

From 'Passionate Minds', Chapter Three.

Du Châtelet's first serious relationship after marriage, was with the Duc de Richelieu, whom the Valmont character in 'Liaisons Dangereuses' seems to have been modelled on:

...Émilie's confidence had been knocked out of her by her marriage. Her husband, Florent-Claude, was kind enough, and never criticized her for spending so much time reading - if anything, he seemed proud to have such an intelligent wife. But he was busy supervising his military garrisons, and largely left his young bride behind with his sisters, to deal with the two children - a boy and a girl - they quickly had.

Even child-rearing wasn't something she could take much pride in, however, for parents of her class were strongly discouraged from spending much time with their children when they were very young. There were wet-nurses and nannies to handle these 'primitive' tasks.

Du Châtelet needed to open the door to science again. But how could she? No woman in France - or England - was allowed to register a university, let alone at the grand Académie des Science in Paris. She was an outsider, a young isolated parent, and no one from those august institutions would know anything about her, however eager she was for intellectual companionship.

Florent-Claude realized that something was wrong, and was happy to set her up in an apartment in Paris. But that wasn't much better at first. The first step would be to have female friends there, but Emilie didn't trust that the wealthiest women in the capital would like her. Too many of the ones she did meet were only interested in gossipy details about each other. Why were they so uniformly unkind? 'If I were king,' she mullied in later writing, 'women would be able to take part in all human rights, especially ones involving our reason. It's because of their lack of education [that] they seemed born to deceive.'

The level of knowledge was stunningly low. Louis XV's daughters remained illiterate, even after several years in convents. (Decades later, even Olympe de Gouges, author of the stirring *Declaration of the Rights of Women* had to dictate her texts because she'd never been taught to write.) In the few schools that were available for women, all science, philosophy and literature were taboo.

'I felt,' du Châtelet wrote, looking back, 'as if I were swimming in an endless sea of uncertainty.' She would eat too much ('I gave in too often to my big appetite'), but then immediately go on diets so no one could say that she'd gained weight. At one point, she even nervously tried an affair with what seemed a pleasant young noble, Guébriant, but it ended quickly. She wanted love, or at least a partner to go forward with in thought. Guébriant was both insincere, and entirely vacuous.

And then her world transformed.

At age twenty-two, Émilie now met the most sought-after man in all of France, It wasn't Voltaire yet, but rather the one man Voltaire often said he wanted to be: Louis-François Armand du Plessis, the Duc de Richelieu, ten years her senior.

If she had wanted to make the women in her Paris circles resent her even more, Émilie couldn't have chosen better. Richelieu was a man's man, yet also one whom most women blindly adored. It was through him that she got the confidence crucial for the next stage of her life.

He was the great-nephew of the famous Cardinal, and the Sun King Louis XIV himself had been his godfather. He'd inherited a fortune, and been thrown into the Bastille three times before his mid-twenties - first at age fifteen by his own father, for disobedience, then aged nineteen for duelling, and finally, at twenty-three, for plotting to overthrow the government. He was a renowned soldier - or at least managed to give the impression he was one - and later led the victorious combined land-sea attack on the fortified island of Minorca, reducing the British Empire in the western Mediterranean.

When Richelieu wasn't at the front he dressed simply, with only minimal elaboration of the lace cuffs that Versailles drones insisted on. He was polite, and quietly humorous, and - most wondrous of all - listened at length to female confidence. As a result, one awed contemporary put it, 'He was woman's idolized lord. The coquette and the prude, the duchess and the princess - all alike yielded to him...never a passion, but much debauchery. He even has mistresses who aid him in his acts of infidelity, their jealousy stifled by their desire to please...'

It seemed inconceivable at first that he would turn to this quiet, intellectual young woman. She was cautious at first - 'I can't believe that someone as sought after as you wants to look beneath my flaws, to find out what I really feel'. It didn't help that affairs were a serious matter, and only allowed so long as the appropriate forms were followed (as Florent-Claude had always done with his own mistresses). This meant no holding hands in public, and no staying the night at someone else's home while you were in the same city as your spouse either. Maintaining a more public affair away from Paris was less of a problem, for one was showing polite discretion by being so far removed.

When Émilie began sleeping with Richelieu, everyone waited for him to drop this intense, albeit gracefully tall youngster, and move to a more conventional partner. But he was having too much fun. As Richelieu would be the first of many to discover, Émilie was different from anyone he'd ever met. She still blurted her sentences, and sometimes it was as confusing as when she'd been a child trying to get a word in ('My ideas were all mixed up last night,' she wrote to Richelieu '...I know I'm not eloquent').

But when she wasn't too shy, or too excited, she was captivating. Which of Richelieu's previous conquests would have been able to lead him through the twists and turns of the English philosopher John Locke, or on to ideas he'd never suspected about the distant reaches of outer space? Soon a truly astounding event took place.

Louis-François Armand du Plessis, the Duc de Richelieu, was in love.

It couldn't last of course, despite the increased thrill he found. Émilie was young and pretty enough, and also would have picked up from Florent-Claude's sisters and other female friends knowledge of the appropriate bedroom techniques for these circumstances. The problem, rather, was that Richelieu's attraction to Émilie had depended on her reversing the usual course he was used to, of women blindly glorifying him. Instead, with her extraordinary quickness, she soon managed to assess his underlying feelings; his underlying self. Being Émilie, she also felt no need to keep her thoughts to herself. 'Friends get to see each other in every way they are,' she wrote him. 'I love you sad, happy, lively.'

Soon however she began to see too deeply. It had been clear from the start that he wasn't going to be the man who could lead her forward into science. Now it was evident that their relation couldn't last as a mere sharing of passion either. She was jokey about it at first. 'No, I'm not at all satisfied with your letter,' she wrote with mock seriousness. 'It's not that you're not charming but you don't speak about yourself enough.' But then she got closer: 'You write as if you have all the grace and gaiety in the world. But I think we met too late. You'll never love anyone unless you need them for your pleasure.'

The affair went on for a while longer, but when it ended Émilie did another thing no other woman in France had managed. Richelieu wasn't the man she was looking for, but she was so graceful during the break-up that the two became lifelong correspondents and friends. In the years to come, he sent her hundreds of letters: sometimes superficial, sometimes thoughtful (and always poorly spelled, even by the relaxed standards of the time).

It was a happy enough ending, and Florent-Claude as always was friendly with his wife when they happened to overlap in Semur or Paris. But now that she'd had a glimpse of real passion she was even less content to be alone with her books. She was still excluded from the world of science researchers and exciting writers; still looking for the partner who could help her enter this world she sought.

At which point I cut to a chapter on Voltaire, building up to his time in Paris, where he's at his own impasse in life. They meet - and the main body of the book begins...