

Life as an Émigré. Part 1

Summary

The duchess recounts her departure from France for Tournai in the Austrian Netherlands, which had become a rallying post for the expanding French émigré diaspora. She is far from happy on her arrival there: her reduced personal circumstances and the émigrés' military resources are both the cause of considerable disappointment.

Date and place of writing

3 October 1791, Tournai

Themes

- The Duchess
- War and Counter-Revolution
- Nobility

Letter

Tournai. 3 October 1791

Madame, I left Paris eight days ago today, but I only arrived here on 28 September because so many of the post-horses had been exhausted from all the emigrants leaving the kingdom via Lille.¹ This was not due to any turmoil in the capital, indeed I have never seen it quieter than during the 6 summer months I just spent there, but rather because rumours were circulating that foreign powers would be coming to our aid very soon and that in response the new Assembly was going to close the borders. There was therefore a race to get out. All this made it very difficult to get over the frontier, but just as I left I was advised that both in Lille and at the last French customs post it would suffice to show a 6 livre tournois piece² and they would allow you to take whatever you wanted with you. Very happily this is exactly what happened to me, as only a few days before the countess de la Myre had personal possessions and money taken off her because she had not known this secret of how to charm them.

Having got to Tournai, and arriving at the small house that Dècle secured for me back in mid-June at fifteen louis per month in rent,³ I found it to be the tiny hovel of some mildly disreputable Parisian seamstress. The first room serves to shelter six of my servants, as well as being a dining room both for my household staff and myself,

and has table space to seat only ten people comfortably. A second room serves as my bedroom, as my reception room for receiving guests, and as my office. The privy is at the other end of the courtyard, which guarantees me a regular soaking this winter.

My news, Madame, is not what we were being told back in Paris. Our master's brothers⁴ are working very hard to create an army out of this noble throng which has come to them from court, and from every town and region. There are wealthy members of the Third here too. But what can be done with all these people from high society, when what is really needed are soldiers? When such people have neither the robustness nor the experience needed to serve in such a capacity? When most of the gentlemen rushing here possess neither uniforms nor weapons?

Notes

1. The eighteenth-century post-horse system allowed travellers (and the post) to move between different staging posts, changing to fresh horses as required.
2. The livre (tournois) was part of the standard metal coinage of eighteenth-century France, though from 1790 it operated alongside the Revolution's new paper currency, the *assignat*. Six livres was roughly the equivalent of a week's basic wages (two weeks for a woman).
3. The louis (d'or) was worth 24 livres (see note 1 above). An annual rent of 4320 livres was a very considerable sum of money to pay for what the duchess herself describes as a small and basic property. This is likely the result of the émigré influx increasing demand on the local property market. For comparison, only about 3% of all rental properties back in Paris were priced above a yearly rate of 1600 livres in the same period.
4. The brothers of Louis XVI, who had both already emigrated: the count de Provence and the count d'Artois.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 3, pp. 66-68).

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