

The Duchess Rides Through the Great Fear

Summary

The duchess felt trapped in Paris following the Revolutionary events of July 1789. She decided to leave Paris for her provincial estates at Moreuil in Picardy, about eighty miles due north of the capital. Rural unrest had been growing since the spring, and the second half of July saw the 'Great Fear' sweep right across the country. Panic over food supplies and reports of armed brigands (or foreign invaders) combined with the new Revolutionary hopes and rhetoric of June-July 1789 to combustible effect. The seigneurial regime which had underpinned French society for centuries was targeted for destruction. It is rare to find an account of an individual actually encountering the Great Fear. The duchess maintains that she was unpeturbed by reports of violence and disorder in the early stages of her journey north. However, the closer she got to her provincial property (where she herself exercised extensive seigneurial rights over the local population), the more difficult it became for her to deny the seismic changes which were underway. And soon enough news would reach her from Paris that the National Assembly had abolished feudalism—and therefore much of the infrastructure and benefits linked to her Moreuil estate—in the famous Night of 4 August.

Date and place of writing

8 August 1789, Moreuil

Themes

- The Duchess
- Violence
- War and Counter-Revolution
- Nobility
- Municipal Government

Letter

Moreuil. 8 August 1789

I could no longer, Madame, endure my imprisonment during this hideous stay in Paris. Last time I had the honour of writing to you, and to avoid dying of horror and sorrow, I was in the process of requesting permission from my district, the Feuillants, to come here. Having obtained this, and also permission from the Committee of the

Paris Municipality on 26 July (such bountiful fruits of our liberty, acquired by such great wrongdoing), I left the rebel capital on the 27th at 4 o'clock in the morning.

The only things I saw on leaving this unfortunate city were His Majesty's burnt-out customs gates and an armed bourgeois who asked me, reasonably respectfully, whether I had permission to travel. Without this he would have returned me to his Hôtel de Ville, but as soon as he read the documents he let me continue without any further trouble. Until Chantilly I saw nothing else which felt like it was a part of the rebellion. This was cause for great celebration on my part, along with my ladies-in-waiting and my major domo who made up the first carriage. Your friend Maubeuge, the cook and a household official were in the second, and two more were escorted by liveried servants on horseback.

When this great convoy arrived in Chantilly we found out from various huddles of people that messengers had just arrived to declare that Clermont was on fire and put to the sword. Apparently it was the Emperor, along with the queen riding sidesaddle and 25 thousand Germans, who had cut down all the wheat in those parts, and that any towns which tried to oppose them were punished in this manner. Clermont's militia was arming up, and people said cannons were going to be drawn up at the town gate. I assure you, Madame, that all this ridiculous story did to me personally was provide me with a depressing sense of the prejudices of the common people, whose hatred makes them believe that such nonsense could be true. I wanted to go on at once to this Clermont that everyone said was in flames but which surely was no more on fire than were my own carriages. However one of my maids was totally taken in by these rumours and wanted me to return to Paris. Threatening to send her back herself in one of the other carriages, along with her husband, I only agreed to wait for the news from Clermont, which had been requested via the post several hours previously. I settled down to eat, with that hearty appetite you know I get when travelling, and the news soon came through that no enemies had been sighted in the vicinity of Clermont but that, based on who was claimed to be on the way there, the town would await them under arms. We got back into our carriages sure that it was going to be a similar story everywhere.

Indeed all we saw at Creil and Clermont were respectable folk bearing arms who asked to see our papers and inquired whether we had encountered any of the enemy. We assured them that there had been none. And it was only when we reached the avenues at Argenlieu that we eventually did so, but this enemy was only interested in people like us. They were around twenty men armed with rifles, pikes, steel-tipped canes and other threatening items. They stopped us and forced us to confirm our allegiance to the Third, declaring that they were on the hunt for noble heads to put on their pikes. In a rather unpleasant arrangement, anyone who was passing and looked respectable had to shout out to them, 'Death to the noble rabble'. But despite this nasty exhortation, which terrified us all, they let us carry on in exchange for money.

Arriving in Saint-Just, and while changing relay horses, we were shocked to see amid a number of armed militia¹ a wounded bourgeois and a child covered in blood, neither of whom were receiving any attention. Hardly had we left the grounds of the abbey² before we were confronted again by another group of men, and this happened four times before our arrival in Montdidier. There, in a sign of the darkness of these times, two men who were complete strangers to us went ahead of us to the Hôtel de Ville³ to denounce our two carriages for saying that death was coming to every inhabitant of Picardy within twenty-four hours. But when the members of the Third who were in charge there, respectable folk, learnt that these were my carriages and that I myself was travelling in the first one, they declared this to be a calumny and led a shout of 'Long live the mother of the poor' among all the armed villagers who had gathered there. My vassals repeated this with all their hearts and then escorted me here, where their love gives me great strength.⁴ However, all the horrors that I suffered in Paris and all the mortal danger I endured on the road have greatly disturbed my health, and the news since then has not helped.⁵

Notes

1. By August 1789, militias were springing up all over France in response to the extraordinary pressures and tensions of that summer. At this early stage of the Revolution they were dominated by the middle classes, and would soon be officially recognised as National Guard units.
2. There had been an abbey in Saint-Just belonging to the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré which had burnt down in 1707. The grounds are now a park.
3. The building which housed the municipal government for a village, town or city.
4. Compare this welcome with the state of the duchess's relationship with the local community twelve months later.
5. The duchess had heard what happened in the National Assembly four days previously, when a dramatic evening debate saw deputies decree the abolition of feudalism and the system of privilege which had underpinned ancien régime society. She discusses this at length in the next (untranslated) part of the Letter.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, pp. 18-20).

Published at www.revolutionaryduchess.exeter.ac.uk as part of the AHRC-funded project 'The Duchesse d'Elbeuf's Letters to a Friend, 1788-1794', a collaboration between Queen Mary, University of London and the University of Exeter.