MEMOIRS OF ÉLISABETH VIGÉE-LEBRUN 1789

*As the revolutionary impulse spread in France, the long-suffering underclass began rioting in the streets. The aristocracy became the target of their pent-up rage. Madame Vigée-Lebrun was a wealthy artist who painted portraits of the aristocracy, including King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. The following excerpt from Vigée-Lebrun’s memoirs describes her terrifying escape from France.*

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I made three portraits of Mme. Du Barry. In the first I painted her at half length, in a dressing- gown and straw hat. In the second she is dressed in white satin; she holds a wreath in one hand, and one of her arms is leaning on a pedestal. The third portrait I made of Mme. Du Barry is in my own possession. I began it about the middle of September, 1789. From Louveciennes[[1]](#footnote-0) we could hear shooting in the distance, and I remember the poor woman saying, “If Louis XV were alive I am sure this would not be happening.” I had done the head, and outlined the body and arms, when I was obliged to make an expedition to Paris. I hoped to be able to return to Louveciennes to finish my work, but heard that Berthier and Foulon[[2]](#footnote-1) had been murdered. I was now frightened beyond measure, and thenceforth thought of nothing but leaving France. The fearful year 1789 was well advanced, and all decent people were already seized with terror. I remember perfectly that one evening when I had gathered some friends about me for a concert, most of the arrivals came into the room with looks of consternation; they had been walking at Longchamps that morning, and the populace assembled at the Étoile gate had cursed at those who passed in carriages in a dreadful manner. Some of the wretches had clambered on the carriage steps, shouting, “Next year you will be behind your carriages and we shall be inside!” and a thousand other insults.

As for myself, I had little need to learn fresh details in order to foresee what horrors impended. I knew beyond doubt that my house in the Rue Gros Chenet, where I had settled but three months since, had been singled out by the criminals. They threw sulphur into our cellars through the airholes. If I happened to be at my window, vulgar ruffians would shake their fists at me. Numberless sinister rumors reached me from every side; in fact, I now lived in a state of continual anxiety and sadness. My health became sensibly affected, and two of my best friends, the architect Brongniart and his wife, when they came to see me, found me so thin and so changed that they besought me to come and spend a few days with them, which invitation I thankfully accepted. Brongniart had his lodgings at the Invalides, whither I was conducted by a physician attached to the Palais Royal, whose servants wore the Orléans livery,[[3]](#footnote-2) the only one then held in any respect. There I was given everything of the best. As I was unable to eat, I was nourished on excellent Burgundy wine and soup, and Mme. Brongniart was in constant attendance upon me. All this solicitude ought to have quieted me, especially as my friends took a less black view of things than I did. Nevertheless, they did not succeed in banishing my evil forebodings. “What is the use of living;; what is the use of taking care of oneself?” I would often ask my good friends, for the fears that the future held over me made life distasteful to me. But I must acknowledge that even with the furthest stretch of my imagination I guessed only at a fraction of the crimes that were to be committed. . . .

I had made up my mind to leave France. For some years I had cherished the desire to go to Rome. The large number of portraits I had engaged to paint had, however, hindered me from putting my plan into execution. But I could now paint no longer; my broken spirit, bruised with so many horrors, shut itself entirely to my art. Besides, dreadful slanders were pouring upon my friends, my acquaintances and myself, although, Heaven knows, I had never hurt a living soul. I thought like the man who said, “I am accused of having stolen the towers of Notre Dame;; they are still in their usual place, but I am going away, as I am evidently to blame.” I left several portraits I had begun, among them Mlle. Contat’s. At the same time I refused to paint Mlle. de Laborde (afterward Duchess de Noailles), brought to me by her father. She was scarcely sixteen, and very charming, but it was no longer a question of success or money—it was only a question of saving one’s head. I had my carriage loaded, and my passport ready, so that I might leave next day with my daughter and her governess, when a crowd of national guardsmen burst into my room with their muskets. Most of them were drunk and shabby, and had terrible faces. A few of them came up to me and told me in the coarsest language that I must not go, but that I must remain. I answered that since everybody had been called upon to enjoy his liberty, I intended to make use of mine. They would barely listen to me, and kept on repeating, “You will not go, citizeness;; you will not go!” Finally they went away. I was plunged into a state of cruel anxiety when I saw two of them return. But they did not frighten me, although they belonged to the gang, so quickly did I recognize that they wished me no harm. “Madame,” said one of them, “we are your neighbors, and we have come to advise you to leave, and as soon as possible. You cannot live here; you are changed so much that we feel sorry for you. But do not go in your carriage: go in the stage-coach; it is much safer.” I thanked them with all my heart, and followed their good advice. I had three places reserved, as I still wanted to take my daughter, who was then five or six years old, but was unable to secure them until a fortnight later, because all who exiled themselves chose the stage- coach, like myself. At last came the long-expected day.

