

*Brief Lives*  
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Marquis de Sade

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Brief Lives  
Published by Hesperus Press Limited  
19 Bulstrode Street, London W1U 2JN  
[www.hesperuspress.com](http://www.hesperuspress.com)

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First published by Hesperus Press Limited, 2011

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Designed and typeset by Fraser Muggeridge studio  
Printed in Jordan by Jordan National Press

ISBN: 978-1-84391-917-9

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# Introduction

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What's in a name? Everything, if that name is Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade. Most people would not be able to reel off those forenames, but mention the 'Marquis de Sade' in almost any country that provides a reasonably broad education and the associations will be immediate: brutality, perversion, male dominance; the worst excesses, in fact, of sexual depravity. There are very few examples of writers whose names have entered language as concepts. It is possible of course to make adjectival forms of the names of many writers, but rarely have they entered common parlance. Notable exceptions are, in the world of drama, 'Shakespearean', 'Brechtian', and 'Pinteresque', and, in that of the novel, 'Dickensian' and 'Kafkaesque'. There are not many more. 'Sade' has been given the additional honour of becoming an '-ism'. Sadism is a way not only of looking at the world but of interacting with it and philosophising about it.

Despite there being general agreement on what constitutes sadism, there is less agreement on what form of the family name one should use. When referring to the Marquis by his family name only, should one call him 'de Sade' or just 'Sade'? French dictionaries and other authorities provide a bewildering array of options for the use of the 'de', and ordinary native French speakers also disagree, except on one point: that it depends on the circumstances. Simone de Beauvoir and Pierre Klossowski preferred 'Sad' and many American writers have followed their examples. Biographers have varied. I have opted to refer to the family name always as 'de Sade', partly to maintain continuity with usage in works by him that have already been published by Hesperus Press, and partly out of the conviction that this form is more acceptable in British English (one talks after all of 'de Gaulle' and not 'Gaulle', and indeed of 'de Beauvoir' herself!).

Before it became notorious, the name had an interesting and illustrious history. Its origins are shrouded in legends, one even claiming derivation from one of the three Magi. The first known representative of the family was Louis de Sade, provost of Avignon in 1177, who paid for the construction of the famous bridge there. His descendants maintained and restored the bridge, and the de Sade coat of arms can still be seen on the first arch of the bridge. It seems likely that the family came originally from Italy. The name is spelt variously in ancient documents as 'Sado' or 'Sadone', and sometimes 'Sauze' or 'Saze'. It may therefore be that the family took its name from a small town in Languedoc called Saze, on the banks of the Rhône, not far from Avignon. Over the centuries the family developed many prestigious connections, through marriage, with other local noble families, and also with the papacy. It was also renowned for its military exploits.

Another legend, for which there is stronger (though disputed) evidence, is that Laura, the woman immortalised as a symbol of spiritual perfection in the work of the early-fourteenth-century poet Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), was related by marriage to the de Sade family. According to the Abbé de Sade, the Marquis' uncle, who researched the family archives thoroughly, she was the wife of Hugues de Sade. Argument has raged ever since and the matter has never been satisfactorily settled.<sup>1</sup>

Many other distinguished figures, however, can be attributed to the family without doubt; the figures include magistrates, governors, papal chamberlains, diplomats, abbés, abbesses and nuns. It is against the background of this distinguished lineage that reactions to the Marquis' notorious behaviour must be seen.

The notion of corrupt nobility has always been associated with de Sade. Hence, he is often referred to

in one breath, as the 'Marquis de Sade'. It is interesting to note that after his father's death he was eligible to use the title of 'Count', but he had little fondness for it, and only used it when it benefited him in some way. Already in his own lifetime the 'Marquis de Sade' was becoming the stuff of legend. He was happy to use pseudonyms however as it suited him: 'Comte de Mazan' when pursued by the police, and 'Louis Sade' or 'Citizen Sade' out of political expediency at the time of the French Revolution. In his own epitaph, never put on his grave, but found in manuscript form in the family archives, he refers to himself simply as 'D.A.F. Sade, Prisoner under Every Regime.' Exactly why he had to spend so much of his life in prison must be the central focus of any biography of a man who, despite circumstances that would have destroyed most other mortals, managed to produce some of the most original and imaginative writing of his age.

## Childhood, the Military and Marriage 1740–63

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The child born on 2nd June 1740 in the Hôtel de Condé, Paris, should have been called Louis-Aldonse Donatien de Sade, according to his mother's wishes, but, with so many new-born babies dying at the time, the christening was hurriedly put in the hands of some servants. Entrusting such important matters to servants was quite common at this time, and in this case the servants obviously thought that one of the father's names, François, would be more appropriate, instead of Louis, and, as the Provençal name Aldonse was completely unknown to them, they substituted Alphonse. The child who was to become infamous as the Marquis de Sade was thus finally named Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade.

De Sade's father, the Comte Jean-Baptiste-François-Joseph de Sade, was born in Avignon in 1702, to a family of Italian origin that had settled in Provence in the twelfth century, and he inherited the estates of Lacoste and Saumane and one at Arles in the Camargue, as well as sharing ownership of another at Mazan. On 13th November 1733 he married Marie-Eléonore de Maillé de Carman in the chapel of the same Hôtel de Condé where his son was to be born. His bride was the daughter of the Comtesse de Maillé, who had been lady-in-waiting to the Princesse de Condé. Both the princess and the prince attended the wedding and, shortly after, Marie-Eléonore was also appointed lady-in-waiting. For the first few years of his marriage the Comte de Sade lived separately from his wife, fulfilling his duties as aide-de-camp to the Maréchal de Villars. A daughter was born to the couple in 1737 but survived for only two years. In 1739 the count was appointed lieutenant-general, and it was in 1740, when the Princesse de Condé died, that he was sent to Cologne. He was at the Court of Cologne at the time of his son's birth.

The Princesse de Condé died only eighteen months after her husband, when the boy Donatien was just one year old. As a result his mother ceased to be lady-in-waiting but was allowed to stay on in the Hôtel de Condé to bring up both her own son and the five-year-old orphaned prince. It is likely that Donatien resented his position as the younger, weaker child, who was not shown the respect paid to the older prince, and it must have been hurtful as well as mysterious to him when his parents suddenly decided in 1744 to send him away to be brought up by other members of the family. It is possible that one reason for the parents' decision was to free the countess to accompany her husband on some of his missions. In August 1746 another daughter was born, but only survived for five days.

Donatien was sent to the home of his paternal grandmother in Avignon. She was a kind old woman who had mothered ten children, four of her daughters having taken holy orders. The boy stayed there only for about a year and a half, when he was sent to live with another relative, a forty-year-old uncle who, if not exactly a role-model for him, undoubtedly opened his eyes to an alternative view of morality. This was his father's younger brother, the Abbé Paul Aldonse de Sade d'Ébreuil, who fulfilled his priestly duties at the Cistercian monastery at Saint-Léger d'Ébreuil, near Limoges, but entertained mistresses at his chateau at Saumane. There was also much local gossip about his relationships with the proprietress of a tavern who was notorious as a prostitute, and with a maid by the name of Marie Curt. Interestingly, while the count's finances declined drastically over the years, the abbé had a sizeable income. He had been a benefice at the monastery and also received a generous pension from the Archbishop of Arles.

