

'Poor Arbella' is a just epitaph for the unhappy niece of the Queen of Scots, for she, like her aunt, was the victim of ruthless schemers playing for the highest stakes: Bess of Hardwick, Arbella's grandmother, like an English Catherine de Medici plaguing the life of Mary and, later, of her own grandchild; James of Scotland, who preferred a foreign crown to his mother's life; the hunchback Robert Cecil weaving his plots to achieve still greater domination. Such as these made Arbella wretched, but time takes its revenge when at last the truth is told, as it is so convincingly in Miss Handover's masterly biography of the unfortunate lady.

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MADAME ELISABETH. By Maurice de la Fuye and Emile Albert Babeau. (Lethielleux; 950 ffs.)

The French Revolution seen through the eyes of one of its principal royal victims cannot fail to make a deep impression. Madame Elisabeth, the sister of Louis XVI, was not a passive witness of the national resentment which overwhelmed and finally destroyed the ancient monarchy. Her pen was active, describing in many letters the momentous events in which, unexpectedly, she was forced to play a prominent rôle.

Madame Elisabeth's letters are an important source for the historian of the French Revolution, as is made clear by MM. Maurice de la Fuye and Emile Albert Babeau in their magisterial presentation of her life. She is important, too, from the religious point of view. Deeply disturbed though she was by the diminution of the royal prerogative, the saintly young woman was even more distressed by the crippling attack on the Church. Though Madame Elisabeth's counter-efforts and sisterly advice were in vain, her angelic serenity sustained Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette in the agonizing conditions that followed the collapse of the royal power.

Louis XVI suffered for the faults of his immediate predecessors. The humiliation of his family, the odious treatment of the Dauphin, the execution of his wife and sister, were, as the authors say, 'un crime sans pardon'. Among the innocent victims of the Terror, Elisabeth-Marie de France is outstanding in her nobility and resignation. The cause for her beatification has been introduced in Rome. Few, surely, would dispute the assertion of the authors that 'her virtues, her unswerving loyalty to the Church, her truly Christian and heroic death, crowning a life consecrated to the defence of the faith and the practice of charity have won universal admiration for this noble princess'.

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