet--Mme.
Roland's Story of
her Own Life--A Marriage of Reason--Enthusiasm for the
Revolution--Her
Modest Salon--Her Tragical Fate

CHAPTER XVIII. MADAM DE STAEL Supremacy of Her Genius--
Her Early
Training--Her Sensibility--A Marriage de Convenance--Her
Salon--Anecdote
of Benjamin Constant--Her Exile--Life at Coppet--Secret
Marriage--Close
of a Stormy Life

CHAPTER XIX. SALONS OF THE EMPIRE AND RESTORATION--
MADAME RECAMIER A
Transition period--Mme. De Montesson--Mme. De Genus--
Revival of the
Literary Spirit--Mme. De Beaumont--Mme. De Remusat--Mme.
De Souza--Mme.
De Duras--Mme. De Krudener--Fascination of Mme.
Recamier--Her
Friends--Her Convent Salon--Chateaubriand Decline of the
Salon

CHAPTER I. SALONS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

_Characteristics of French Woman--Gallic Genius for
Conversation--Social
Conditions--Origin of the Salons--Their Power--Their
Composition--Their
Records._

"Inspire, but do not write," said LeBrun to women.
Whatever we may think

today of this rather superfluous advice, we can readily pardon a man living in the atmosphere of the old French salons, for falling somewhat under the special charm of their leaders. It was a charm full of subtle flattery. These women were usually clever and brilliant, but their cleverness and brilliancy were exercised to bring into stronger relief the talents of their friends. It is true that many of them wrote, as they talked, out of the fullness of their own hearts or their own intelligence, and with no thought of a public; but it was only an incident in their lives, another form of diversion, which left them quite free from the dreaded taint of feminine authorship. Their peculiar gift was to inspire others, and much of the fascination that gave them such power in their day still clings to their memories. Even at this distance, they have a perpetual interest for us. It may be that the long perspective lends them a certain illusion which a closer view might partly dispel. Something also may be due to the dark background against which they were outlined. But, in spite of time and change, they stand out upon the pages of history, glowing with an ever-fresh vitality, and personifying the genius of a civilization of which they were the fairest flower.

The Gallic genius is eminently a social one, but it is, of all others, the most difficult to reproduce. The subtle grace of manner, the magic of spoken words, are gone with the moment. The conversations of two centuries ago are today like champagne which has lost

its sparkle.

We may recall their tangible forms--the facts, the accessories, the thoughts, even the words, but the flavor is not there. It is the volatile essence of gaiety and wit that especially characterizes French society. It glitters from a thousand facets, it surprises us in a thousand delicate turns of thought, it appears in countless movements and shades of expression. But it refuses to be imprisoned. Hence the impossibility of catching the essential spirit of the salons. We know something of the men and women who frequented them, as they have left many records of themselves. We have numerous pictures of their social life from which we may partially reconstruct it and trace its influence. But the nameless attraction that held for so long a period the most serious men of letters as well as the gay world still eludes us.

We find the same elusive quality in the women who presided over these reunions. They were true daughters of a race of which Mme. De Graffigny wittily said that it "escaped from the hands of Nature when there had entered into its composition only air and fire." They certainly were not faultless; indeed, some of them were very faulty. Nor were they, as a rule, remarkable for learning. Even the leaders of noted literary salons often lacked the common essentials of a modern education. But if they wrote badly and spelled badly, they had an abundance of that delicate combination of intellect and wit which the French call ESPRIT. They had also, in superlative measure, the social gifts which

women of genius reared in the library or apart from the world, are apt to lack. The close study of books leads to a knowledge of man rather than of men. It tends toward habits of introspection which are fatal to the clear and swift vision required for successful leadership of any sort. Social talent is distinct, and implies a happy poise of character and intellect; the delicate blending of many gifts, not the supremacy of one. It implies taste and versatility, with fine discrimination, and the tact to sink one's personality as well as to call out the best in others. It was this flexibility of mind, this active intelligence tempered with sensibility and the native instinct of pleasing, that distinguished the French women who have left such enduring traces upon their time. "It is not sufficient to be wise, it is necessary also to please," said the witty and penetrating Ninon, who thus very aptly condensed the feminine philosophy of her race. Perhaps she has revealed the secret of their fascination, the indefinable something which is as difficult to analyze as the perfume of a rose.

