

THE RELEASE

Huningue—Christmas 1795.

A GIRL sat alone in Room No. 10 of the Hotel du Corbeau. From the window she could hear a rush of movement and voices, a perpetual, driving rhythm; it was the Rhine. Nothing could be seen except high fortifications and one or two sentries on guard. But the girl waited by the window, listening.

She was used to listening. For more than three years, she had seen none of the events around her, only heard sounds and guessed at their meaning. Now, as she listened to the river, it became the beating of drums and the ringing of the tocsin and the shouting of words which she tried in vain to catch. The old, sickening agony swept over her. Would no one tell her the news? Why wouldn't they let her go to her mother? And where was her aunt Elisabeth? Then she seemed to be with her mother, aunt, and brother again. It was a shivering January morning, and they could hear from below the barred window, as she now heard from the river, the cry of 'Execution of Capet!' But the noise of the river swelled out, growing mad, exultant, and hateful, till it became the noise of the mob one day in September. 'Mon Dieu, Madame, it is the head of the Princesse de Lamballe that they are carrying!' Through the confusion, she could still hear those words and see her mother's face turn into a senseless mask.

Thank God, it was all over. The sound she heard was only the flowing of the Rhine. She was no longer a prisoner in the Temple, but Her Royal Highness Marie Thérèse Charlotte, awaiting her formal exchange and release. Tomorrow, she would be free. She would even have her own household to escort her to Vienna. Meanwhile, she was content to wait at Huningue, the frontier stronghold where she had arrived on the previous night. To be sure, she was confined to two rooms in the Hotel du Corbeau. But at least they provided a change from her two rooms in the Temple, from the exasperating clock with its figure of For-

tune turning her wheel, from the piano that she would never touch since her mother had played on it. For a year she had lived alone with her memories in those rooms . . . nothing to do but knit or read a few books that she already knew by heart. And the endless questions. She could still hear them.

'Citizeness, have you many knives?'

'No, Monsieur, two.'

'Have you none in your toilet table? Nor any scissors?'

'No, Monsieur, no.'

Or else, 'Why have you got a fire? With what did you light it?'

Well, she had fires lit for her now in the Corbeau. Simple attentions were new and wonderful to her . . . the welcome from the good people of the inn, her hostess laying out the bright dishes for supper, the children bringing her some winter flowers as a Christmas greeting. Christmas. She had never before realized the miracle of it. Surely the Hand of God had brought about her release, so that she might find peace and goodwill at this blessed time? Aunt Elisabeth used to tell her that the Hand of God was visible in everything. Whatever her perplexities in the past, Marie Thérèse now felt triumphantly certain of it.

Beyond her window, the river was full of new voices. It was life rushing past, unseen but calling to her. And she, cramped within four walls, longed passionately to live. But then the river seemed mysterious and terrifying. It would snatch her away from France, from all that she knew. France was her own country, the country of her father, her aunt Elisabeth, and her Bourbon ancestors. The Revolution, as Aunt Elisabeth had explained, was not France but merely the work of 'monsters' who had turned the heads of the people. Soon the people would repent and wish for their former rulers again. Even during her journey from Paris, the countryfolk had crowded to see their 'good lady.' Just as the change was beginning, she must leave them and go among foreigners.

She was helplessly alone. She had not been allowed to take with her Madame de Chanterenne, her 'Renète,' who

had broken the isolation of the Temple and led her out under the trees of the little garden. Instead, she had had to travel with Madame de Soucy, whom she hardly knew. And Madame de Soucy had spent the journey in telling her how, when she reached Vienna, the Emperor would try to marry her to an Archduke and how the Archduke had fits. Marie Thérèse dreaded Vienna. She could not even thank the Emperor for her liberty, knowing that he had let her mother die on the scaffold. Poor mother, who had put her trust in princes . . . she had been cruelly abandoned. Anger welled up in Marie Thérèse, blending with the noise of the river, choking all other sensations.

