

NOBLE CANONESSES OF FRANCE

By JOAN EVANS

Englishmen are apt to take a peculiar pleasure in survivals of the Middle Ages of which the form remains but the original purpose is obscured, and are apt to claim such survivals as characteristically English. Up to the Revolution, however, France was richer than ever England has been in such delightful anachronisms, and knew how to adapt them to contemporary needs without changing their forms or unsettling their endowments. Many a woman of to-day might envy the position and prebend of a noble canoness, though she could not claim as distinguished a pedigree.

The origin of the institution of noble canonesses is obscure. A college of canons is a body of priests living in common under a Rule; the justification of their existence is their priesthood, by virtue of which they can serve the community. Women, who cannot be in Orders, cannot have this particular justification for living in common; but since the Augustinian Rule, adapted as it was to the pastoral and liturgical work of the canons, was gentler in its demands than the monastic Rule of St. Benedict, canonesses following it are mentioned at as early a date as the Council of Frankfurt in 794, and in 816 the Council of Aix-la-Chapelle drew up a rule of life for them.

The comparative gentleness of their Rule assured the canonesses an existence, but they played little part in the religious life of the middle ages, except in so far as they specialized in tending the sick—a service that offered a womanly parallel to the ministrations of the priest canons. By the sixteenth century canonesses were roughly divided into those, for the most part regular, who taught the young or tended the sick, and those, all secular, who merely led a common life.

The important houses of the second category were all colleges of noble canonesses. The very idea of

worldly nobility may seem alien to the ideal of monastic humility; but in fact feudalism and monasticism grew up *pari passu*. Nunneries in particular were often founded with a view to providing for the unmarried daughters of a noble house; and in Germany and Flanders nunneries reserved for those of noble birth were established at an early date. Papal authority, it is true, was never secured for the limitation of a nunnery to those of noble birth. Indeed the thirteenth-century Pope, Honorius IV, hearing that the house of Andenne had been founded by Guy Count of Flanders for women whose *preuves de noblesse* were to be sworn by seven noblemen, vetoed the statute as being a possible cause of perjury. Yet noble nunneries continued in being, and even the vetoed statute of Andenne reappeared when it was reformed in 1307.

Nearly all of these noble nunneries were in origin Benedictine, but with the decline of monasticism towards the end of the Middle Ages they tended to adopt the easier Augustinian Rule, and to become houses of noble canonesses. A normal requirement was sixteen quarters of nobility; at Maubeuge, however, this did not suffice, and no one was admitted who was not of such ancient family that the origin of its nobility was lost in antiquity.

By the sixteenth century such houses formed a definite category to themselves. Our Lady of the Capitol and St. Ursula at Cologne, Lindau and Buchau were the most important houses in Germany, Maubeuge and Nivelles in Flanders, and Remiremont in Lorraine. The abbesses of several of the German houses, notably Lindau, Buchau and Essen, ranked as Princesses of the Empire, and sent their representatives to the Diet. The abbess of Lindau, if she left the abbey to take part in any ceremony, had the naked sword of feudal dominion borne before her. Her Mayor of the Palace was so great a personage that a local law forbade him to come to Lindau with other than twelve horses. At Buchau only daughters of counts or barons could be received. At Nivelles in the Low Countries each of the forty-two canonesses (who had to prove four generations of nobility on either side) became at her reception into the community a

Chevalière of the Hapsburg Order of St. George. During the Gospel she held a naked sword, and at the end of the Mass a knight gave her the accolade. The sister house of Andenne had thirty canonesses but no abbess; the Count of Flanders was always the titular abbot. Several of these houses, some of which had been founded as 'double' monasteries with a small house of monks under the abbess to serve their altars and manage their estates, maintained the tradition by having a parallel house of men canons; at Cologne twelve canonesses had a subsidiary house of five canons and seven chaplains; and at Essen fifty-two canonesses were paralleled by twenty canons. Certain houses, too rich and too well protected for suppression or dissolution, even adopted the Protestant Reformation; Gandersheim, Quedlimburg, Gerenrode and Erfurt became and continued to be Protestant houses of noble canonesses, and the Abbesses of Erfurt, Quedlimburg and Gerenrode continued to bear the title of Princess of the Empire.

