

A glimpse of the catastrophe at the end.

The book goes through du Châtelet's work in physics, and in philosophy; her years with Voltaire, and their breakup; until finally, well into her 40s, she has an affair with the young, handsome, and quite unscrupulous poet Saint-Lambert, which ended up with her pregnant...and Saint-Lambert abandoning her.

She knew she was unlikely to survive the labor, and began staying up even later than usual; desperate to complete her writings. The prologue had touched on that, and now, in the final chapter of 'Passionate Minds', I continue the story:

...Voltaire couldn't follow Émili's mathematical symbols, and begged her to start going to sleep earlier. She shrugged him off. How important was her health now anyway? In her old manuscript on 'Happiness' she'd written: 'It's rare to admit it, but we all secretly like the idea of being talked about after our death. In fact, it's a belief we need.'

She kept up her work pace, in that strange summer of 1749. The weather was odd, sometimes unseasonably cold, with driving rain under grey skies; then abrupt, humid thick air. She'd settle in for sessions after late dinner and coffee, and continue almost till dawn. Voltaire understood why she wouldn't slow down. 'She believed that death was striking,' he wrote, and '...all she thought about was how to use the little time she had left, to deprive it of taking what she felt was the best part of herself.'

They moved to another estate, where a friend provided a luxurious guest-house with freshly painted, light blue walls. Voltaire was with her, and Saint-Lambert showed up too...

Saint-Lambert was kind at first, helping her walk around the grounds but it didn't last long. After one dreadful dinner she wrote him: 'My God you treated me cruelly, you didn't glance my way once. I was used to looking in your eyes and seeing how much you cared for me, how much you loved me. I looked tonight, and didn't find anything...I bitterly repent for having been seduced by your love; for once having believed your feelings matched mine.'

Despite being busy with the calculations for her book, she also began speaking confidentially to Longchamp [their servant], asking him to help put her private papers in order. Although their location 'had the most excellent facilities for Madame's health...yet she approached me with various sealed envelopes, and made me promise that, if she were not to survive the dangers she was soon to face, I was to execute her instructions with complete accuracy.'

Saint-Lambert, now in full cowardice, found reason to leave for his garrison in Nancy. Late in August she wrote asking him to see her one more time. Voltaire never left her, and although not disparaging her fears, tried reassuring her that

she really did have a good chance of surviving. She was fit; the pregnancy had advanced with no complications; the air was fresh.

It was possible he could be right. In the direct translation portion of her work, she'd written out Newton's words: 'The admirable arrangement of the sun, the planets and the comets can only be the work of an all-powerful and wise being...' Not everyone her age failed to survive childbirth. If there was any justice, shouldn't she be one of the fortunate ones?

Sometimes the uncertainty was too much ('I'm terrified when I think my premonitions might be true'). But she continued her intense writing schedule, and managed to finish the manuscript, on August 30. She wrote to the director of the King's Library that her pages were on the way: 'It would be most kind to have them registered so that they can't get lost. Mr de Voltaire, who is here beside me sends you his tenderest compliments'. In her final letter, August 31, 1749, she was tired, but still had hope:

'I walked to my little summer-house today, and my stomach is so swollen, and my back so sore, that I wouldn't be surprised if I had the baby tonight.'

Émilie du Châtelet gave birth on the night of September 3. She died of infection stemming from the labor on September 10; the child – a girl – died soon after. Her translation and commentary on Newton's *Principia* became fundamental to key eighteenth-century developments in theoretical physics, laying the groundwork for much of contemporary science.

Voltaire was bereft: 'I've lost the half of myself – a soul for which mine was made'. Months later, after he had abandoned their château at Cirey and moved back to Paris, his servant Longchamp would find him wandering at night in the apartment he'd shared with Émilie, plaintively calling her name in the dark.