

From Chapter Eight of 'Passionate Minds'.

To get a sense of what Voltaire and du Châtelet's first months living together at their isolated Château de Cirey were like, I arranged this chapter as a quick montage, from contemporary letters and memoirs. Here are some extracts:

REFURBISHING

Mme du Châtelet has arrived, just at the moment when I received her letter informing me that she would not be arriving yet. Her coach was rough, and she's bruised and shaken, but she laughs and is charming.

- VOLTAIRE TO MADAME CHAMPBONIN, CIREY NEIGHBOR

Voltaire says I'm busy as a queen ant. But the lodgings aren't finished, and we still have 100 workers.

- EMILIE TO PARISIAN FRIEND

Madame wishes to order a dressing-case from Hébert [the goldsmith]... who has moved and lives in the Rue Saint-Honoré. You must give him 1200 francs in advance for the silver to make it...

- VOLTAIRE TO THE ABBE MOUSSINOT, HIS PURCHASING AGENT IN PARIS

Now she is putting windows where I've put doors; she's changing staircases into chimneys, and chimneys into staircases. Then she is going to plant lime trees where I proposed to place elms, and where I have planted herbs she is going to make a flower-bed...We have found the secret of furnishing Cirey out of nothing.

- VOLTAIRE TO MME DE LA NEUVILLE, CIREY NEIGHBOR

There are whispers that Madame forgets herself so far as to throw such handy portables as plates and forks at M. de Voltaire when she is roused...

- VISITOR RECOUNTING SERVANTS' GOSSIP

I spend my time with masons, carpenters, stonemasons – there's no time to think of anything else! But however difficult I may be to live with – and I can assure you I've been almost as difficult for Voltaire as for you – visit us and you will see a strange phenomenon: two individuals who've spent three months together, and who love each other more than ever.

If someone had told me two years ago I would be living like this, I wouldn't have believed them.

- EMILIE TO RICHELIEU

Would you please send the thermometers and barometers – I must insist very strongly on this. If I can have the thermometers made according to the modern method of Fahrenheit I should be very much obliged to you.

- VOLTAIRE TO MOUSSINOT

FIRST GLIMPSES

Cirey is four leagues from any other house. It's a terrifying solitude where my uncle lives, though admittedly with a spirited woman...and very pretty.

- MARIE-LOUISE DENIS, VOLTAIRE'S NEWLY MARRIED NIECE,
RECOUNTING A VISIT AFTER THE MAIN CONSTRUCTION WAS FINISHED

I stopped at Cirey. The architecture is surprisingly magnificent. Voltaire's quarters end in a gallery where scientific instruments of all kinds are assembled...One writes verse in his corner, the other studies triangles in hers.

- CHARLES JEAN FRANCOIS HENAUT, COURT OFFICIAL

Would you kindly send me a hundred trimmed quills, two reams of foolscap paper and two reams of large letter-papers. Also some toothpicks, and three or four dozen little flat buttons for shirts. Also why not add a dozen-and-a-half oranges.

- VOLTAIRE TO MOUSSINOT

I only got there at two in the morning, covered in mud. You can imagine my state. But Emilie greeted me very graciously, and soon Voltaire arrived, a candle in his hand. He's as elegant as if he were in Paris. (I think he powdered his wig for me.) As for her, well she speaks so fast!

- MADAME DE GRAFFIGNY, EXCITABLE HOUSEGUEST

Could you please send twenty pounds of wig powder, finely ground and ready to use, and ten pounds of wig powder suitable for grinding later? It would be most kind.

- VOLTAIRE TO MOUSSINOT

Voltaire said he had to go off and write, so Madame let me see her rooms. Well oh my God! Voltaire's rooms are nothing compared to hers! The main bedroom's wood-panelled, varnished in light yellow, with edges of the palest blue. Everything matches - even the dog's basket! I swear I could fall on my knees it's so gorgeous. The big window's curtains are embroidered with muslin - the view outside is wonderful.

- MADAME DE GRAFFIGNY FINDS A FRESH VICTIM

DAILY LIFE

Once I began to live in solitude I was astonished at how much time I used to waste [in Paris], just tending my hair, or worrying about my appearance.

- EMILIE, UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT

Yes, Hébert [the goldsmith] is expensive, but he has taste, and one must pay for that. So give him the 1200 francs.

- VOLTAIRE TO MOUSSINOT

...so after coffee the goddess of this place [Emilie] got the idea to go for a ride. I wanted to accompany her, but oh my gracious! When I saw the wildness of her stallions! I was scared - but I still couldn't decide if I should stay behind. Luckily the kind Voltaire was there....

- MADAME DE GRAFFIGNY

...then at four p.m. they sometimes meet for a little snack, but not always. Dinner's at nine p.m.... They just don't want to be disturbed in the middle of the day at all.

- MADAME DE GRAFFIGNY

...Reflect on the advantages we enjoy. Your whole body is sensitive – your lips enjoy a voluptuousness that nothing wearies.

- VOLTAIRE REMINISCING

When Voltaire came into Madame's room today to read out from his play, she told him he should wear a different jacket. But he said he didn't want to change it: that he'd be cold and would probably catch the flu. Madame repeated herself, and he stormed out of the room, saying he was ill and to hell with the play. I left with him.

When we went back into Madame's room, Voltaire looked away from her, and wouldn't say a word. But then they began to speak with each other, in English for some reason – it's a language I don't understand – and suddenly everything was fine: Voltaire happily began reading his play aloud.

- MADAME DE GRAFFIGNY. SHE LEFT ONLY FIVE WEEKS LATER.

OLD FRIENDS

I do ask you to continue to send me news. The accounts in your last letter made me worry for your safety.

- EMILIE TO MAUPERTUIS, ANOTHER EX LOVER, AND NOW POLAR EXPLORER

I will say nothing more of the rigours of travelling in the deepest snow as the winter came. The Lapps use curious long shoes – narrow planks of wood, about eight feet long – to keep from getting stuck. One walks on them, or rather glides. It's a manner of proceeding which requires long practice.

- MAUPERTUIS, DISCOURSE

When one has travelled, Madame, only from one's home to the Tuileries or to the Opera, one has very limited ideas about all the wonderful things there are to see.

- MAUPERTUIS, LETTER SENT FROM ARCTIC CIRCLE

Now you've written from Stockholm to Madame de Richelieu, but she only wants your letters to brag about them. I genuinely want to learn your news – despite, that is, your pride, your vanity, and your infuriating flippancy.

- EMILIE TO MAUPERTUIS

WHAT THEY BEGAN

All right I have one more thing to tell you. That morning Emilie was reading aloud to Voltaire, a mathematical calculation for the size of the supposed inhabitants of Jupiter. The reasoning was roughly that since the eyes are in proportion to the body, and they knew the size of the pupil of the eye, and they could work out the distance of Jupiter from the sun and so how much light it received...oh, I just don't know about something so useless!

- WHAT MADAME DE GRAFFIGNY ALSO REPORTED

And my good Moussinot, do also send a large reflecting telescope. It must be strong enough to detect the satellites of Jupiter clearly.

- VOLTAIRE TO MOUSSINOT

The text was written in Latin, and yet she read it aloud in French. She hesitated a moment at the end of each sentence. I didn't understand why, then saw she was working through the calculations on the pages with each pause. That's how fast she was.

- VISITOR TO CIREY, 1738

And then I switch back to straight narrative, as, preliminaries now over, we begin to see the wonders their shared life led to...