SIX BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

General De Piépape's "A Princess of Strategy"*

The rich field of French biography seems inexhaustible, and each new one is as colourful as the last. Very entertaining is the book which bears the somewhat misleading title of *A Princess of Strategy*. It is an accomplished narrative made thoroughly readable in an easy translation—one which gives no sense of an intermediary between you and the author. As often before, one asks on closing the volume, "Why is it so delightful to know these people?" Is it that they were not afraid to speak their own minds, lead their own lives, and play with all their hearts for their coveted stakes? Or is it merely because the material of their biographies is in itself enticing to pallid Anglo-Saxons and gives a fillip to tamer and more circumspect blood? Be what it may—here is a brilliant simpleton, a calculating mad-cap, a heartless benefactress, a doll of sawdust and yet of initiative, who lives vividly again for us in these pages and wrests her tribute of reluctant admiration for her misplaced pluck and of reluctant sympathy for her human failings.

The granddaughter of the great Condé, says the author, had his flashes of genius together with his violence, haughtiness, and undisciplined imagination. He was highly exasperated when all his grandchildren turned out so diminutive. "At this rate," cried he, "they will soon come to nothing at all!" Mademoiselle de Charolais, being a midget, was also precocious and took up literary and scientific studies at fifteen; but in spite of her omnivorous reading she was too frivolous to be thoughtful. The Duc du Maine, to whom her father married her, was the son of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan. He was brought up by that strict moralist, Madame de Maintenon; who, having picked out for him one of the Condé dwarfs, set about conquering the aversion of both the young man and the king to the marriage. Louis was finally won over because of his mad secret project of bringing about a fusion between his illegitimate children, whom he heaped with privileges, and his royal race; and the Duke was persuaded to accept the hand of the young lady because she was an inch less short than her sister. The little hop-o'-my-thumb who thus became the Duchess du Maine, says the author, looked upon the marriage as a happy escape from a tyrannical father and a down-trodden mother; but she subsequently recognised bitterly the difference between a legitimate princess and an illegitimate prince. The alliance was not popular at court and the young bride had plenty of opportunity to sharpen her wits upon disagreeable people, and indeed she proved so fiery a little body that they soon became fearful of crossing her.

Fortunately for them, however, she soon wearied of the exacting dissipations of Versailles and Marly. It much better suited her to retire to a sort of Watteau arcady, where she could amuse herself with lavish pastoral entertainments and play Lady Bountiful to the countryside. Having tasted of this enchanting life, she inveigled her husband into purchasing for her the huge palace of Sceaux as a more imposing stage for her revels. But at a time when society regarded purity as a mere convention, her own conduct was never in this respect unbecoming; and with all her splendours she did not lose the love of study or her desire to play Mæcenas to her generation as her grandfather had done before her. She had the secret of attracting to her court the *beaux-esprits*. She made Malézieu work out the details of her theatrical performances and Genest write masques and madrigals for her, and carried Fontenelle and Voltaire in her train. To the latter the road to Sceaux was more familiar than any other throughout thirty years.

Rather early in her reign there, the Duchess found she had as a sort of lady's maid a short-sighted girl who could not sew a sleeve decently into a chemise but

*A Princess of Strategy. Translated from the French of General de Piépape by J. Lewis May. London and New York: John Lane.

was able nevertheless to extricate her by quick diplomacy from a difficult position. It soon dawned upon the mistress what an excellent secretary this wide-awake and intelligent young person would make. And so Rose de Launay, afterward Madame de Staël, became a Mademoiselle de Lespinasse to the Duchess and her coterie.