In France itself such houses were almost unknown up to the time of Louis XIV. There were houses of canonesses, for the most part regular; there were Benedictine monasteries of royal foundation, in which most of the nuns were of noble birth; but houses of noble canonesses on the German model were an alien institution. Yet even the restitutions exacted by the Peaces of Ryswick, Utrecht and Rastadt left France in possession of a considerable territory that had once been Imperial. The treaty of Vienna in 1738 gave Lorraine to Stanislas Leczinski, father-in-law of the French King, to whom it was to revert on his death, which took place in 1766. In consequence a number of houses of noble canonesses found themselves on French soil, and depending, in so far as they were feudal, upon the French Crown.

II

The most famous of the houses of noble canonesses in eighteenth-century France was that of Remiremont in the Vosges. It was founded at an early date as a nunnery on the left bank of the Moselle; its members claimed that this foundation took place as early as

570. It was reformed as a Benedictine house in Carolingian times, and again in 1290, when the Emperor Rudolf granted its abbess the title of Princess of the Empire in perpetuity. By the fifteenth century, and possibly earlier, the abbey was exacting proofs of noble birth from its novices. Somewhere about 1515 Remiremont, which had become more and more lax in its discipline, renounced the Benedictine Rule and became a house of secular canonesses. Its political history was always stormy; it lay on a frontier which was, and is, one of the natural battle-fields of Europe, and it was rich enough and powerful enough to withstand the authority of Pope, Emperor, King and Duke. In theory it owed obedience only to the Pope and the Emperor, but the Dukes of Lorraine were apt to claim rights over Remiremont, and the abbey invariably resisted the claim. In spite of such struggles Remiremont continued to grow in riches and honour and to demand increasingly strict proofs of noble birth from those who wished to enter it. Indeed, because of the marriage of Henry IV with Marie de Medicis, the daughters of Louis XIII and Louis XIV were only admitted to Remiremont by dispensation, for they had not the nine generations of noble birth on both sides of the family which the statutes demanded. In 1777 Louis XVI, with characteristic good nature and want of wisdom, tried to relax the rules in favour of Phoebe de Polignac, an ill-favoured lady of an exceedingly noble house who could not become a canoness because a *mésalliance* had caused a gap in her quarterings on the maternal side. The king endeavoured to make her noble by *brevet*, and gave her a letter under his seal to this effect.

' Louis par la grace de Dieu Roi de France et de Navarre, à tous ceux qui les présentes verront, salut. Voulant donner à notre aimée, la Damoiselle de Polignac, une marque de notre protection royale et de notre dilection . . . avons résolu de lui concéder et lui concédons par les présentes lettres qui seront signées de notre main et scellées de notre scel, les qualifications de Dame Comtesse Diane de Polignac; ensemble la prééminence d'icelui rang de Comtesse en toutes choses de

cérémonies ou plaidoiries sur toute autre Damoiselle noble non qualifiée, comme également pouvoir timbrer ses armoiries de la couronne qui appartient à ladite qualité de Comtesse, et ce mandons à nos justiciers, juges-d'armes et tous autres nos officiers à ce comis, pour qu'ils ne s'ingèrent d'y mettre contrôle, empêchement ni tout autre sorte d'impediment ; car tel est notre bon plaisir.'

This unheard-of action roused such a protest at Remiremont, when the lady presented herself as a candidate for admission, that the King had to tell her he would prefer to see her without the ribbon and cross of a canoness.

The uncanonical requirements of noble birth were the most strictly observed among the statutes of Remiremont. The seventeenth century witnessed some attempt at reform from within the community. The abbess was at this time Catherine de Lorraine, daughter of the Duke of Lorraine and Claude de Bourbon, and consequently niece of four Kings of France: Francis II, Charles IX, Henry III and Henry IV. She had been elected to her office in virtue of her noble birth, but proved to possess an equal nobility of character. She wished Remiremont to become once more Benedictine, and was herself prepared to take the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; but her canonesses were by no means willing to renounce their comforts and their freedom, and successfully blocked her attempts at reform. Political events added to her troubles, and Remiremont, that had its own army, both feudal and mercenary, under the command of its Seneschal, had to sustain two sieges.