The sight of his new home must have been daunting to the young Donatien: the Château de Saumane had all the appearance of a strongly fortified castle, with walls six feet thick, openings for cannons, a moat, drawbridge and portcullis. However, the abbé had had the interior well decorated, creating also a studio, where he could pursue his interests in natural history, and an extensive orangery.



Most influential on the development of his young nephew proved to be his well-stocked library. Apart from presenting the boy with an example of how to live a double life, the abbé thus also awoke in him a taste for culture.

The library contained the major works of French literature by authors such as Racine, Molière, Boileau, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot, as well as philosophical works by Hobbes, Locke, Bayle and Montesquieu, etc. There were also hidden corners where the abbé concealed his collection of dubious works on sexual aberrations. While it cannot be proved beyond doubt, it is difficult to imagine that such an inquisitive child as Donatien would not eventually have found a volume with the intriguing title *History of the Flagellants, in which the good and bad uses of flagellation among Christians are pointed out. Translated from the Latin by Abbé B\*\*\** (Amsterdam, 1701), in which the author apparently cites several cases in which flagellation was known to have incited sexual desire.<sup>2</sup>

A major research interest of the abbé was the history of his own family. He was especially interested in proving the validity of the local legend that Petrarch's Laura had been a member, by marriage, of the de Sade family. He became convinced that she had been the daughter of one Audibert de Noves and Dame Ermessende, and that she became the wife of Hugues de Sade, on 16th January 1325. It has proved difficult to substantiate his claim, but the legend persists.

The count decided to employ a private tutor for his son. The man recommended to him was a 29-year-old cleric from the diocese of Geneva, the Abbé Jacques-François Amblet, originally from Annecy. He had not yet been ordained and so was free to take such a post. Donatien's uncle sent back favourable reports of the tutor to the count, indicating that he seemed to be an intelligent and sensitive teacher. It seems likely that Amblet provided the boy with the warmth and friendship that was lacking in his relationships with his family.

The only other companionship the boy found was with the peasant children of the village and on the nearby farms, with only occasional contact with the children of merchants, lawyers and the like. In this way he acquired a liking for the Provençal dialect. He did however establish one friendship that was to last: with a boy called Gaspard François Xavier Gaufridy, who was the son of a businessman from Annecy with responsibility for managing the count's properties. They often went on long walks together and sometimes stayed with Donatien's grandmother at Lacoste.

In the autumn of 1750, when Donatien was eleven years old, the count decided that it was time to bring the boy back to Paris and put him in a Jesuit school, the Collège Louis-le-Grand, in the rue Saint-Jacques. The Jesuit method of education at the time involved a combination of manifest kindness with a strict regime of punishment for any child who infringed the rules. Beating with the birch on a carefully specified extent of exposed body was the norm. Many biographers have attempted to trace de Sade's fascination with whipping and anal eroticism at least in part to the corporal punishment he endured in school, but it must be stressed that such punishment was the norm in most schools and was often enforced in more extreme forms. In de Sade's case there must have been latent tendencies that such treatment reinforced.

Although it is likely that Donatien stayed occasionally in the nearby Hôtel de Condé, he undoubtedly shared the same routine as the boarders for the most part. The daily routine of the school was not particularly strict when compared with other similar institutions, though it might appear so by modern standards. It involved getting up at 5.30 a.m., attending prayers at 6 a.m., and studying the Bible for an hour and a half before breakfast. The morning study period started at 8.15 a.m., with a break for mass at 10.30 a.m. There was then a period of private study until the lunch break, followed by a period of recreation. The afternoon study session started at 1.15 p.m. and continued until 4.30 p.m., when there was another break. Then study continued from 5 p.m. until 7.15 p.m. After prayers at 8.45 p.m., the

boys had to go to bed at 9 p.m. Religious education took up only a small part of the day, being restricted mainly to the morning mass and prayers.

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The Jesuits were more generous than many educational establishments when it came to the role of entertainment in the boys' lives. As well as the conventional curriculum of Latin, Greek and rhetoric they arranged for the boys to take part in theatrical activities and other kinds of performances. Classical French tragedies would be studied and then performed, and in the intervals there would be pastoral sequences with music and dancing. There are even records of the occasional performances of operas and oratorios and many more sober versions of biblical stories and the lives of the saints. In addition to using works by respected authors, the Jesuit fathers often wrote works themselves especially for such occasions. The performances were not just behind closed doors, but were usually attended by the pupils' parents and other relatives, and also invited lords and ladies of the nobility. Extant engravings show that the stage sets were often elaborate, utilising complex machinery, with convincing special effects. Performances were held outdoors in amphitheatres in the summer and in a special indoor theatre in the winter. It cannot be said with certainty that de Sade took part in any of the performances, but undoubtedly he attended most that took place during his stay at the school. It has been estimated that during his stay, at least fifteen plays and ballets were put on (from August 1750 until sometime in 1753) many with impressive sets and scenery.<sup>3</sup> An interest in writing, directing and acting in plays stayed with him throughout his life, and we can reasonably suppose that the experience of the school productions awakened this enthusiasm.

De Sade's first known close relationship with a woman dates from his time at the Jesuit school. In late August or early September, at the end of every school year, Donatien would stay with one of his father's former mistresses, the widowed Comtesse de Raimond, whose husband had been Governor of Ingolstadt. The countess, born Marie de Bède de Blaye de Montrozier, lived in the Château de Longeville, near Fismes in Champagne. Though her affair with Donatien's father had long been over they maintained a close relationship, and she soon became enamoured of his charming son, whom she frequently referred to in letters as 'my son' or 'our child'. She now lived throughout the year at Longeville with her mother and daughter, but maintained contacts with the most respected members of local society, including leading members of the church and the nobility. Many charming young unmarried women were also among her visitors, and in the winter months she held a sort of regular *soirée*, at which the latest works of philosophy would be discussed and entertainment provided in the form of music and poetry. A regular participant was a certain Mme De Vernouillet, who quickly won the affections of the thirteen-year-old Donatien. She obviously enjoyed the effect she was having on him. In a letter to the Comte de Sade in September 1753, the Comtesse de Raimond reported that his son was truly in love with the woman and seemed to be experiencing strong affections that were unfamiliar and surprising to him and were driving him wild with desire.<sup>4</sup>

Yet another habituée of the countess's *soirées* who was captivated by the young Donatien was Mme de Saint-Germain, who also referred to him as her son and invited him to her home. She became so enamoured of him that she refused to let him return to his father and wrote the count a long begging letter, in which she claimed that she was able to shower upon him the attention that would not be available to him in Paris, and that she had already taught him many things in the short time that he had been with her.<sup>5</sup>

De Sade was to remember these women and their motherly love with affection throughout his life. In a letter from his prison in Vincennes in 1784 he was to write to his wife of Mme de Saint-Germain as the one woman in the world, after his wife, whom he had truly loved. He felt he owed her as much as any man can owe to his real mother.<sup>6</sup>

The count was not at all dismayed by his son's amorous liaisons and positively encouraged them. He even rented some rooms for him not far from the Hôtel de Condé, where Donatien could entertain his lady friends when they were in Paris. With his growing financial difficulties the count was also undoubtedly hoping that his son's charms would eventually attract a woman endowed with considerable wealth.

