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| The Abbot  A Short Story based on Historical Fact  By Maryanne Peters  I loved her and that is all that I can say. To me she was the very epitome of what a lady should be – beautiful, refined, intelligent and hungry for sex. So why was she a nun? Well, she was not a nun really, because she did not qualify to be one.  She was born male, you see. She was born François-Timoléon de Choisy in October 1644, in Paris, the son of a minor official who probably owed whatever status he had to the fact that his wife was an occasional mistress of Louis XIV of France – “the Sun King”  For whatever reason, his mother dressed him as a girl from an early age – she told me that it was because her mother recognized her as a girl regardless of anatomy. She dressed exclusively as female until the age of 18, having been schooled as a girl under the patronage of Madame de La Fayette, a well-known author and friend of the Queen. Even when of age and being rebuked by the Duc de Montausier, Madame de La Fayette would not see the youth become a man – she had other plans. |  |

By custom the first born of the De Choisy was to be installed as the abbot of Sainte-Seine in Burgundy. Life as a cleric may have seemed odd for somebody of my lady’s refinement and adventurous spirit, but the truth was that it suited her.

“I thought the robes so beautiful, and I determined that I never wanted to wear breeches in my life again,” she said to me. She was referring to the period when she studied philosophy and theology at the Sorbonne for almost five years dressed as a man.

When that was over she recommenced life as a woman first as Madame de Sancy in the Saint-Medard district of Paris, and then, having been exposed as a man beneath her skirts, to the provinces living as the Comtesse des Barres at the Chateau de Vouzay in Bourges south of Orleans. It was said that my lady took women as well as men to her bed in those days, but from the time I met her she simply said that she “preferred just to lie back and enjoy the labors of others”.

It was said that she had laid back for the Comte de Bussy-Rabutin among others. The Comte was regarded as perhaps the most notorious lothario in France, best known for the Holy Week orgy at Roissy in 1659 – they still talk about that. When they met, my lady was 26 and Busy Rabutin was 52 but she still described him as “an energetic lover”. They shared a love of words and they were both writers, although his best known work at the times was hardly religious - his *Histoire Amoureuse de Gaules* was scandalous.

She has freely admitted to me that this was a life of debauchery, and that it would have its denouement. She will not give details, but I suspect that it was a violent lover or perhaps a jealous husband who put an end to her choosing female partners. She declined to provide details and I did not press for them. Suffice to say that in 1683 she looked to God and for a time, He provided the answer.

I have heard it said that her “conversion” from sexual dilettante to clergy was much earlier, given the visit to Rome with Cardinal de Bouillion in 1676, but she was most certainly the Comtesse on that trip, and the Cardinal was a renowned rake with an appetite for the exotic.

Even after the Comtesse had been consigned to the memoirs of dear lady, after 1683 and a life in the service of the church, many remarked that the garments she wore as an abbot were distinctly feminine, which was exactly the way she wanted them. There was also no disguising her gestures and her walk, that were, to put it mildly, effeminate. Nevertheless she performed her functions as a leader of religious studies in the priory that was her home for two years before she joined Alexandre de Chaumont’s mission to Siam in 1685.

She told me that she discovered the Kingdom of Siam to be a remarkable place, and some small part of her fascination was in relation to the large number of men in that country who chose to live as women and did so with ease. From Siam, as she explained to me, she acquired many concoctions and practices which enabled her to function more completely as a woman, which is what she wanted.

My lady is most well known for the religious works that she wrote form her own studies, including her “Dialogs on the Immortality of the Soul” written before she went to Siam and the “History of the Church” in eleven volumes written in later life with the help of a team of researchers, including me.

I was hardly religious, but not unlike my lady, I seemed unsuited for manly pursuits. Unlike many who chose the monastic life, I had manly desires, which I needed to suppress. It is my belief that those of my colleagues inclined away from women would have found the abbot unappealing, given how much of a woman she was. Even though, as with Bussy-Rabutin there was an age difference between us – she was 46 and I was 26 when I arrived at the priory in 1690 – I was drawn to her.