It was the 5th of October, and the King and Queen were conducted from Versailles to Paris surrounded by pikes.[[4]](#footnote-3) The events of that day filled me with uneasiness as to the fate of Their Majesties and that of all decent people, so that I was dragged to the stage-coach at midnight in a dreadful state of mind. I was very much afraid of the Faubourg Saint Antoine,[[5]](#footnote-4) which I was obliged to traverse to reach the Barriere du Trone. My brother and my husband escorted me as far as this gate without leaving the door of the coach for a moment; but the suburb that I was so frightened of was perfectly quiet. All its inhabitants, the workmen and the rest, had been to Versailles after the royal family, and fatigue kept them all in bed.

Opposite me in the coach was a very filthy man, who stunk like the plague, and told me quite simply that he had stolen watches and other things. Luckily he saw nothing about me to tempt him, for I was only taking a small amount of clothing and eighty louis for my journey. I had left my principal effects and my jewels in Paris, and the fruit of my labors was in the hands of my husband, who spent it all. I lived abroad solely on the proceeds of my painting.

Not satisfied with relating his fine exploits to us, the thief talked incessantly of stringing up such and such people on lamp-posts, naming a number of my own acquaintances. My daughter thought this man very wicked. He frightened her, and this gave me the courage to say, “I beg you, sir, not to talk of killing before this child.” That silenced him, and he ended by playing at battle with my daughter. On the bench I occupied there also sat a mad Jacobin[[6]](#footnote-5) from Grenoble, about fifty years old, with an ugly, bilious complexion, who each time we stopped at an inn for dinner or supper made violent speeches of the most fearful kind. At all of the towns a crowd of people stopped the coach to learn the news from Paris. Our Jacobin would then exclaim: “Everything is going well, children! We have the baker and his wife safe in Paris. A constitution will be drawn up, they will be forced to accept it, and then it will be all over.” There were plenty of ninnies and flatheads who believed this man as if he had been an oracle. All this made my journey a very melancholy one. I had no further fears for myself, but I feared greatly for everybody else—for my mother, for my brother, and for my friends. I also had the gravest apprehensions concerning Their Majesties, for all along the route, nearly as far as Lyons, men on horseback rode up to the coach to tell us that the King and Queen had been killed and that Paris was on fire. My poor little girl got all a- tremble; she thought she saw her father dead and our house burned down, and no sooner had I succeeded in reassuring her than another horseman appeared and told us the same stories.

I cannot describe the emotions I felt in passing over the Beauvoisin Bridge. Then only did I breathe freely. I had left France behind, that France which nevertheless was the land of my birth, and which I reproached myself with quitting with so much satisfaction. The sight of the mountains, however, distracted me from all my sad thoughts. I had never seen high mountains before; those of the Savoy[[7]](#footnote-6) seemed to touch the sky, and seemed to mingle with it in a thick vapor. My first sensation was that of fear, but I unconsciously accustomed myself to the spectacle, and ended by admiring it. A certain part of the road completely entranced me. . . . I got down from the coach, but after walking some way I was seized with a great fright, for there were explosions being made with gunpowder, which had the effect of a thousand cannon shots, and the din echoing from rock to rock was truly infernal.

I went up Mount Cenis, as other strangers were doing, when a postilion[[8]](#footnote-7) approached me, saying, “The lady ought to take a mule;; to climb up on foot is too fatiguing.” I answered that I was a work-woman and quite accustomed to walking. “Oh! no!” was the laughing reply. “The lady is no work-woman;; we know who she is!” “Well, who am I, then?” I asked him. “You are Mme. Lebrun, who paints so well, and we are all very glad to see you safe from those bad people.” I never guessed how the man could have learned my name, but it proved to me how many secret agents the Jacobins must have had. Happily I had no occasion to fear them any longer.

*Excerpt from Memoirs of Madame Vigée Lebrun, translated by Lionel Strachey (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), pp. 25–30.*

1. Louveciennes: the estate of Madame Du Barry, the woman Vigée-Lebrun was painting [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Berthier and Foulon: Berthier was a French aristocrat; Foulon was a government official [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Orleans livery: servants’ uniforms [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. pikes: weapons made up of shafts with pointed heads [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Faubourg Saint Antoine: a suburb of Paris [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Jacobin: a radical revolutionary [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Savoy: the region between France and Italy [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. postilion: a coachman [↑](#footnote-ref-7)