Near the end of the school year in 1754, when Donatien was just fourteen, his life took a sudden turn that was to thrust him rapidly into manhood and enable him to discover the true nature of his sexual appetites. His father removed him from the school and put him into a military training establishment which he was also attached directly to a regiment. At that time it was not unusual for children as young as twelve to be put into regiments. The count obtained a place for his son in the *École préparatoire de cavalerie*, founded in 1741, and attached to the light cavalry regiment of the King's Guard. It was a very aristocratic regiment and posts in it were highly sought after. The count had used his connections and pulled strings to ensure his son's acceptance. He also had to provide a certificate confirming at least four generations of nobility in his family, as well as pay 3,000 livres<sup>7</sup> for the honour. After a twenty-month period of training Donatien was appointed sub-lieutenant on 14th December 1755. He did not receive any wages but was now able to wear an impressive blue uniform. After a further thirteen months he was promoted to the rank of cornet, with responsibility for carrying the regimental flag, in the *Brigade de l'André* of the Comte de Provence's Carbine Regiment.

War was brewing at this time in Europe, with France, Austria and Russia joining together in a coalition against England and Frederick II of Sweden. Fighting broke out in June 1756, sparking off the Seven Years War. De Sade had his first experience of fighting under enemy fire under the command of the veteran *Maréchal de Richelieu*. According to official reports of the battles de Sade acquitted himself well. By 1757 he had been transferred to the *Brigade Malvoisin* of the Carbine Regiment, and in April 1759 he was nominated for the captaincy of a cavalry regiment that had become available. He was now in his nineteenth year with an income of ten thousand livres. In the same month he wrote to the Abbé Amblet of his indulgences in pleasure seeking. The abbé was staying with his father at the time and Donatien must have known that the news would be passed on. The letter's tone made it clear that the author had not changed his ways, and he stressed that his first thought on rising from his bed every morning was how he might pursue more pleasure that day. The count also received a letter from a companion of his son, one M. de Castéra, who commented on his violent passions. The companion promised to prevent him from misbehaving with German girls and spending too much money on gambling. These were hardly words to reassure the count.

By this time Donatien's mother had retired to a Carmelite convent on the *rue d'Enfer*. Whatever the reasons for her final decision, her relationship with the count had been deteriorating over many years and with the gradual loss of their wealth she had long been unable to live the life of luxury that she had been used to. The count's mistress, Mlle de Charolais, had died after a long illness in 1758, and, finding himself very lonely, he decided to retire to his estate near Avignon. Here he hoped to put his financial affairs in a degree of order, so that he might give some attention to finding a wife for his son. This seemed to be the only sure way of taming Donatien's passions and gaining some guiding hand in his development. The ideal young woman would have to be both noble and wealthy, but he also needed to make his son's prospects more promising if he was to make such a catch. He asked the king to let him resign his own appointment as lieutenant-general of Bresse, Bugey, Valromey, and Gex in favour of his son. In March 1760, the king granted his request, but reduced the stipend for the post from 80,000 to 60,000 livres. The count was not happy with this outcome, but the king would not change his mind.

As well as making direct contact himself with the families of potential partners, the count employed marriage brokers who mediated for him. Several of the attempts progressed as far as detailed negotiations with parents, one with a certain Mlle de Bassompierre being rather abruptly broken off when the young lady in question was offered to another man. In all likelihood the family had been informed of Donatien's reputation. The count realised that he would have to make the prospect of marriage with his son more financially attractive. In the spring of 1761 he attempted to raise enough money to purchase a standard-bearer's post for his son. He also sent petitions to the Duc de Choiseul to try to obtain the post of colonel for him. Prince Louis-Joseph de Condé was also approached in the hope that his son might be taken on as an aide-de-camp. But all was to no avail. Although Donatien had not yet become involved in any truly outrageous scandals, his reputation and also his father's record discouraged most persons of note and nobility from becoming associated with the name of de Sade. Meanwhile Donatien had managed to find a woman himself whom he wished to marry.

While in his garrison in the town of Hesdin in the Pas-de-Calais in the summer of 1762, he met a woman ten years older than himself. He was smitten and wanted to marry her. Her name has not been recorded, but she is known to have come from a well-respected family, and Donatien wrote to his father to ask his permission for the marriage. The count was naturally put out by his son's wilful behaviour, but the colonel of Donatien's regiment, the Duc de Cossé, was soon able to report to his father that he had dissuaded the young man from this unsuitable match.

By February 1763 the Seven Years War was over and the Duc de Choiseul, who was then minister of war, decided on a severe reduction of troop numbers in all major regiments. The dismissed officers did not lose their ranks but were given only paltry pensions of 600 livres. The count now found himself with a huge debt and a son without a military post and no hope of obtaining a new one. The situation had deleterious effects on his already deteriorating health. None of this seriously concerned Donatien, who even before being demobilised in March 1763 had been living it up in Paris, at balls, theatres and brothels, for over a month. However, through an acquaintance, the count heard of what might be a very suitable match for his son. The young lady was the daughter of Claude-René Montreuil, the presiding judge ('président' in French) at the Cour des Aides. The président's wife, Marie-Madeleine, was the daughter of Antoine Masson de Plissay, who among other posts held that of royal counsellor. The judge's wife was a forceful and determined woman known to all simply as 'La Présidente'. Their eldest daughter was Renée-Pélagie, eighteen months younger than Donatien. Although the parents could not offer an imposing dowry, they did have many influential connections in the royal court. This fact determined the count to reject another marriage proposal concerning one Mlle de Cambis, of a respectable family of Florentine bankers who had settled in Avignon. While the count was conducting negotiations with the Montreuils, however, Donatien had found himself yet another woman he preferred to marry.

The young woman in question was one Mlle Laure-Victoire de Lauris, a member of a Provençal noble family, dating back to the Middle Ages. She was twenty-two years old, and – this was clearly an important factor – she was extremely beautiful. All looked very promising, especially as her father, the Marquis de Lauris, gave his consent. When the young lady heard, however, that negotiations were already taking place to acquire another spouse for Donatien, she was reluctant to interpose her own interests. The count managed in the meantime to secure the agreement of the Montreuils and to finalise arrangements. The marriage was to go ahead in Paris, but Donatien was still determined to marry Laure-Victoire. The count had brought his son back to Provence, hoping that distance would cool his ardour. Donatien's beloved refused to follow him there, and he finally flew into a rage. At some point around this time Donatien revealed to his father that he had contracted a venereal disease. He was treating it with mercury, which was the only known remedy at that time. His father was determined to cover it up



at all costs: one word to the Montreuil and the whole wedding would be off. He attempted to explain away as a fever.

In a letter to Laure-Victoire on 6th April 1763, which may or may not have been sent, Donatien's feelings veer between anger, dismissing her as a monster, and abject apology. It seems that she had also found someone else whom she loved more. Donatien also seems to imply that it was she who had given him the disease, though it is most likely that he acquired it through sleeping with prostitutes as a soldier.<sup>8</sup> Finally he had little option but to acquiesce to his father's wishes. It obviously became difficult to back out of the agreement when the king himself agreed to give his approval to the marriage – a royal honour – in a ceremony to take place in Versailles. Nevertheless Donatien managed to stay away from Paris in Avignon and be absent from the ceremony. This was a definite decision on his part, due to his persistent reluctance to enter the marriage arranged by his father, and to his desire to save the relationship with Laure-Victoire. The marriage was approved without him.