A history of the French salons would include the history of the entire period of which they were so prominent a factor. It would make known to us its statesmen and its warriors; it would trace the great currents of thought; it would give us glimpses of every phase of society, from the diversions of the old noblesse, with their sprinkling of literature and philosophy, to the familiar life of the men of letters, who cast about

their intimate coteries the halo of their own genius. These salons were closely interwoven with the best intellectual life of more than two hundred years. Differing in tone according to the rank, taste, or character of their leaders, they were rallying points for the most famous men and women of their time. In these brilliant centers, a new literature had its birth. Here was found the fine critical sense that put its stamp on a new poem or a new play. Here ministers were created and deposed, authors and artists were brought into vogue, and vacant chairs in the Academie Francaise were filled. Here the great philosophy of the eighteenth century was cradled. Here sat the arbiters of manners, the makers of social success. To these high tribunals came, at last, every aspirant for fame.

It was to the refinement, critical taste, and oral force of a rare woman, half French and half Italian, that the first literary salons owed their origin and their distinctive character. In judging of the work of Mme. De Rambouillet, we have to consider that in the early days of the seventeenth century knowledge was not diffused as it is today. A new light was just dawning upon the world, but learning was still locked in the brains of savants, or in the dusty tomes of languages that were practically obsolete. Men of letters were dependent upon the favors of noble but often ignorant patrons, whom they never met on a footing of equality. The position of women was as inferior as their education, and the incredible depravity of morals was a sufficient

answer to the oft-repeated fallacy that the purity of the family is best maintained by feminine seclusion. It is true there were exceptions to this reign of illiteracy. With the natural disposition to glorify the past, the writers of the next generation liked to refer to the golden era of the Valois and the brilliancy of its voluptuous court. Very likely they exaggerated a little the learning of Marguerite de Navarre, who was said to understand Latin, Italian, Spanish, even Greek and Hebrew. But she had rare gifts, wrote religious poems, besides the very secular "Heptameron" which was not eminently creditable to her refinement, held independent opinions, and surrounded herself with men of letters. This little oasis of intellectual light, shadowed as it was with vices, had its influence, and there were many women in the solitude of remote chateaux who began to cultivate a love for literature. "The very women and maidens aspired to this praise and celestial manna of good learning," said Rabelais. But their reading was mainly limited to his own unsavory satires, to Spanish pastorals, licentious poems, and their books of devotion. It was on such a foundation that Mme. De Rambouillet began to rear the social structure upon which her reputation rests. She was eminently fitted for this role by her pure character and fine intelligence; but she added to these the advantages of rank and fortune, which gave her ample facilities for creating a social center of sufficient attraction to focus the best intellectual life of the age,

and sufficient power to radiate its light. Still it was the tact and discrimination to select from the wealth of material about her, and quietly to reconcile old traditions with the freshness of new ideas, that especially characterized Mme. De Rambouillet.

It was this richness of material, the remarkable variety and originality of the women who clustered round and succeeded their graceful leader, that gave so commanding an influence to the salons of the seventeenth century. No social life has been so carefully studied, no women have been so minutely portrayed. The annals of the time are full of them. They painted one another, and they painted themselves, with realistic fidelity. The lights and shadows are alike defined. We know their joys and their sorrows, their passions and their follies, their tastes and their antipathies. Their inmost life has been revealed. They animate, as living figures, a whole class of literature which they were largely instrumental in creating, and upon which they have left the stamp of their own vivid personality. They appear later in the pages of Cousin and Sainte-Beuve, with their radiant features softened and spiritualized by the touch of time. We rise from a perusal of these chronicles of a society long passed away, with the feeling that we have left a company of old friends. We like to recall their pleasant talk of themselves, of their companions, of the lighter happenings, as well as the more serious side of the age which they have illuminated. We seem to see their faces, not their manner, watch the play of intellect and

feeling, while they
speak. The variety is infinite and full of charm.

Mme. de Sevigne talks upon paper, of the trifling
affairs of every-day
life, adding here and there a sparkling anecdote, a bit
of gossip, a
delicate characterization, a trenchant criticism, a dash
of wit, a
touch of feeling, or a profound thought. All this is
lighted up by
her passionate love of her daughter, and in this light
we read the
many-sided life of her time for twenty-five years. Mme.
de La Fayette
takes the world more seriously, and replaces the playful
fancy of her
friend by a richer vein of imagination and sentiment.
She sketches for
us the court of which Madame (title given to the wife of
the king's
brother) is the central figure--the unfortunate Princess
Henrietta whom
she loved so tenderly, and who died so tragically in her
arms. She
writes novels too; not profound studies of life, but
fine and exquisite
pictures of that side of the century which appealed most
to her poetic
sensibility. We follow the leading characters of the age
through the
ten-volume romances of Mlle. de Scudery, which have
mostly long since
fallen into oblivion. Doubtless the portraits are a
trifle rose-colored,
but they accord, in the main, with more veracious
history. The Grande
Mademoiselle describes herself and her friends, with the
curious naivete
of a spoiled child who thinks its smallest experiences
of interest to
all the world. Mme. de Maintenon gives us another
picture, more serious,
more thoughtful, but illuminated with flashes of
wonderful insight.