When Catherine died the rival houses of Bourbon and Lorraine struggled for the inheritance. The Bourbons pressed the claims of Mademoiselle d'Alençon, the King's cousin, to be elected abbess, and Charles IV wanted the honour for his own daughter. France was more powerful than Lorraine, and Isabelle d'Alençon, though only a child, was elected. She remained a puppet abbess; it was perhaps fortunate for Remiremont that she did not live to be very old. She was succeeded by Princess Dorothea Maria de

Salm, who had the backing of the Emperor, but was only ten. When Mabillon visited Remiremont in October 1696, she was still abbess, and he saw her officiate at the admission of a canoness. On her death in 1703, Princess Elizabeth Charlotte de Lorraine, a child of two and a half, daughter of Leopold, Duke of Lorraine and Elizabeth Charlotte of France, was elected abbess. She died in 1711, of an epidemic; and her sister Gabrielle, elected abbess in her stead, caught the infection and followed her to the grave. The next election was a reasonable one: Beatrix Hieronyme de Lorraine might be a grand-daughter of Charles IV, but she was fifty years old and a woman of character. She built a hospital and a charity school, arranged for the regular distribution of alms in the town, and reformed some of the grosser abuses in the administration of the abbey. On her death in 1738 another Lorraine princess, Anne Charlotte, was elected, at the age of twenty-four. The prosperity of the abbey continued and increased under her rule. She bought new ornaments in the classical style for the church, and in 1752 laid the foundation stone of a new palace for the abbess, designed by the architect Jenneson of Nancy. Much of it still exists; with its handsome façade, the external frieze carved with medallions of the Dukes of Lorraine, its garden set behind a wrought iron grille, its gilt panelling, its colonnaded music room, its lost paintings and bronzes and mirrors, it must have been a model country house for a spinster Princess. Yet, though she took an interest in the administration of the abbey estates—of which she enjoyed by right the lion's share—she hardly ever lived in the palace she had built.

It was in her abbatiæ that the French nationality of Remiremont was for the first time affirmed and protected. The Chapter was forbidden to accept any German ladies, since the German chapters would not accept any ladies from Lorraine. In the seventeenth century three English women had been received; they appear in the Remiremont necrology as Anne de Lynden, who died in 1665; Jeanne Crane de Copley, in 1688, and Jeanne de Copley de Tresham, in 1670; but there were now few Jacobite Catholic ladies in France of sufficiently noble birth to take their place.

In 1763 the absentee Anne Charlotte de Lorraine nominated Christine Salomé of Saxony, daughter of Augustus of Poland, as her coadjutrix; when Anne Charlotte died ten years later, Christine de Saxe succeeded her.

Christine de Saxe was middle-aged, ungraceful and ungracious, but she tried to be abbess in fact as well as in name, and at least succeeded in doing much for the town. In 1775 she chose Anne Charlotte de Lorraine Brionne, a girl of twenty, to be her coadjutrix. Under Christine de Saxe the chapter became yet more closely linked with the French monarchy. In 1774 the King decreed that all the canonesses, senior and junior, should wear, as a kind of Order, a blue ribbon bordered with red, worn from the right shoulder and supporting a cross with the figure of St. Romaric, the patron of the abbey. The canonesses irreverently called this cross *le Crachat*.

Four years later the church was struck by lightning, and the chapter had to spend 77,000 livres on its repair. In 1782 Christine de Saxe died—not at Remiremont—but though Anne Charlotte II automatically succeeded her, she did not trouble to come to Remiremont until 1784. Then she was received with her due of verses and triumphal arches and mythological decorations, but her entry was the most glorious part of her short reign; she died in 1786. At her death the abbess's crozier was first offered to the King's gentle and pious sister, Madame Elisabeth, but she refused the honour. In her place her cousin, Louise Adelaïde of Bourbon-Condé, a music-lover of twenty-nine, was elected. She made her solemn entry on 1st August 1787; it was the last festivity that the canonesses of Remiremont were to see.

It is possible from the surviving statutes and from various contemporary accounts to reconstruct the organization of Remiremont in the eighteenth century in some detail. The abbey was legally dependent only on the Holy See and the Emperor; the abbess had rights of tithe in seventy-eight parishes and of *haute, moyenne et basse justice* in fifty-two *bans* and twenty-two lordships. The officers of the chapter included a *Doyenne*, a Secretary, a *Dame Sourière*, a Treasurer, two Great Almoners, two Bursars,

responsible for the fabric of the building and for the seal of the community, two *Dames Censieres*, and five officers. The *Secrette* and the *Dame Souriere* both enjoyed certain lordships and benefices in right of their office, and the Secretary shared the abbess's right of jurisdiction over all cases in the Val d'Ajol. It was between her hands that the sacristans took their oath of fealty to the abbey. The chapter of canonesses was limited to seventy-nine, including the abbess and her officers. Ten canons, an *Écolâtre*, seven prebendaries, three sacristans and some minor officials performed the services of the church, where the ritual followed in a simplified form that of the original Benedictine constitutions. When she was present the abbess gave the blessing; at the great feasts the Seneschal walked before her bearing her crozier. A canoness, called the *Beau-Sire-Dieu* from the opening words of the prayer she offered, was appointed to receive communion every Sunday.