On 1st May 1763 both families appeared at Versailles, all the necessary members being present except Donatien. Many illustrious persons signed the document. Apart from the king himself, these included the dauphin and dauphine, the Duc de Berry and various other counts and princes. Shortly after the event the Montreuil learned the truth about Donatien's illness, but by now 'La Présidente' had become determined to secure the joining of the two families. There were two other ceremonies to be conducted: signing the actual marriage contract in the presence of a lawyer, which had been arranged for 15th May, and the religious ceremony on 17th May. There was some anxiety as to whether Donatien would be absent from these ceremonies as well. He finally made it, however, and both families met together in the Montreuil's Paris house on Sunday 15th May, and the contracts were signed in the presence of two notaries.

The financial terms agreed between the two parties are of some interest and played an important role in Donatien's subsequent behaviour. It was common at that time to draw up marriage contracts of considerable complexity, to guarantee the fulfilment of the financial expectations of both parties. The main terms were as follows: Renée-Pélagie received a dowry to the value of 300,000 livres, but most of this was in the form of future inheritance with only a little as cash; Donatien, apart from his back-dated annual revenue from his post of lieutenant-general, received all of the count's estates in Provence together with their revenue, though the count reserved the right to do as he wished with a portion of his lands to the value of 30,000 livres. There was one clause that gave the Montreuil considerable influence over their son-in-law: they agreed to provide accommodation, together with the services of two servants, for the young couple for the first five years of their marriage in either their Paris house or their home, the Château Echauffour, in Normandy. If circumstances prevented this, they would allow them a living allowance of 2,000 livres per annum. After five years they would provide 10,000 livres to enable the couple to establish their own independent home. Donatien would thus be financially dependent on his parents-in-law, and thereby in the hands of the ruthless Présidente'.

Immediately after the marriage the married couple stayed in the Paris home of the Montreuil. At first matters boded well for Donatien and his mother-in-law. She even took his side against his father. In fact he had won her over with his charms, which may account partly for the severity of her subsequent bitterness. The count was living in the rue Basse-du-Rempart, not far away from his son, though Donatien refused to visit him. At this time La Présidente wrote to the Abbé de Sade that she and her husband were perfectly happy with the behaviour of their son-in-law. She believed that marriage was helping him to settle down, as indeed everybody had been hoping. The count knew his son only too well, however. Having at last secured a suitable match for him with a distinguished family, the count was

anxious that the marquis did not ruin everything by maintaining his life as a libertine. This was to be a continuing source of conflict between them. He wrote to his brother that his son was as wild as ever and still constantly on the lookout for pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Donatien was also particularly angered by the fact that his father had claimed some income due from his post as lieutenantgeneral for himself, which was clearly a breach of the marriage contract. Mme de Montreuil leaped to his defence over the issue. Her pleading letters failed, however, to persuade the count that his son had had any real change of heart.

For the first four months after the wedding the relationship between the young couple seemed, to all outward appearances, to be as satisfactory as could be wished. They seemed to be as affectionate and loving as any young couple. There is evidence, however, that Donatien was making certain sexual demands of his wife, to which she seems finally to have acquiesced; at least, there is no evidence of her having made any strong protest against his demands. It is likely that, like many wives of that period, she ceded the right of dominance to her husband. A letter from Donatien to Renée-Pélagie, written in a later period (June 1783), makes it irrefutably clear that Donatien had indulged in anal intercourse with his wife, probably with some frequency. He evokes the experience, which is obviously familiar to her, and writes of masturbating while thinking of her buttocks.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear, however, that no matter how much his wife might attempt to please him, exclusive marital sex did not satisfy Donatien. Barely a month after his wedding he was arranging some private accommodation where he could conveniently return to his life of debauchery: he rented a small house on Paris' rue Mouffetard, and a furnished one in Arcueil in the southern suburbs of Paris, as well as obtaining access to an apartment in Versailles.

He managed to maintain his double life successfully for several months and might have continued to do so, if he had not been driven to indulge in excesses which were to single him out as very much more than the average libertine of his age. Before the end of October, a scandal of shocking proportions was to occur, resulting in de Sade's arrest and imprisonment in the fortress of Vincennes.



## Dangerous Liaisons 1763–71

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In early autumn 1763, the Marquis de Sade, now aged twenty-three, was staying with his wife and mother-in-law in the Château d'Echauffour. On 15th October he set off for Paris, saying that he intended to go eventually to Fontainebleau to pay his respects to the king and undertake other duties. Then he would go on to Dijon, where he would take up his official appointment as lieutenant-general. In Paris he stayed with M. de Montreuil, but he had things other than official duties on his mind. For over three weeks he had been planning certain entertainments for himself.

In late September a twenty-year-old working-class girl, named Jeanne Testard, a fan-maker by profession, had been approached by a woman known as du Rameau, a procuress, and offered forty-eight livres to provide special services to a gentleman whose identity would not be revealed to her. She agreed. The young woman was later to provide a detailed account of exactly what happened to her with the gentleman in question on the night of Tuesday 18th October. She was picked up by a carriage and taken eventually into the courtyard of a building. The gentleman, accompanied by his servant, led her up to the second floor and took her into a bedroom. He then sent the servant back downstairs and bolted the door. He asked her if she believed in God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary, and when she replied that she did, he immediately uttered the most horrible blasphemies. He claimed to have proved that God did not exist, and to demonstrate his utter disrespect for religious symbols he masturbated into a holy chalice, uttering insults against Jesus and the Virgin Mary. He also told the young woman that he had been with another woman, with whom he had sexual intercourse after putting two hosts – as used in holy Communion – into her vagina, while shouting out challenges to God to avenge his actions.

He then took Jeanne into a neighbouring room, where she saw various objects that frightened her. Hanging about the room were four whips apparently made from birch and five others made from various other materials, including iron and brass. There were also ivory figures of Christ on the walls and engravings of Christ and the Virgin Mary, together with various obscene images. The gentleman asked her to whip him, using the whip made of iron filaments, which he planned to heat until they were red-hot. Then she was to choose one of the whips with which he would beat her. She refused, however. He then took two of the crucifixes, trampled on one and masturbated with the other. After this he ordered her to do the same, and when she continued to refuse to comply with his demands, he threatened her with pistols and his sword. She finally did as she was bid and uttered blasphemous phrases as instructed by him. But his attempts to make her take an enema and pollute the crucifix failed. Throughout the night he read blasphemous poetry to her. Before she left he proposed that she allow him to sodomise her. He made her promise to return the following Sunday, when they would attend Holy Communion together, steal two of the hosts, burn one and place the other inside her before he entered her. Before she left him on that first occasion he made her swear an oath not to tell a soul of what had transpired between them.