Suddenly, she caught a new sound, distinct from the river, a rattle of wheels on the cobbles. A carriage had come from Paris. The princess turned a little wearily from the window. Then she heard a familiar bark. In a moment, she had run to the door of her room. Coco. Why, she had actually been forgetting Coco, the dog who had once belonged to her brother and had been her own cherished companion for the last months. People were talking, carrying packages, running to and fro. But Marie Thérèse saw only the hairy body that tumbled upstairs and flung itself frantically upon her. Here was an end of loneliness, she thought, as she felt the rough tongue against her skin again.

'Madame . . . Your Royal Highness . . .' Behind Coco, a group waited to claim her attention. As she shook herself free, she recognized a face that she had not seen since the earliest days of her imprisonment. It was Hue, the valet who had loyally followed her father and brother to the Temple. Why, she wondered, must memories of the past stab into all her moments of happiness? But she was glad to see Hue alive, and she welcomed him with a grace that overpowered the poor man's self-control. Marie Thérèse turned away. Emotion hurt and embarrassed her. She inquired after 'Renète,' who had been left in Paris; it was hard to have no confidant, she felt, at this crisis of her life.

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In the evening, she composed a letter to Renète, setting down the jumbled feelings and incidents of the last few days in awkward, childish French. 'This is very badly written,' she scribbled, 'but I am at a table with M. Mechin, who is writing also. Mme. de Soucy and her son are writing also. M. Gomin and M. Hue are talking near the door. That is the position at the present moment, and Coco, my dear Coco, is asleep in the corner of the stove.'

She had forgotten the Rhine that still sounded outside in the darkness.

Bâle—the following night.

A muddy road, a group of people, a wrought-iron gate . . . The coach drew up. Marie Thérèse looked about her. 'The ground is damp. Madame will wait for a chair?' The proposal was from Monsieur de Bacher, First Secretary of the French Embassy in Switzerland. But Madame jumped down from the coach and walked with him up a long, bare avenue to the Villa Reber, which had been lent by a merchant of Bâle for the ceremony of the exchange. In the house, Marie Thérèse found more people, officials in uniform, and stately gentlemen glittering with decorations. Among them was the Prince de Gavre, whom the Emperor had appointed head of her household. She decided at a glance that she did not like him. She had hoped that the ceremony would be quickly over, but it was drawn out by the elaborate speeches draped around the practical business of handing her to Austria. On the whole, she played her part well, made the proper responses, and even got out the words 'gratitude to the Emperor.' But suddenly she felt lost in the strangeness of it all. She turned quivering to de Bacher. 'Monsieur,' she sobbed, 'I shall never forget that I am French.'

Free? She could not believe it. She was lonely and bewildered among the new faces and the new, guttural sounds of German. Her heart glowed at the French speech of a chamber-maid from Vaud. 'You are happy,' she told the girl, 'to belong to that country.' She paced to a window at the back of the house. Outside was the night, but she

could descry a sloping lawn, a little knoll, and the slender columns of a miniature Grecian temple . . . a glimpse of a world that she had dreamed long ago. She turned abruptly away. There was refreshment to be taken, and Coco to be fed and patted. Someone said, ' He is very ugly, that animal. It would be easy to get a better dog for Madame.' ' But I love him,' protested Marie Thérèse. ' He is all that remains to me of my brother.' She began to cry again.

She had satisfaction, however, in the return of the trunks of clothing that had been presented to her by the Republican Government. She would accept nothing from ' monsters ' who had usurped the rule of her country. De Bacher, at her request, had sent a dressmaker that morning from Bâle to Huningue, and she had spent an hour with the woman, discovering the latest fashions and making her own choice of caps, fichus and cloaks. The business had given her a reassuring sense of normality. As for the bill, since she had no money herself, she had left all payment to de Bacher. No doubt he could get the money . . . from the Government, perhaps . . . but that was not her affair. She would not consider herself indebted to ' the monsters.'

