

# Capture at Varennes: The Humiliation of a King

## Summary

Here the duchess sifts through the wreckage of the royal family's thwarted attempt to escape Paris in June 1791. Before leaving on what would become known as the 'Flight to Varennes' Louis XVI wrote a public repudiation of the Revolution up to this point. The combination of physical flight and written fight posed a considerable challenge for political leaders in the National (Constituent) Assembly, who had staked their own futures on the success of a new constitution with executive power still vested in the monarchy. They scrambled to control the situation, contain popular outrage, and respond to the first concerted efforts to turn the Revolution in a Republican direction.

## Date and place of writing

30 June 1791, Paris

## Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Monarchy
- Public Opinion

## Letter

Paris. 30 June 1791

We have been under the cosh, Madame, in the aftermath of the ill-fated day of 21 June when our royal family rightly felt they could no longer put up with the impudent rebellion of their subjects, with the humiliating prison where they were being held by them, or with the pleasure their subjects took each day in stripping away another set of rights from the crown. Finally, this unfortunate family decided to leave the Tuileries during the night of the 21/22 of this month.<sup>1</sup> The people seemed less surprised by this manoeuvre than the National Assembly, which immediately dispatched messengers in all directions and put a triple guard on Paris.

The king, the queen, their two children,<sup>2</sup> Madame Élisabeth and Madame de Tourzel were all in the same carriage, and we were fearful throughout Tuesday and

Wednesday that it would be their misfortune to be stopped. This duly happened on their arrival in the small town of Varennes, a place which will forever be remembered for its disloyalty to our kings. It was a postmaster who recognised his king, and who dared deliver him up to a rebel municipality. They forced him to leave at once for Châlons-sur-Marne, escorted by every last National Guardsman in the area.<sup>3</sup> At Sainte-Menehould he was treated to the spectacle of the count de Dampierre, whose château was close by, being hacked to pieces. Further on His Majesty was met by Barnave, Pétion and La Tour Maubourg, members from the Left of the Assembly who had been sent to oversee the final stage of the journey being made by these illustrious prisoners. The first of these three behaved with great courtesy and the second with a thuggishness consistent with his general appearance. The third was still worse.

But it was the reception back in Paris on Saturday 25 June, in the evening light just before 8 o'clock, that was truly odious. Our masters entered their own capital city like criminal prisoners on the way to their dungeon. The soldiers stood with their weapons lowered and their hats still on their heads, having been forbidden to take them off, and many people shouted terrible things about the royal couple. They were led to separate rooms [in the Tuileries Palace] and placed under arrest with each of them given a separate and hefty guard. Then the interrogations began, the king's on Sunday and the queen's on Monday.

What a situation, Madame, for a king of France to be in! And how long can this last? The people are now as spiteful towards him as they have been for a long time towards the queen, calling him a fraud, and other names, and saying that they no longer want a king. And the Assembly acts accordingly.<sup>4</sup> Oh! God, have mercy on our despicable blindness.

## Notes

1. The royal family had actually left the previous night, 20/21 June.
2. The dauphin and his younger sister, Marie-Thérèse (1778-1851).
3. The royal family was stopped in Varennes on the evening of Tuesday 21 June. The following morning, orders came through from Paris to return them to the capital.
4. In point of fact the Constituent Assembly moved to protect Louis XVI's political position and issued a statement in mid-July describing the Flight to Varennes as an abduction rather than an attempt at escape. However, the king's influence and popularity were significantly diminished.

## Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 2, pp. 57-58).

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