Jeanne Testard, however, immediately tried to find some high police officials in order to report her experiences. The commissioner of the Châtelet eventually took down her statement. It was nine or ten days, though, before the police had gathered enough evidence, from statements made by prostitutes with whom the same gentleman had consorted, to establish that the culprit was the Marquis de Sade. It was at this point that de Sade probably made the acquaintance for the first time of Inspector Louis Marais, who was to have his every move under surveillance for many years to come. Marais took him under guard to Fontainebleau, where he presented him to one M. de Saint-Florentin, a minister in the royal

household. The case was then put before King Louis XV himself, who ordered de Sade to be locked up in the fortress at Vincennes until such time as his family agreed to take over the expenses of his incarceration, a common practice at the time, where wealthy families were concerned. Marais took him to the prison on 29th October 1763.

It must be stressed that at this time it was considered a greater crime to have committed blasphemy and sacrilege than to have conducted violent sexual acts that might be considered perverse. For crimes against religion de Sade could have been executed, had he not been an aristocrat.

Scarcely had he been put in his dungeon when the marquis began to feign remorse and attempted to plead his way out. He wrote first to, among others, the governor of Vincennes, begging him to pass on a letter to Mme de Montreuil and to allow his wife to visit him. He also asked that his personal servant be allowed to visit him. When these requests were ignored he wrote for the second time to the lieutenant general of police, M. de Sartine, begging for the same favours to be granted. In this letter he also feigned repentance and requested that a priest be sent to him, to enable him to regain his respect for the divine.<sup>11</sup>

The minister of the royal household, M. de Saint-Florentin, who had presented de Sade's case to the king, agreed to allow him a father confessor but refused permission for his servant to attend him. As soon as his father the count heard of his son's arrest he hurried to Fontainebleau to beg the king for pardon. He must have pleaded his son's case convincingly because the king ordered the young marquis to be released on 13th November. But he was not free to do as he pleased, as it was also stipulated that he be confined to the Château d'Echauffour under the close supervision of Inspector Marais.

Meanwhile, Renée-Pélagie was approaching the full term of a pregnancy: the child (whose sex has not been traced) survived only a few days.

The king allowed de Sade to return to Paris on 15th April and to stay there for three months, though in fact de Sade did not go there until late June or early July. This was the first stage in the process of suspending his sentence completely. He used his new-found freedom to indulge his passion for the theatre. At the theatre in his wife's uncle's house, in Evry, just outside Paris, he staged performances of his recent theatrical successes. He acted in many of them along with members of his wife's family and various family friends.

In June, before going to Paris, he was allowed to go to Dijon to be formally installed as lieutenant general of Bresse, Bugey, Valromey, and Gex. While there he spent some time researching in the archives of the Carthusian monastery. This is one of the earliest indications of his serious interest in writing an history.

When he returned to Paris de Sade could no longer resist the temptations of the flesh. Inspector Marais' reports from this period reveal that he spent great sums of money on many women, night after night. On 15th July 1764 he watched a performance at the Comédie-Italienne, and afterwards he had him-self introduced to Mlle Colet, a twenty-year-old actress. The next day he sent his servant with a message for her, begging passionately for an assignation. The lady in question was by no means new to the game of handling suitors to her own advantage: she had been kept by many wealthy men before de Sade came on the scene, and had learned how to get the most favourable deal before handing out her favours. At first she rejected de Sade, but he persisted. She was not one to yield quickly and kept him waiting for several months before agreeing to a meeting. Fortunately for de Sade, the royal order which confined him to Echauffour was rescinded in September 1764, so that he was free to follow his amorous pursuits. The precise details of his wooing of Mlle Collet are not known, but by early December she had become his mistress, and, though she was still living with the Marquis de Lignerac, de Sade was paying her a monthly income for her favours, though this commitment did not stop him from seeking the

company of prostitutes, too. By 21st December the Marquis de Lignerac had left Mlle Colet to de Sade ~~apart from occasional visits, which meant that de Sade became responsible for her entire upkeep.~~ This also entailed the risk of the relationship becoming public knowledge, which strained Mme de Montreuil's patience. Mlle Colet had in the meantime acquired another far richer lover who showered her with expensive gifts, the duc de Fronsac. De Sade could not compete and allowed his mother-in-law to persuade him to give her up. He was not long in seeking another actress with the same company, a Mlle Beaupré, who conducted her affairs with a business acumen comparable to that of Mlle Colet. By April 1765 there is evidence in Marais' reports that de Sade had started an affair with one of the most renowned courtesans of the time, Mlle Beauvoisin, also an actress and twenty-two years old.

De Sade, now aged twenty-four, returned temporarily to Echauffour but left again on 9th May – on his way, it was assumed, to Avignon. He never arrived there but turned up instead at his estate of Lacoste in the company of Mlle Beauvoisin. Very few of the local people knew what his wife looked like and he was able to pass Mlle Beauvoisin off as her. He had managed completely to fool Inspector Marais, who was convinced that the woman had gone into hiding at the home of another marquis, to cover up her pregnancy. De Sade proceeded to indulge himself in his thespian pursuits, converting one large room in the chateau into a theatre. He produced and acted in more of the plays he liked, and organised parties and other social events, to which he invited the local nobility. Though to intimates of the family his uncle, the abbé, decried his nephew's behaviour, he nevertheless spent a week at Lacoste and took part in all the events organised by de Sade.

In August 1765 he arranged another subterfuge to mislead his in-laws. His wife and mother-in-law were staying at Echauffour. On 20th August de Sade's valet, Teissier, arrived at the rue Neuve-du-Luxembourg, saying that his master would not be arriving for about a week and that he had been sent on ahead with the luggage. In fact de Sade had gone that same day, in disguise, to Mlle Beauvoisin's apartment. But he had not fooled Mme de Montreuil, who guessed at once what he was up to.

De Sade was in dire financial straits: he had left about 4,500 livres in debts behind him in Provence. Remarkably, his mistress came immediately to his aid. She sold her jewels and added some more cash, making a total amount of 10,000 livres, which she gave to him. There was a condition however: de Sade arranged for an annuity, in perpetuity, of 500 livres to be paid to her. By the end of the month he had decided to inform his wife and mother-in-law that he would not be able to join them in Normandy. Among other tasks he needed, he claimed, to find more money to settle his debts in Provence. His mother-in-law finally agreed to acquire the extra money for him by November, but only on the condition that he return to his wife and herself in Echauffour at once. Finally de Sade acceded to her demands, returning to Echauffour on 15th September, to be welcomed with open arms by Renée-Pélagie, whom her mother had kept in complete ignorance of her husband's activities.

The atmosphere in the family was remarkably relaxed for some time and the married couple were obviously able to indulge in considerable intimacy, for in October she managed to conceive a child. But at the beginning of November de Sade learned that Mlle Beauvoisin had in all likelihood suffered a miscarriage, and despite his mother-in-law's protestations, he hurried off to be with her. By the middle of December she was fully recovered, so much so that she immediately resumed her pursuit of rich suitors. So successful was she that she decided to end her relationship with de Sade on 3rd January 1766. He immediately consoled himself in the arms of a Mlle Dorville, who was not such a drain on his finances, and sent off an abusive letter to Mlle Beauvoisin, in which he expressed the pleasure he felt at the prospect of being fifty leagues away from her by the following day, and assured her that her image would be promptly erased from his heart.<sup>12</sup>

It does not appear that he fled her quite so soon, but by early May he did set off for Avignon, with

the aim of inspecting the progress being made in the building projects at Lacoste. It is known that he spent some time en route with an unidentified woman in Melun, but only Mme de Montreuil and de Sade's uncle seem to have been aware of this affair. While de Sade was concerned about the new apartment being created for his wife and various improvements to the gardens, it was the work on the theatre that interested him most. His plans were ambitious: in addition to the room he had converted into a theatre in the spring of 1765, he wanted to add several other rooms, covering altogether an area more than a thousand square feet and providing a view of the terrace. The stage itself was to be 30 square feet.

