FRANCOISE MIGNOT, A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY

OPPORTUNIST

Marble efficies, however close their likeness to the illustrious deceased, are not infrequently of unattractive mien. Such is the countenance of one sculptured denizen of the Abbey Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, in Paris, where, in a side-chapel, Jean-Casimir the Fifth of Poland kneels uncertainly upon his pedestal. His expression, as he extends crown and sceptre towards the High Altar, is peevish, as of one who, realizing the advisability of licking a little spiritual cream off the political spilt milk, feels that he has been hardly treated; and the thirty sounding lines of epitaph do nothing to counteract the impression that here lies enclosed the heart of a depressing failure. This, to be sure, is anticipation, since the royal refugee takes a secondary place in our narrative, of which the heroine is the lady whose third husband he may or may not have been, and whose marriage, celebrated in secret, if at all, became public knowledge, and gave rise to a saying, long current in Dauphiné: "E ist lou secret de la Liaudia; y z san tui,"—It's like the secret of Claudine; everybody knows it.1

It appears that, for years, Marie-Françoise-Claudine Mignot, the "Lhauda" of tradition, was the pride and envy of her native province. One must discard the theory that would make of her the heroine of Jean Millet's Pastorale et tragi-comédie de Janin,² because she was born only in 1631, two years before the first performance of the play. Her own life was romantic enough, and inspired the playwrights Bayard and Duphot to concoct a highly imaginary comédie historique which appeared on the boards of the Paris Vaudeville in 1829,³ and later, put on in English at the Haymarket, moved the author of The Ingoldsby Legends to facetious comment.⁴ It may be that, one day, Lhauda may reappear in a biographie romançée; the genre, like the heroine is tenacious of life.

She was the young and comely daughter of a linen-draper—some say a washerwoman⁵—in the hamlet of Baschet, near Grenoble. By dint of prudence and diplomacy, she obtained a formal offer of marriage from the young

"secretary"—more likely valet-de-chambre—of Monsieur Desportes d'Amblérieux, Treasurer of Grenoble, and a ball was given in the village to celebrate the engagement. We may not know if, like their neighbours across the Iser, the Dauphinois were addicted to the goignade, the romp that so scandalized good Bishop Fléchier; but it happened, unfortunately, in the enthusiasm of the dance that the fiancée's deportment was not what it ought to have been, causing uproarious mirth, and the superior valet-secretary, affronted, repudiated poor Françoise, then and there. Later, repenting of his harshness, and none too sure of his own powers of persuasion, he besought his master to intercede for him, which the latter did, in unexpected fashion. He was well on in years, and Françoise only fifteen, but both were well satisfied. Incidentally, the Treasurer was rich. No sooner had he interviewed the despised beauty than he sent the secretary out of the way on business, obtained a dispensation from the Bishop of Grenoble, and took the bride to his own bosom with all speed.

That Françoise was the angelic creature that some would have us believe8 seems a little doubtful, considering her later career. A portrait of her in early youth9 shows us, along with a very pretty face, an espiègle little smile in no wise indicative of naïveté. However, she made Monsieur Desportes an excellent wife. Quick to avail herself of every opportunity, she applied herself to acquiring the education she lacked, and soon passed muster in a milieu where Henriette still took precedence of Armande. "Her features were fine and regular", says Lallanne¹⁰ quoting a note to the text of Millet's play, "her air modest and discreet; for wit she substituted much aimiability." She was also, he adds, of a pleasing plumpness. In the opinion of her elderly spouse she was perfection, so much so that on one occasion, in doting mood, he declared himself all unworthy of his Françoise, adding that only a king could deserve such a paragon. How often has flattery been transmuted into prophecy in the mind of a suggestible politician? One may assume that Françoise purred, and remembered. She was to find favour with persons higher in the social scale than the Treasurer of Grenoble. When Monsieur Desportes died, leaving his entire estate to his widow, his relatives attacked the will.¹¹ Françoise also found herself in difficulties with regard to succession duties,12 and went to Paris to seek legal aid. In the memoirs of Mademoiselle de Montpensier13 we read that an Augustinian monk introduced her to the secretary of her second husband. This person enlisted his master's influence on the widow's behalf, and, having seen her affairs put in order, expected her to marry him.14 But the canny Françoise, in gratitude to the high official who

had rendered her so great a service, found it incumbent on her to pay a visite de politesse. Presenting herself at the portals of a certain mansion in the rue des Fossés-Montmartre, she soon found herself in the august presence of no less a personage than François de L'Hôpital¹⁴, sieur du Hallier, comte de Rosnay, Captain of the King's Bodyguard, Field-Marshal of France, Chevalier of the King's Orders, Knight of the Holy Ghost, Governor of Lorraine, Champagne, and Paris, whom the Sun-King, in all correspondence, addressed as "Mon Cousin".