The trunks were accordingly sent back to Paris, and with them went all her French attendants except Madame de Soucy. She said good-bye sadly to her people, thanking each one for his particular services to her. Then she set out on the next stage of the journey, followed by her new suite. The line of coaches and baggage carts passed through a towered gateway into the town of Bâle. Crowds jostled in the narrow street and leaned out from the projecting storeys of the houses to catch a glimpse of the princess. Was the scene real, wondered Marie Thérèse, or had some phantom of the past returned in an altered shape? Instinctively, she answered the shouts of welcome with a royal movement of the head.

The coach turned suddenly out from its dim course between the houses. There lay the Rhine, superb and full, a shining breadth under the moon. Marie Thérèse started. So this was the river that she had heard at Huningue. Why, it was not to be feared, only marvelled at. The coach

jolted on to the bridge, where kings had met long ago. Figures pressed forward on all sides, holding up lanterns, shouting 'Vive Madame! Vive la Princesse!' She pulled down the glass windows and bowed, dizzy with light and noise and the splendour of the river. She did not hear, beyond the acclamations, the distant singing of *Ca ira*.

As the cavalcade disappeared into the dark huddle of Petit Bâle, good Republicans were already celebrating the release of those 'martyrs for liberty' whom Austria had exchanged for the princess. Though Marie Thérèse did not know it, one of them had crossed her path before. Near another frontier, at Varennes, he had helped to turn back her family to Paris, to the captivity from which she now emerged alone. His name was Drouet.

Laufenburg—the next morning.

'Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.'

Familiar words . . . the rise and fall of nasal voices, mingling with the rich odour in the air . . . figures blurred by drifting incense . . . surely she was in the Royal Chapel of the Tuileries? She could see her father bent earnestly over his missal. She caught a glimpse of her mother's grave dignity and the rapture of her aunt Elisabeth.

There was a movement beside her; she turned to find only Madame de Soucy. Not far off, she recognised the arrogant figure of the Prince de Gavre. Vaguely, she recollected last night's journey from Bâle. There had been a series of bumps and splashes over dark, rain-sodden roads, then the walls of Rheinfelden and a few lights doubled in the river, and at last, at two o'clock in the morning, a chance of sleep in the castle of Laufenburg. She had woken to the sound of water running yet more swiftly than at Huningue. And now, on her first day of freedom, she was in a church again. The voices swelled out, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo.'

Three years and four months since she had last attended High Mass . . . three years and four months since she had knelt with her family in the Chapel of the Tuileries. Of the gulf between, she would not think. It held her no longer. Yes, she must give glory to God, for He had saved

her and brought her out of captivity. Had not her aunt rightly taught her to trust in Him? Soon, no doubt, He would re-establish the sacred institution of the Monarchy in France. And the instrument of this great work? Why not Marie Thérèse Charlotte? She would write to her uncle, now Louis XVIII, asking him to stop the war, and then his people would turn to him with tears of gratitude and repentance. In her mind, the wonder was already accomplished.

But again she remembered that she was in the church of Laufenburg. She looked up to the friendly points of the candles. Above the High Altar, she could see the crucifix. On one side hung a picture of St. Sebastian pierced with arrows, and on the other . . . Marie Thérèse caught her breath . . . a picture of St. Catherine kneeling before the executioner. The scene was conventional enough; in the background rose a neatly walled city, and in the foreground the saint, robed in delicate pink, looked serenely to heaven while she waited for the axe to fall. But, for Marie Thérèse this was a living truth. In place of St. Catherine, she saw her aunt Elisabeth, just as calm, just as pious, just as secure of a martyr's crown. Undoubtedly Elisabeth had now joined the Blessed Catherine in Heaven. It was mere selfishness to wish her back in the world. Nor was it difficult to pardon those who had given her the sweetness and glory of martyrdom. For a moment, the past lost its terrors.