“Do you think me a man or a woman?” she asked me when she saw me staring at her. She certainly appeared to be a woman, with her flowing robes more a dress than a cassock, and fingered with delicate hands with many jewelled rings in such a feminine fashion.

“I cannot see a man,” I said. It was not a lie to ingratiate myself. The from and conduct was so much like that of a woman, even in middle age.

She seemed pleased with my words. She said: "You might ask why. Where do I get such a bizarre pleasure from dressing and acting as I do? Well, the work I do here is to study scripture and to understand its application to the world that we live in, don’t you agree?”

“I am here to learn, Father Abbot”. It seemed completely the wrong for of address.

“Learn you shall. What belongs to God is to be loved, to be adored,” she said. There was a mirror on her writing table and she lifted it to see his reflection and arrange a dark curl to better expose a feminine eyebrow. “It is beauty that gives birth to love. The pursuit of beauty is for the glory of God.”

“And what of men?” I asked. “I am a man without hope of achieving the beauty that you talk about…” I could not resist a compliment: “The beauty that you have achieved.”

“You will do well here, young man,” she said. “But I am not the woman I was. When I was younger and when I found myself at balls or at comedies in dressed in beautiful gowns, with diamonds resting on my soft bosom and my hair arranged high on my head and I heard people say quietly near me: “Here is a beautiful woman…”. I tell you that I have tasted in myself a pleasure that cannot be compared to anything, so great is it. Ambition, wealth, love do not equal it!”

There was a light in her eyes. I saw the fire of passion that I had not expected to see within these cloistered walls.

“Man, as far as his weakness allows it, aspires to the same thing. Men seek beauty by their association with women, and other things of beauty.” She lifted the mirror again. “These are the traits which can make them love - they feel the inestimable pleasure of being loved by somebody beautiful.”

He turned to me and smiled, and I felt my loins fill as they had not done since I surrendered myself to the church. There was no hiding my feelings.

I took her to bed then and there. I bolted the door while she tore off her robes. We both agreed that it was for the glory of God. Beauty and love He has created them both, and as I filled her with my seed I saw both in her smiling face. And God can never be glorified too often.

“The passages of women dry up with age, but mine never will as long as you work it,” she said. I loved her. There is no other way to say it.

But as she said: “We always love ourselves better than we love others,” she said. She should know.

My lady died in the year of Our Lord 1724. She left me with her papers. Strangely she had destroyed very little of what she had written save some letters written by Bussy-Rabutin which, given the style of his work, I would have loved to have read. But there was so much that told of her life and her adventures that I could not let it perish. That is why I used the skills that I had learned from her in helping with “The History of the Church” to compile what has now been published as *Memoires*.

It just seemed to me that this was a story worth telling. She had spent so much time on religious works to help good Christians better understand God, but her own story might be called a treatise on humanity, or a small and unusual part of it.

For me, it is just fun. Here was a person who gave a good part of her life to pleasure. It was not just the pleasure of the body but the pleasure to be had in the beauty of creation – not just God’s but her own.

“Here is a beautiful woman…”. Nothing can equal that!

The End

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Notes:

The teller of this tale is fictional but none of the others are.

*Memoires* was published in 1737 and has been through many editions since. Other books relying almost entirely on this incredible material are the anonymously penned *Histoire de Madame la Comtesse de Barres* and *Aventures de l'Abbé de Choisy* by Paul Lacroix.

Some of the passages are quotes from the book, in particular “Here is a beautiful woman … [to hear those words] ambition, wealth, love do not equal it!”

*Histoire Amoureuse de Gaules* by Roger Comte de Bussy-Rabutin is available on the Gotenburg Project.

BUT… in his article *Authenticity and Textual Transvestism in the Memoirs of the Abbé De Choisy* in the *Journal of French Studies* (Oxford University Press) Paul Scott, Associate Professor of French, University of Kansas says: “Unfortunately, one of the great cross-dressing memoirs we have in history isn’t real,” Scott said. “We want it to be true because it so fantastical. But if you regard it with any scrutiny, there are implausibilities, contradictions, anachronisms and no contemporary corroboration whatsoever.” So sad!