He had been destined for Holy Orders, 15 and had been, in fact Abbot of Sainte-Geneviève-de-Paris and Bishop of Meaux; but, realizing his true vocation, he flung the frock into the nettle-patch and donned the cuirass. His military career had been, on the whole, a distinguished one, beginning in the wars of religion and continuing throughout those with Spain. As Governor of Paris, his prowess at the time of the Fronde was less brilliant, owing partly to the fact that, however stout a fellow on the field of battle, the doughty Field-Marshal was curiously weak in dealing with the opposite sex.

His relations with the dreadful Madame de Vilaine (well-named) are better passed over, except to note that the lady, out of sheer perverseness, got him to jilt a rich partie, when he was actually on the way to sign the marriage-contract. His first wife had been Charlotte des Essarts, previously mistress of Henri IV and of the Cardinal de Guise. L'Hôpital, attracted, desired a liaison and nothing more. Charlotte thought otherwise. She invited him to a tête-à-tête dinner at the conclusion of which she suddenly drew a knife and informed him that, unless he would swear to marry her next day, he had polished off his last meal in this world. The Maréchal capitulated, alleging with (to us) startling candour his entire lack of prejudice or preference. She died in 1651, disgraced and in exile, and the King's major-domo, Jean Vallier, noting her demise, expressed the hope that the Governor of Paris might, remarrying, find a partner more worthy of him. But the Governor can barely have had time to enjoy his relief when he found himself confronted by another mégère, this time without matrimonial designs.

Civil war was distracting the country, and Paris was in a turmoil, as the King's partisans and those of Condé disputed the surrounding terrain. Eventually there was heavy fighting in the faubourg Saint-Antoine, Condé's army getting the worst of it and in danger of being cut to pieces. The Governor of Paris, under strict orders to keep the gates of Paris closed, was, with the aldermen and Provost of Merchants, in the Council-chamber of the Hôtel-de-Ville¹⁸ when, accompanied by certain ladies of the Court, and armed with

a document extorted from Gaston d'Orléans, Mademoiselle de Montpensier,—the *Grande Mademoiselle*—marched in, and announced that the City gate of Saint-Antoine must be opened, at once, to Condé's army. In the face of a refusal, that formidable grand-daughter of Henri IV flew into a royal rage¹⁹ and shouted that, did he not do as he was told, directly, she would pluck out his beard first, and kill him afterwards, and the terrified Governor signed the order.

The beard part of the story has been discredited;²⁰ Mademoiselle's own tale is that all she did, while L'Hôpital hesitated, was to lean against a window-frame and pray devoutly.²¹ Nevertheless, intimidation there was, and the Governor's discomfiture was complete, next day, when the magistrates took him severely to task for his weakness.²² Meanwhile, at Grenoble, the thread of his fate was being drawn out. He was seventy, handsome as well as susceptible, and looking for a second wife. In the *Muze Historique*²³ we find listed forty-one candidates for the post. One may judge of his sensations when, not long after the Fronde incident, the seductive Madame Desportes, looking fetching in her weeds, pleasantly rounded of contour, a tear in her eye and honeyed words on her tongue, was ushered into his presence. The Maréchal de L'Hôpital had surely had his fill of termagants.

Their marriage took place, probably in less than a week, at the church that is now Notre-Dame-des-Victoires,²⁴ and the triumphant Governor of Paris conducted his bride to his magnificent house nearby. A far cry to Baschet! But it must be said, in justice to Françoise, that she made as great a success of her second marriage as of her first. Letters written during the seven years of their union²⁵ testify to the Maréchal's delight in the cajoling young spouse who obviously managed him to perfection. There is something touching in the spectacle of the coarse, unscrupulous old soldier—for his personal record was not edifying, particularly as regards the assassination of Concini²⁶—writing of his love with a fervour that is lyrical, as he reproaches his "chère enfant", his "mignonne", his "bonne fille" for absenting herself over-long at Bourbon-les-Eaux, and trusts it will not be many days before the "chères délices de mon coeur" returns, to gladden the heart of her "papa". "My good daughter, I know not if you find the days long, but they seem like years to me."