Upon their pastoral revels the shadow of the State began to fall—for Louis in his dying hours had (thanks to the influence of Madame de Maintenon) brought the crown within reach of the Duc du Maine, the elder of his natural sons, by entrusting to him rather than to the Duc d'Orleans the education of the little dauphin. But once the king was dead, Orleans asserted his rights and the legitimated Duc du Maine found himself deprived not only of his guardianship but his direction of the establishment of Louis XV. Thereupon Madame du Maine bundled the muses out of Sceaux and gave her soul and body up to politics. Against the Regent she began to spin a conspiracy woven alike out of her ambitions and her romances. She moved to Paris and her new abode became a cave of intrigues, which she prosecuted with more energy than common sense. She set to work to gather in the malcontents, to correspond with Madrid, to slander the Regent and his adherents, and to coquette with the National Assembly. The Duke knew of her plans but he lacked the decision either to further or oppose them. The Spanish Prime Minister, furious at the Regent's opposition to the Spanish treaty, made himself believe that all France was willing to rise up against him and that a conflagration might be kindled with the aid of the Duchess, "that she-devil with her paint and powder, her patches and her hoops." But the end of it was that the Duke found himself stripped by the Regency of all the rights and privileges of a prince of the blood, and had to give up his apartments at the Tuileries. The Duchess smashed all the furniture to atoms and turned her old tactics to a new course. She would set up the King of Spain as regent, and make her husband his agent; and Rose de Launay became one of the most skilful assistants in her new conspiracy. Although her instruments were ludicrously lacking in *savoir-faire* and although the Duchess paid as much attention to the style of her correspondence as to its matter, still the plot began to gather shape. She won over a section of the nobility, the whole of Brittany, and the Parliament of Paris. The Duke summoned up enough courage to give his wife a lecture, but the Duchess continued her audacious machinations almost in broad daylight; and as she strewed her indiscretions everywhere, the palace refused to take her rebellion seriously. It was only fitting that such a comic-opera conspiracy should be at last defeated by two long-armed coincidences which smack of the theatre of Bulwer-Lytton. A secretary of the Spanish Ambassador babbled to a woman of the town, who, alert for the main chance, went to the Minister of Police; and the conspirators threw about their confidences with the abandon of that idiotic stage band in *Richelieu*. As a consequence, the Bastille opened its gates to seven score prisoners. But the Duchess as she saw her house toppling in ruins, merely paled beneath her rouge and went on playing cards with her guests. The first of her household on which punishment fell was Rose de Launay, who went to the Bastille. Then her husband was taken at Sceaux, and he wrote to his sister, "They ought not to put me in prison but in a straight-jacket for allowing myself to be led thus by my wife." A few days afterward she was removed to Dijon, where with her nephew as jailer, her demeanour was that of a dethroned queen. After a year of incarceration her mother prevailed upon her to address a complete confession to the Regent. In this she scornfully asserted that her husband's timidity had made him blameless. The Duchess was liberated, and four nobles of Brittany were executed at the hour when, returned to Sceaux, she was once more assembling her court about her. Cured forever of politics, she reassumed her rôle of wit and patroness and ushered in again her nights of splendour.

From the Bastille Mademoiselle de Launay—after resisting all attempts to betray the actors in the conspiracy, and playing there the charming love-idyll of

which she was both heroine and innocent victim—returned to Sceaux. The Duchess frostily gave her shelter, and that is all she got for her devotion. But in later years her mistress, visited with some qualms of remorse, married her off to the Baron de Staäl. It was an excellent arrangement, for by it she kept the indispensable Baronne at her side in Sceaux. Madame continued a princess to her finger-tips and illumined everything with her wit. Her court became far more celebrated than before and attracted even crowned heads. The days of her age were merely the days of her youth over again and she was still overwhelmed with poetical tributes. Voltaire, once more an outcast, accepted again her ever-ready hospitality and, though occasionally audacious, played the rôle of sycophant until Frederick the Great offered him a more imposing refuge.

Yet people at seventy, however liberal, rarely contract new friendships and the ranks of her loyal retainers were sadly failing. Madame de Staäl (who was not at all grateful to the Duchess, and had little reason to be) wrote to a friend that her hostess displayed complete indifference at the death of people who, when alive, would have made her shed tears had they come a quarter of an hour late to cards. And that lady was quietly preparing to open a salon in Paris with the remnants of Sceaux when the death of the Duchess should send them scampering, but it was for her death came instead. The Duchess went on resisting the invasion of the years and still endeavouring to divert herself with newcomers. At the age of seventy-seven she struck her colours. She had long since passed from the great world, and even the little world of Sceaux had now quite dwindled, and thus it would have sent her into one of her old tantrums to find that her departure made little comment.

Her court had been too esoteric to leave much of a mark on eighteenth-century literature, but it was brilliant and refined and infinitely superior in manners and customs to the Palais Royal and Versailles. It is as chatelaine of Sceaux and ringleader of the Cellamare conspiracy and the companion of Madame de Staäl —says the author—that she demands the attention of both literary and historical students. But she was, and is, quite capable of demanding and getting the attention of anybody.

Algernon Tassin.