A moment only. Of her aunt Elisabeth, Marie Thérèse might think without pain . . . Aunt Elisabeth transforming prison life into a tranquil routine, cheerfully making beds, instituting walks about the room, reading the office for each day and observing all the fasts of the Church. Up to the end, her aunt had remained untouched by anything that man could do. But her mother . . . her mother, whose hopes and fears had come to centre in one ailing little boy? Here had been no such immunity. Marie Thérèse tried to choke back the memories that swarmed upon her from every dark crevice of her mind. She fixed her eyes on her missal, but its letters would convey no meaning to her. Then she looked again towards the picture of St. Catherine,

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but it seemed to waver and grow dim. The chanting of the choir sounded far away. It was useless to try to attend, useless to tell herself that all suffering must be offered to God in the sacrifice of the Mass. The memories persisted, crowding fast, overwhelming her.

Incredible that anyone could be so much hurt, yet always endure to be hurt again and more deeply . . . incredible, if she had not seen it. And she had been powerless to help. She had found her mother hard to approach, had watched her lips compress and the lines deepen on her face, without daring to break into her rigid stronghold of silence. She had often shrunk from her grief and her unbearable tenderness. And that last night . . . her mother roused up by municipal officers, obliged to dress before them, kissing her good-bye, and she unable to make any response, numbed by the certainty that she would never see her again . . . she hated the recollection. But it gave place to one that she hated more. She was alone in a group of men. They were asking questions and one of them was writing down her answers. The business did not concern her mother, they declared, but she knew that it did, and, in her terror, she could only repeat 'No' and again 'No.' Conspiracies, treason . . . what were they trying to make her say? The questions grew unintelligible. Her fears increased. Out of strange words and half understood allusions, some vile monstrosity was emerging. She broke down, crying that it was false, whatever they meant, and that they must let her go to her mother. 'Impossible,' they said.

Again and again, she had begged for permission to join her. If only she could have gone, if only she could somehow have relieved the desolation of those last weeks . . . But, no, even in imagination she dared not face that time. She knew that her mother's courage had not failed; she did not want to know more. She had already seen and heard too much. How could she ever be at peace with the world, unless God in His mercy would free her from those memories? She must forget, forget . . . Suddenly, she started in horror at herself. Was she actually praying that she might forget her mother? What wickedness had entered

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her heart? She covered her face. She felt intolerably sick. The next moment, the ancient words of the *Sanctus* reached her, faint at first, but growing clearer, lifting her up on strong wings.

The priest began the Canon of the Mass. Gradually Marie Thérèse ceased to think. She ceased to wonder whether she were in the Tuileries, the Temple, Laufenburg, or all three at once. Past and future no longer troubled her; they were vanishing in the pin-point of the present moment. She was aware only of the priest at the Altar . . . then of the ring of the bell, and the Bread and Wine that were God.

* * * * *

Outside in the valley, the Rhine sped on. Hurrying from the mountains, it called ruthlessly up to the walls of the church. 'Live this moment, princess,' it called, 'for it is all the life you will get. You have come out of the Temple into a new world, in which you have no part. The Monarchy and the France to which you cling exist only in your own imagination. You had better have died with the rest of your family. Do not think yourself free. You are fettered to the past. The memories that you dread will hold you in a prison much stronger and more lasting than the tower of the Temple.'

Mass was over. Marie Thérèse stepped out into the winter air.

A. F. LOVIBOND.

NOTE

This study is based on :

1. Marie Thérèse's own narrative of her captivity, written before she left the Temple.
2. Her subsequent letters to Mme. de Chanterenne (Renète) and Louis XVIII.
3. Contemporary accounts of her exchange, sent by secret agents to the Rt. Hon. William Wickham, English Minister in Switzerland, and now among the Foreign Office Records.
4. 'La Fille de Louis XVI,' by G. Lenôtre.