In due time, the Maréchale presented her lord with an heir, and wine flowed like water as the delighted father invited all and sundry to drink his son's health.²⁷ But the child lived only a few days, and the Maréchale, presented at Court, was launched upon the social career indicated by her husband's exalted rank.

It was well for Françoise that the time of her greatest prosperity was during a period not remarkable for delicacy of manner and sentiment. As is well known, despite the splendour of the Sun-King and the ceremony on which he insisted, much that was crude and even brutal jarred with the formal politeness, just as, at Versailles, pomp and pestiferousness went hand in hand. Had the buxom Françoise come to town a century later, the chances are that she would have been flayed alive by the criticism of a generation whose wit and finesse she would have been the last to appreciate. As it was, she cut a fine figure in a society of whose members too many mistook display for elegance and arrogance for dignity. Mademoiselle de Montpensier describes the Maréchale as having "un beau visage" and magnificent jewels and furniture, but a country wit, and adds that she is so fat as to look ridiculous when dancing.28 A second portrait²⁹ painted about this time represents her, indeed, as a middleaged reine de village, obese and simpering. But there are tributes to her beauty and grandeur.30 The lavish entertainment enjoyed by L'Hôpital's guests is described with gusto by Loret, the society-gossip writer of the time³¹ who, having begun by being facetious at L'Hôpital's expense, soon found it expedient not to bite the hand that fed him, and sprinkled his pages with allusions to

> ... cette divine Maréchale, En beauté presque sans égale, [Qui] Outre son aimable beauté A de mine et de majesté . . . etc., etc.

He became an assiduous publicity-agent, and is most enthusiastic when reporting an entertainment given by the Governor and graced by the presence of the King, Monsieur, Queen Christine of Sweden (who was distracting the Court with her unseemly antics), and Mademoiselle de Montpensier, as well as the three famous Mancini sisters. After a masquerade in which all the royalties took part, a ballet by Montbrun was performed; then came a sumptuous repast, when a long procession of gorgeously uniformed lackeys made the round of the hall, bearing all sorts of rare delicacies, and at the head of the cortège walked the Maréchale herself, to serve her royal guests with her own fair hands.

Loret records another fête given by L'Hôpital to celebrate the taking of Landrécy in 1655—also, in 1662, fireworks and feasting to recall the conclusion of the Fronde, not to mention various routs; at one of these, which cost L'Hôpital twelve thousand crowns, "the crush was so great as to cause a riot

at the entrance."³² Alas! the Chancellor Séguier gave an even grander one, the very next night. In August, 1658, the Maréchal, accompanied by his lady, went on an official visit to Champagne and was given a tremendous reception, with artillery salvos, Te Deums and harangues, balls, plays, and banquets. At Troyes, army and nobility, clergy and magistrates, turned out in full force to do honour to the Lieutenant-Governor, merchants and town councillors joyfully swelled the ranks, and the mayor stepped liveliest of all.

One more grand ball, in 1659; then, a few months later, we read that L'Hôpital is in poor health, and has left Paris, with the Maréchale, for his château at Bernes. Another seven months, and his widow surpassed herself in outlay as, for three days, the Governor of Paris lay in state; on the fourth day, his panegyric was pronounced by Monseignor Azy, in the Church of Saint-Eustache, draped and decorated for the occasion.

It is not certain just when the Maréchale's star began to slip down the horizon. Madame du Noyer, the piquant mémorialiste, says that Françoise's second husband left her pressed for means,³³ and it seems that a grand-daughter of Charlotte des Essarts sued her for money and jewels that had belonged to her grandmother and that Françoise essayed to keep for herself.³⁴ Loret, too, mentions that, before meeting Françoise, he let it be known that he required a substantial dot. Jal says that L'Hôpital left Françoise an immense fortune as well as a house at Issy. At all events, she remained in society for some time longer. She had found a protector in Colbert, and through him obtained payment from the State of sums owing to her husband on his demise.³⁵ At the time of the King's marriage to Marie-Thérèse of Spain, Françoise applied to Mazarin for the privilege of buying clothes, jewels and furniture for the bride and, in the same letter, begs for an appointment in the Queen's household and offers to bid one hundred thousand pounds more than any other applicant for the post which went, for a time at least, to the Princess des Ursins.³⁶