After spending several more days with his uncle he returned to Paris, where he plunged into his libertine life as vigorously as ever. There are no records of his indulging again in any extremely violent practices at this time, but it may be that he had learned how to cover his tracks more successfully.

In January 1767, an event occurred that obviously shocked the young marquis more than he would have expected: his father died. The count had been suffering for some time from an illness that remains a mystery: he became bedridden after losing the use of his legs. He had been in a relatively stable condition for about a month, being able to get up and move around for short periods every day. But in the afternoon of Saturday 24th January, just before his sixty-fifth birthday, he died in the small house where he was living in Versailles. The conditions of his will were not to provide any immediate benefits to his son. His apartment and various valuables went to his wife, and only after the deaths of both his mother and his own wife would his son receive any of this. The count increased the pensions to his brother Richard Jean-Louis, and to his sisters. The abbé received his library and the furniture at Saumane. Agathe de Sade would only inherit this after his uncle's death. He also rewarded his valet, coachman and other servants for their services. De Sade received no increase in the general allowance made to him on the occasion of his marriage. He also had to deal with the disastrous financial circumstances of the count's various estates.

Though he was entitled to do so at his father's death, de Sade rarely made use of the title 'count', and had little interest in the day-to-day running of the estates. Initially, in any case, other matters distracted him. In April he was promoted to the rank of captain of his cavalry regiment and ordered to report immediately to his company. But he soon obtained special leave from his colonel and on 20th April he left Paris for Lyons, where he indulged in yet another of his subterfuges, pretending to be meeting with his uncle, the abbé, but in reality resuming his affair with Mlle Beauvoisin. It was a short-lived reunion however, for he soon set off for Saumane and was in Lacoste by 15th June. He had decided that he would require the local community to pay him homage as their new lord with the full traditional ceremony. Maurice Lever has pointed out in his biography that this is very much at odds with his later commitment to the cause of the French Revolution, and leads one to suspect his motives in the latter case.<sup>13</sup> The ceremony of swearing allegiance to one's lord had been virtually obsolete for about a century in its complex original form. It had long been replaced by the simple signing of a legal document. Apart from his obvious pleasure in playing the role of lord (perhaps it was the theatricality of it all that he enjoyed most), de Sade kept himself generally aloof from all matters pertaining to estate management. He arranged for a lawyer, Elzéar Fage, to collect the dues and supervise the legal aspects of running the estates. He also showed no interest whatsoever in the lives and problems of the local villagers.

He managed to wait until 27th August when his son, later to be christened Louis-Marie, was born but promptly returned to Paris a few days later. By October Inspector Marais was reporting that he was busy trying to persuade another young performer, Mlle Rivière, to stay with him at his house at Arcueil when not on stage, with an inducement of twenty-five louis a month. She refused, but while continuing to pursue her he approached a procuress to acquire some girls for him, also with little success. It seems

that his reputation was now making many women wary of him.

~~De Sade was never one to be daunted by refusal. It is known that early in February 1768, he arranged for his valet to find four girls in the Saint-Antoine area of Paris and bring them to his home in Arcueil. Here he indulged himself in whipping them, and provided them with some consolation afterwards by inviting them to dinner. He further compensated each of them with a monetary reward. He gave a generous tip to his valet also for arranging the whole event.~~

Very much worse was to follow. On Easter Sunday, 3rd April 1768 – a day chosen very much because of its religious associations – a young woman came out of the church of the Petits-Pères and started to beg for money. A passer-by gave her a few coins. Then a distinguished looking man approached her and offered her considerably more if she would accompany him. While the money was tempting, she protested that she was not that sort of woman. She claimed later that the man then attempted to reassure her that he did not have such intentions as she imagined. He needed a housekeeper and he would pay her a regular salary and feed her. She finally consented. The man took her first to a room on the first floor of a house, where he then asked her if she was willing to go with him to his house in the country. As long as she could earn a living for herself, she said, it did not matter to her where she went. In due course the man took her to an unknown destination in a carriage. He promised her that she would suffer no harm and that he would treat her kindly. The gentleman was of course de Sade. The young woman was Rose Keller and was about thirty-six years old. She was born in Strasbourg and was a widow. Since her husband, an apprentice pastry-maker, had died, she had been trying in vain to obtain work as a cotton spinner for over a month.

In the meantime de Sade's servant Langlois had arrived in Arcueil ahead of his master with two prostitutes he had been ordered to bring. About an hour later, early in the afternoon, de Sade's carriage arrived just outside the village and he took the woman to a house on the rue de Lardenay. He led her into a large room upstairs and told her to wait there while he went in search of something to eat and drink. As he went out he locked her in. After inspecting the two prostitutes brought by his servant, he took Rose downstairs again into a small study. He then asked her to remove her clothes, and when she refused, saying that she had not gone there for that sort of thing, he became angry and, threatening to kill her and bury her, he left her alone. She started to undress. De Sade returned with his chest beneath his coat and a white cloth tied round his head. She was still wearing a shift and when she refused to take it off he suddenly tore it off her and pushed her into an adjoining room. Here he threw her face down on a bed. Reports differ on whether he tied her to the bed at this point. He put a pillow over her head to muffle any sounds she might make, and struck her with some kind of whip many times until she was bleeding. According to Rose Keller's statement he then made small wounds in her body with a knife and rubbed molten wax into them, but the evidence of the surgeon supports de Sade's assertion that this never happened. When she cried out he threatened again to kill her and bury her, but she begged him not to because she had not made her Easter confession yet, whereupon de Sade tried to force her to confess her sins to him. His beatings became more and more intense until he finally subsided, making strange noises, expressing a mixture of pain and pleasure. He then took her back into the study and told her to get dressed. He brought a kettle, a basin of water and a towel so that she could wash and dry herself. She left bloodstains on the towel and he told her to wash it. He then told her to rub some special liquid into the wounds to make them disappear, but it caused her great pain. De Sade then fetched some boiled beef, bread and wine and took her to the bedroom on the second floor, where he locked her in again, promising however to release her before the evening.

But Rose Keller decided not to wait upon his mercy. She opened a shutter with a knife, took two covers from the bed, and, tying them together, fixed them to the window, climbed down into the yard



ran to the wall and, scrambling up a trellis, managed to climb over and jump down onto the other side. ~~As she ran away the servant Langlois caught sight of her and tried to bribe her to return, but she was bent on escaping.~~ She met up with a village woman, Marguerite Sixdeniers, to whom she told all that had happened to her. Together with two other women she went into a courtyard, where the women treated her wounds with lavender water. They took her first to a tax official and then to the home of a notary and bailiff. As the bailiff was away, his wife received them, but was overcome with emotion when she heard details of what had happened. The head of the local constabulary was sent for. He took down her statement and arranged for her to be examined by a surgeon. The bailiff's wife asked one of her neighbours to let Rose sleep in their barn for the night. Two days later the bailiff's wife took her into her own home. De Sade meanwhile had left Arcueil and returned to Paris.