Most of these women wrote simply to amuse themselves and their friends.

It was only another mode of their versatile expression.

With rare

exceptions, they were not authors consciously or by intention. They

wrote spontaneously, and often with reckless disregard of grammar and

orthography. But the people who move across their gossiping pages are

alive. The century passes in review before us as we read. The men and

women who made its literature so brilliant and its salons so famous,

become vivid realities. Prominent among the fair faces that look out

upon us at every turn, from court and salon, is that of the Duchesse de

Longueville, sister of the Grand Conde, and heroine of the Fronde. Her

lovely blue eyes, with their dreamy languor and "luminous awakenings,"

turn the heads alike of men and women, of poet and critic, of statesman

and priest. We trace her brief career through her pure and ardent youth,

her loveless marriage, her fatal passion for La Rochefoucauld, the final

shattering of all her illusions; and when at last, tired of the world,

she bows her beautiful head in penitent prayer, we too love and forgive

her, as others have done. Were not twenty-five years of suffering and

penance an ample expiation? She was one of the three women of whom

Cardinal Mazarin said that they were "capable of governing and

overturning three kingdoms." The others were the intriguing Duchesse de

Chevreuse, who dazzled the age by her beauty and her daring escapades,

and the fascinating Anne de Gonzague, better known as the Princesse

Palatine, of whose winning manners, conversational charm, penetrating intellect, and loyal character Bossuet spoke so eloquently at her death. We catch pleasant glimpses of Mme. Deshoulieres, beautiful and a poet; of Mme. Cornuel, of whom it was said that "every sin she confessed was an epigram"; of Mme. de Choisy, witty and piquante; of Mme. de Doulanges, also a wit and femme d'esprit.

Linked with these by a thousand ties of sympathy and affection were the worthy counterparts of Pascal and Arnauld, of Bossuet and Fenelon, the devoted women who poured out their passionate souls at the foot of the cross, and laid their earthly hopes upon the altar of divine love. We follow the devout Jacqueline Pascal to the cloister in which she buries her brilliant youth to die at thirty-five of a wounded conscience and a broken heart. Many a bruised spirit, as it turns from the gay world to the mystic devotion which touches a new chord in its jaded sensibilities, finds support and inspiration in the strong and fervid sympathy of Jacqueline Arnauld, better known as Mere Angelique of Port Royal. This profound spiritual passion was a part of the intense life of the century, which gravitated from love and ambition to the extremes of penitence and asceticism.

A multitude of minor figures, graceful and poetic, brilliant and spirituelles, flit across the canvas, leaving the fragrance of an exquisite individuality, and tempting one to extend the list of the versatile women who toned and colored the society of the

period. But we have to do, at present, especially with those who gathered and blended this fresh intelligence, delicate fancy, emotional wealth, and religious fervor, into a society including such men as Corneille, Balzac, Bossuet, Richelieu, Conde, Pascal, Arnault, and La Rochefoucauld--those who are known as leaders of more or less celebrated salons. Of these, Mme. de Rambouillet and Mme. de Sable were among the best representative types of their time, and the first of the long line of social queens who, through their special gift of leadership, held so potent a sway for two centuries.

CHAPTER II. THE HOTEL DE RAMBOUILLET

Mme. de Rambouillet--The Salon Bleu--Its Habitués--Its Diversions--Corneille--Balzac--Richelieu--Romance of the Grand Conde--The Young Bossuet--Voiture--The Duchesse de Longueville--Angelique Paulet--Julie d'Angennes--Les Precieuses Ridicules--Decline of the Salon--Influence upon Literature and Manners_

The Hotel de Rambouillet has been called the "cradle of polished society," but the personality of its hostess is less familiar than that of many who followed in her train. This may be partly due to the fact that she left no record of herself on paper. She aptly embodied the kind advice of Le Brun. It was her special talent to inspire others and to combine the various elements of a brilliant and complex social life. The rare tact which enabled her to do this lay largely

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