There is reason to believe that those in high places estimated her smiles and scheming for what they were worth, and that our Françoise, far from managing Colbert as she had managed others, became his agent in return for the patronage of which, once again, she felt the need. "In those days", says Lair,³⁷ "good-looking widows were bait dangled by the devil to undermine the virtue of judges, and destroy their tranquillity." In 1661 came the disgrace and imprisonment of the Superintendent Fouquet, when Denis Talon was appointed attorney-general to inquire into the state of the national finances as administered by the popular spendthrift. Colbert, now all-powerful and Fouquet's archenemy, was dissatisfied with the appointment. He employed the Maréchale

de L'Hôpital to turn Talon's head and distract him from his duties. (Talon had not a scolding wife, but was harrassed by an overbearing busybody of a mother.) "The austere and dusty Talon", Lair goes on to say, "succumbed to the wheedlings of pretty Madame de L'Hôpital, and fancied himself as great a lady-killer as he was an orator." "In a short time", says another authority, "the lady knew all his secrets and was sending regular reports to Colbert." Talon, besotted and demoralized, made fearful work of his assignment and was dismissed his post on the grounds of gross incompetence, while the Maréchale, to her chagrin (for her hopes had been high) received, not a reward, but the King's order to retire from the Court, "o while Paris rang with the latest chanson: "1"

—Veuve d'un illustre époux,
Vous nous la donnez bonne,
Quand vous faites les yeux doux
A ce pédant qui vous talonne—
Talonne—Talonne.

It was at a royal festivity in 1676 that Madame de Montespan dazzled the Court, when she appeared decked out in the priceless necklace and eardrops that had hitherto adorned the Maréchale de L'Hôpital. One historian⁴² suggests that the favourite was not too proud to borrow the jewels for the occasion. Lacour-Gayet⁴³ is of the opinion that they were not lent, but sold. After the *affaire Talon*, Françoise's relations with Colbert may have become strained. Meanwhile, she had made another conquest—not, however, a lucrative one.

In 1669, the bells of Saint-Germain-des-Prés rang out to welcome the new Abbot, Jean-Casimir Vasa, sometimes cardinal and Jesuit, recently King of Poland who, after taking tearful leave of a Diet that was weary of him, sought refuge in France.⁴⁴ (On a previous visit, he had been arrested and imprisoned on the charge of intriguing with Spain against the kingdom now offering hospitality.) His late Queen had been Marie de Gonzague, his brother's widow, despatched to Warsaw to marry King Ladislas at the time when France was planning, eventually, to put a son of the Great Condé on the Polish throne.⁴⁵ Thanks to his Queen's courage and influence, Jean-Casimir V. had retained for a time the kingship of a land torn by civil strife and a prey to foreign invasion. The Queen's death left him, despite his military talents, as incompetent as he was unpopular. France counselled abdication, offering a haven and the revenues of eight of the richest abbeys in the realm. In Novem-

ber, 1669, Jean-Casimir took possession of his abbey, and the monks, of whom Mabillon was one, welcomed him with due ceremony.

The new Abbot was as little liked in France as he had been in Poland. He seems to have been stupid, self-indulgent, and pettish, with a quite unedifying devotion to religious formality. Gui Patin⁴⁶ refers to his residence with the monks "who have more wit than he". Salvandy says that he divided his time between the Princess Palatine, Ninon de Lenclos, and—the Maréchale de L'Hôpital.

This time it is the chansonnier Coulanges who indulges in a quip:47

—Du feu roi de Pologne Messieurs, que dites-vous? Sans sceptre et sans vergogne Il vécut parmi nous. Oui, mais son inconstance, Moine, roi, cardinal, Le fit venir en France Mourir à L'Hôpital!