It soon came to Mme de Montreuil's notice that a young woman in Arcueil had accused her son-in-law of various forms of assault. She immediately asked the Abbé Amblet and a lawyer to try to find out if there was a way of settling the matter without going to court. Rose Keller was clearly determined to get as much as she could from this rich aristocratic family. She exaggerated the extent of her injuries, as will be explained shortly, and a process of haggling over the precise amount of compensation took place. An agreement was finally reached in the presence of a court official and various other witnesses. She was awarded 2,400 livres and a further 140 for medical treatment.

However, this was not the end of the matter for the Marquis. On the Friday after Easter Sunday a royal warrant was issued for de Sade's arrest. He was to be taken to the Château de Saumur and imprisoned there forthwith. This arrest was actually engineered by Mme de Montreuil to prevent her son-in-law from being put through the normal judicial system. She persuaded her husband to use his influence to obtain from the king what was known as a *lettre de cachet*. This was in effect a document that put him under royal arrest.

The *lettres de cachet* play such an important role in de Sade's fate, that it is important to understand their nature and function in French society at that time. They had a long history, dating back to the thirteenth century, and were originally letters signed by the king, countersigned by one of his ministers and closed with the royal seal or *cachet*. They contained orders issued by the king which overrode the laws of the land and were indeed often contrary to them. Over time the king himself became less and less directly involved in their issuance, and they were signed by a secretary of state with the imprint of the king's privy seal. They were used to silence political adversaries, punish noblemen without the need for a trial, and generally remove from society people who had proved to be a major embarrassment in some way. By the time Mme de Montreuil decided to apply for a *lettre de cachet* the process had become arbitrary and open to abuse.

What de Sade had done was not so exceptional at that time. Many a wealthy young lord would indulge himself brutally and selfishly in his pleasures. What was exceptional was the high profile given to this case. It was brought before one of the highest courts of the land. It is likely that de Sade was being used as a scapegoat to appease public opinion, which had been turning against the practice of letting young libertines off lightly if they came from a noble family.

The Montreuil family did their best to remove all incriminating evidence, arranging for the Abbé Amblet to visit the house in Arcueil and collect various whips, ropes and other items. They also managed to gain permission for de Sade to travel to Saumur in the company of the Abbé Amblet rather than the police.

It must be said that though the investigation was thorough it is difficult to establish the true facts of the case. There are many points on which Rose Keller's version of events is at odds with de Sade's and indeed with the conclusions of the surgeon. Significantly, she claimed that he had poured white and red wax into her wounds, but there were traces only of white wax, which it was indeed common to use as



salve. Maurice Lever analyses the contradictions convincingly and at length in his biography.<sup>14</sup>

After he had been at Saumur for less than two weeks, it was decided to transfer him to the fortress Pierre-Encize, near Lyons, and to ensure that no attempt at escape would be made he was to be accompanied by Inspector Marais. By early May the normal judicial courts condemned de Sade for failing to appear before them. He was summoned to appear within a week. Meanwhile the Montreuil did their best to obtain letters of annulment, a royal prerogative, which would grant a complete pardon for the crime and free the Marquis from all punishment. On 3rd June the letters of annulment finally arrived. The lieutenant-general of police was ordered to move de Sade from Pierre-Encize to the Conciergerie, where the letters were confirmed. After this de Sade was to return to the fortress. On 10th June he appeared in court where he gave his own version of the facts. He was then taken to the Grand'Chambre, the only place where the royal letters of annulment could be considered. The king's decision was approved and the prosecution was stopped. De Sade's only punishment was to be ordered to pay 100 livres in alms. He was still detained for several months however in Pierre-Encize, but was allowed a considerable number of freedoms. He was allowed, for example, to walk around the grounds and near the end of July his wife was given permission to visit him. Finally, on 16th November 1768, he was set free, on the direct orders of the king, on condition that he go to Lacoste and remain there. René Pélagie stayed with her husband for a few days in Lyons and then returned to Paris. The marquis showed no signs of having learned his lesson and promptly returned to his regular lifestyle of self-indulgence and pleasure-seeking, arranging frequent parties and theatrical performances. As ever he was also living well above his income, but was unwilling to provide his wife with sufficient financial support during her pregnancy.

He had been suffering for some time from various health problems, including haemorrhoids, and his wife was able to use this fact in pleading for him to be released from confinement and allowed to move closer to Paris. Royal permission was granted, on condition that he did indeed live a quiet life during his convalescence. He returned to his family in time for the birth of his second son, who was baptised Donatien-Claude-Armand. It seemed for a while that the marquis was calming down and enjoying domesticity, and his mother-in-law wondered whether he might not be ready to make his appearance again at court. She was advised, however, that his misdemeanours were still too fresh in the king's mind.

In the early autumn of 1769 de Sade suddenly decided he wanted to travel to Holland. It has not been possible to establish any clear motivation for this trip. Perhaps it was pure escapism. He spent just over a month travelling in the country and documented his experiences in the form of seven letters to an imaginary woman. He left Paris on the night of 19th September and the next day reached Valenciennes from where he went on to the border at Quiévrain. On 22nd September he arrived in Brussels, the appearance of which did not especially please him. After a week he had reached Antwerp, where he stayed only one night, finding the inhabitants not especially to his liking. He was, however, delighted with Rotterdam, especially with the canals, neat gardens, and general cleanliness of the city. Here he wrote his third letter on 2nd October, in which he also praised the liberal attitudes of the people and their religious tolerance. From here he travelled to Delft by canal and on to the Hague by the same means. Here he was rather critical of the military manoeuvres of the Prince of Orange's troops. On 7th October he travelled to Leyden, made a brief stop in Haarlem and arrived in Amsterdam on 9th October. Here he reported extensively on a visit to the theatre, which however disappointed him with its interior decorations and the quality of both play and performance. On 18th October he was writing of Utrecht which he found to be full of the idle rich, and on the 19th he set off back to Paris via Antwerp and Brussels.

De Sade seems to have spent the winter of 1769-70 mainly at various social events with his family and

in-laws. At the end of July 1770 he decided to try and rejoin his regiment, which was garrisoned at Fontenay-le-Comte. Somewhat anxious about how he would be received, he joined his unit on 1 August. Major de Malherbe, who was in command of the regiment in the absence of the Comte de Saignes, was immediately hostile to him. He refused to allow de Sade to carry out his duties as a captain and when de Sade protested he was arrested. De Sade contacted the Comte de Saignes, and it seems that the matter was settled in his favour, but no precise record remains of the event. He did at least stay on for a while with his regiment. In March 1771, he applied to the Ministry of War for an unsalaried position as cavalry colonel. Thanks no doubt to the support of the Prince de Condé his application was successful.