That the Maréchale was actually joined in matrimony to the ex-King of Poland has never been proved. The evidence is insufficient and contradictory; no contract was ever registered or record kept. One writer (a romantic, to be sure)⁴⁸ alleges that Jean-Casimir, in crown and sceptre, contracted a left-hand marriage with the Maréchale in 1670. This is an unlikely story on the face of it, although the Père Anselme, surprisingly, accepts it, merely altering the date to 1672. The Abbé Vanel, historian of Saint-Germain-des-Près, scouts the very idea of such a thing as scandalous, sacrilegious, and absurd.⁴⁹ But many persons believed it, and, characteristically, the Maréchale said nothing by way of contradiction. Madame du Noyer⁵⁰ notes that the Maréchale habitually referred to the late King of Poland as "le roi, mon seigneur", for what that might imply. There was none to gainsay her, since he had died, almost before the rumour had become rife. If Françoise did not achieve a third and royal alliance, she obtained a certain credit for having done so, and "lou secret de la Liaudia" became proverbial in Dauphiné.

Before his death, the Abbot of Saint-Germain-des-Prés had sunk deep in poverty and debt. Berryer, Louis Fourteenth's administrator, took a huge commission, persecuted the monks, neglected his charges so that convents and monasteries fell into disrepair, and saw to it that Jean-Casimir received only a small portion of the revenues assigned to him. (The chronicler, a loyal

supporter of his abbot, is pleased to record that Berryer has since gone mad, imagines himself to be a horse, and has gone to live in the stables. This, he adds, is nothing compared to what he will be called upon to suffer in a future state.) In 1671, the Community of Saint-Germain-des-Prés voted to advance thirty thousand pounds to pay the king's debts to tradesmen and send him to Bourbon-Lancy for his health. He was not to be a charge to them much longer. In August of the following year came word of the Polish capitulation of Kamiensk to the Turks. It was the old King's death-blow. He died, four months later, at the Abbey of Saint-Martin-de-Nevers.

Considering his poverty, his will is a curious one,⁵¹ for it includes legacies to the amount of three hundred and sixteen thousand pounds, most of which, it is true, consisted of revenue from property in Poland and Dantzig, and also, apparently, of bad debts. Part of this he bequeathed to friends and religious orders, the bulk to his sister-in-law, Anne de Gonzague; eventually, thanks to her, the good monks who had borne so long and patiently with this tiresome monarch got some nice Holy Relics.

One item in the will is significant. Mention is made of three hundred gold pistoles owing to the Maréchale de L'Hôpital who held no receipt for the loan. No doubt she was not ill-pleased to oblige the King-Abbot, but she may have been in no position to be a lender. Saint-Simon⁵² says that, in 1674, she paid twelve thousand pounds to the Carmelites in the rue de Boulay as security for shelter and sustenance as long as she should live. The nuns were in high favour with the Queen of France, who, with Monsieur, often visited them. What more fitting than that the widow of a field-marshal and governor of Paris should end her days in so select a retreat? But the Carmelites, more austere than the Benedictine Fathers, were, apparently, less charitable. The Maréchale proved long-lived, the money was exhausted, and pressure was brought to bear on the poor old woman. In her eightieth year, too ill to visit him in person, she addressed a despairing letter⁵³ to Demarest, Comptroller-General of Finance, begging him for an advance in moneys owing to her at the end of the month and comprising all the means that she posses sed: "I must perish like the beggars in the street, if you, Monsieur, have not the goodness to grant me this favour which I beg of you, most earnestly." She whose lord had lavished hospitality on the greatest in the land was made to feel an encumbrance on those who, a few years before, would have been honoured by a visit from her. Would her old friends at Baschet have been kinder? Probably not; nor is it likely that the "Liaudia" of other days was prone to philosophize during those last dismal years. Pride in things accomplished

would be salve to many a wound. A twelve-month more, and she went the way of her two, possibly three, husbands. And if, in another sphere, she ever found herself confronted with the trio, one may be sure that her unerring instinct for knowing a good thing when she saw it would safely guide her decision as to which of the three connections would be most greatly to her advantage.

NOTES

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- 22. Sainte-Aulaire, op cit.

- 23. J. Loret, La Muze historique (Paris, 1857-1878), I, p. 137.
- 24. G. Lacour-Gayet, op. cit.
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- 28. Op. cit., IV, p. 282.
- 29. Musée de Versailles.
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- 31. Op. cit., I, 137; 184; 220; 497. II, 9; 31; 75-76; 239-246; 247; 241-243; 342; 455; 495; 521-522; 533. IV, 19, etc.
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