On 17th April there was a further addition to the family in the form of a baby daughter, Madeleine Laure, but de Sade was still in considerable financial straits. The Montreuil family were refusing him any additional help. With creditors breathing down his neck, he decided in June to sell his unsalaried post as colonel to the Comte d'Osmond. This was not sufficient however to settle his debts, and by the end of the month he was put in the debtors' prison at Fort-l'Évêque. This was no great disgrace at the time, as many of his fellow citizens spent time there on a temporary basis. He was probably there for no more than about two months, and eventually bought his way out on 9th September, by paying an advance of 3,000 livres of what he owed. He decided to escape for a while with his immediate family to Lacoste. Here a fateful encounter occurred: his young sister-in-law Anne-Prospère Cordier de Launay came to stay.

## Incest, Debauchery and Flight 1771–7

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Anne-Prospère Cordier de Launay, a younger sister of de Sade's wife, was the second of Mme de Montreuil's five children, and just under twenty years old when she visited the de Sades at Lacoste. She had been in poor health and Renée-Pélagie invited her to stay with them for a while to help her recover. She was a secular canoness at the Benedictine Priory in Alix near Lyons. Many young women of the nobility chose this lifestyle at the time. Such canonesses were provided with annuities by their parents and did not take religious vows. They were therefore free to return to the normal world eventually and marry. While staying at Lacoste Anne-Prospère helped her sister, did jobs for her brother-in-law and even acted in some of his plays. She was also an extremely beautiful young woman, and captivated both the ageing Abbé de Sade and his nephew. In fact the marquis found the combination of beauty, religiosity and chastity irresistible. It also seems that the young canoness was strongly attracted to her brother-in-law. Many commentators are convinced that they had a very affectionate and passionate love affair. Remarkably enough de Sade's wife seems not only to have been aware of the relationship but also to have tolerated it. Whatever the nature of the marquis' feelings for Anne-Prospère, it was not sufficient to induce him to change his ways. In fact he was soon to indulge himself in yet more scandalous doings.

On 23rd June 1772, he suddenly decided to leave Lacoste and travel to Marseilles. Ostensibly it was to collect money owed to him, but he obviously had it in mind to give vent to his more extreme sexual needs. He was accompanied by his valet, d'Armand, known as Latour. He expressed the intention of returning by the 29th for a theatrical production, but this was not to be.

In Marseilles he stayed at the Hôtel des Treize-Cantons and visited a nineteen-year-old prostitute called Jeanne Nicou several times. On Thursday 25th June he sent Latour off to the harbour area with instructions to find some especially young girls. Latour managed to persuade an eighteen-year-old girl by the name of Marianne Laverne to meet him the following night at eleven o'clock. She gave him her address but when the two men arrived there the next evening it appeared that she had gone on a escapade in a boat. Latour came back the next morning and found her at home. She agreed to meet the two men but Latour said that it had better not be at her lodging house, as his master required more privacy. She agreed to meet them at a house belonging to a Marie Borelly, known as Mariette. Latour had already arranged for two other women, Marianne Laugier and Rose Coste, to join them there.

According to the official report drawn up later, Latour was the first to arrive. He later went out to fetch his master. The marquis started proceedings with a guessing game: how many gold crowns did he have in his hand? The girl who gave the right answer would be the first to submit to his desires. It turned out to be Marianne. Everyone else except Latour was sent out of the room. De Sade made Latour and Marianne lie down on the bed. While beating the girl with one hand he masturbated Latour with the other. When he addressed Latour it was always as 'Monsieur le Marquis'. Latour was to address him at all times as 'Lafleur' as though he were the valet. Latour was then sent out of the room. Marianne was then offered some sweets made from aniseed coated with sugar which probably contained an aphrodisiac. He encouraged her to eat as many as possible. He then offered her twenty livres to let either Latour or himself perform anal intercourse with her. According to her statement later she refused to agree, but it is unlikely that she would have admitted to complying with his demand, as anal intercourse, whether active or passive, was punishable by death at the time. De Sade then produced a whip made of parchment with bent nails affixed to it and asked her to beat him with it. She started to do it but she could not bear it any longer. He arranged for her to beat him with a broom made from heather instead.

but she could not keep that up for long either. She eventually retired to the kitchen feeling sick.

~~Latour then brought Mariette into the room. De Sade made her take off her clothes and bend over the~~ end of the bed. He beat her with the broom and then made her beat him, marking the number of times with a knife on the mantelpiece. He then turned the girl over and penetrated her, while masturbating Latour, whom he also allowed to have anal intercourse with him.

It was then Rose's turn. She had to strip and lie down next to Latour. De Sade caressed her and penetrated her. Then he beat her with his right hand while masturbating Latour with his left. She was then paid twenty livres for letting Latour have anal intercourse with her.

When it was Mariette's turn she attempted to run out of the room on seeing the whip covered with blood on the bed. He recalled Marianne and offered the sweets to both girls. Marianne could not take any more and Mariette threw hers onto the floor. He told Mariette to watch while he had anal intercourse with Marianne and Latour had anal intercourse with him. Mariette tried to avert her eyes.

De Sade finally let all the young women go, paying them six livres each and promising them more if they would join him again that evening. When Latour went to collect them later in the afternoon they refused to go with him, and de Sade ordered him to go out and find another prostitute. He found a 20-year-old girl called Marguerite Coste. That evening de Sade visited her alone. He persuaded her to have some of his special sweets and expressed the desire to have anal intercourse with her, but she claimed her statement that she allowed him only to have intercourse with her in the conventional way.

Unfortunately for de Sade Marguerite became extremely ill, probably because of a reaction to the contents of the sweets: she had severe pains in her stomach and vomited a lot of black material, probably a mixture of blood and bile. Although poison was at first suspected a chemical analysis found no trace of any such agent. The matter was brought to the attention of the Lieutenant-General for Criminal Affairs, who interrogated the four prostitutes and seven other witnesses. He also studied carefully the medical reports on both Marguerite and Marianne, who had also had severe after-effects. He presented his evidence before the Royal Prosecutor, who, on 4th July 1772, ordered that both de Sade and Latour be arrested.

A few days before the actual warrant was issued, while de Sade was rehearsing some plays for performance at Lacoste, someone came to warn him that he was accused of poisoning a number of prostitutes. According to the informant, one of them had subsequently died. De Sade decided to act quickly: the only possible choice was flight. Both Latour and his sister-in-law went with him. His wife knew of their arrangements but stayed behind at Lacoste. It is likely that the group hid first somewhere in the region, in Mazan, Arles or with the abbé in Saumane. When the bailiff empowered to arrest de Sade and Latour, together with some constables, finally arrived at Lacoste, they were informed by de Sade's lawyer Fage that both men had left about a week previously and that he had heard nothing from them since. The bailiff then conducted a search of the entire property and left a summons for the two men to appear before the law within two weeks. They appointed de Sade's steward, Pierre Chauvin, as legal trustee of the property.

De Sade's sister-in-law returned to Lacoste after some time but was clearly very distraught and could offer no comfort to Renée-Pélagie, who eventually turned to their mother for assistance. If his mother-in-law had previously done her best to help her son-in-law, her attitude now changed dramatically. She would now do her best to pursue him and have him punished. The reason is not far to seek. She had been able to tolerate his comparatively minor misdemeanours, such as financial crises, sexual adventures with lower-class women and even his persistent lies, but when she discovered that he had had his wife with her favourite, beautiful and delicate second daughter, Anne-Prospère, her patience had been tried to its limits. It amounted to incest, at least legally, and if it became public knowledge, the family name

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