The distinguishing mark of a canon's habit in early days was the surplice that indicated his priestly function; this was imitated by the canonesses, and survived in a vestigial form in many houses, for example at St. Ursula's of Cologne and at Maubeuge, as a kind of basqued overdress. At Remiremont, however, the original habit had been Benedictine. Of this little survived into the eighteenth century but its colour. It was prescribed that when the canonesses were at Remiremont they must always wear black, without gold or silver, with a petticoat of a modest colour, and no jewels or coloured ribbons; the dress followed the fashion of the times. In church a long mantle of black wool was worn over this, with a train, and collar and fronts of ermine; the canonesses' footmen used to carry their trains as far as the grille of the choir. The abbess wore a similar mantle with a wide border of ermine all round it, and an ermine amice; she had a lady to carry her train. The great officers wore a taffeta hood with a long veil to the ground; the others a cap with a black ribbon, stiffened by a half crown called a *touret*.

When they were not in residence at Remiremont the canonesses were allowed a greater latitude. They might wear dresses of grey, black, brown, white,

purple or violet, with ribbons of the same colour, provided that they were high to the neck, and that no lace, patches or rouge were worn. They had the right of setting the cross of the chapter behind their personal arms on a lozenge, and of having these arms not only on their seals but also carved upon their tombstones.

The canonesses were divided into two categories, *Dames Tantes* and *Dames Nièces*—a distinction mentioned in documents of the abbey as early as 1474. The elder nuns, the Aunts, alone held prebends and alone had the right of presenting a new candidate for a vacant stall. As a preliminary the candidate's pedigree had to be established for four generations on the paternal and maternal sides, and proof offered that each of the eight families in this pedigree had been noble for two hundred years. This proof had to be attested by three knights, who swore upon the Gospels in the choir of Remiremont that the proofs were valid, and that if need be they could produce at least two more knights to affirm their validity. The candidate presented had to be at least seven years old, unless the 'Aunt' were dying, when she might present a child of five. If an extra vacancy occurred it was filled by the abness. The girl was led in, wearing a little cap and *touret* and a crown of rosemary and jewels; the *Dame Tante* led her before the abness, solemnly enthroned in the choir, and made the petition: '*Je vous prie, Madame, d'apprebender ma nièce.*' The abness passed a little black ribbon called *le mari* over the candidate's neck, and fastened the trailing mantle that had been laid upon her shoulders. One sacristan brought a loaf, from which the abness cut off a little piece of bread and gave it to the child to eat; another brought a golden cup of wine, which the abness handed to her to drink. Then the abness led her to her stall and the nuns sang a *Gloria in Excelsis* and a *Te Deum*.

Each of the ninety-five prebends was a named and distinct estate in the vast property of the abbey. The abness herself had thirty-six prebends; the five senior *Dames Tantes* held five each, the eight next four, the six next three, and the two juniors two. A lady with five prebends was allowed to *apprebender* three nieces, one with four three, one with three two,

and one with two one. The nieces—who were most often but not invariably of the Aunt's family, even if not a niece in the English sense of the word—were destined to succeed to the prebends of their aunts.

Each *Dame Nièce* was expected to reside for a year as a postulant before her candidature was finally approved. Of the *Dames Tantes*, the *Doyenne* and Secretary were supposed to spend eight months in residence in the year; the ladies with more than one prebend, seven, and those with only one, five months out of twelve. The nieces were expected to reside at least three months a year, and were not allowed to hold any position at court or in the household of a princess. It was not difficult to obtain a dispensation from residence for reasons of health or family matters, and in any case the obligations of residence were not very strictly kept. According to the statutes, if a canoness was absent for three years, she was, after a year's warning, to be excluded from the Order; and a *Dame Nièce* was to be excluded after five years' absence. Both were only to be readmitted after two years' residence, but in practice this rule was not strictly honoured.

Each *Dame Tante* had her own house, of which some still survive in the Place de l'Église at Remiremont: handsome stone houses of moderate size like those built for the Leczinski court at Nancy. The nieces lived with the aunts, who were also allowed, if over the age of twenty-five, to take one or two women boarders. No men visitors were legally allowed, except of the canoness's own family, and no men callers were supposed to be permitted until the *Dame Tante* was of ten years' standing or had attained the age of forty: another rule that was not strictly observed. Each canoness had her own household of servants, male and female, and by statute unmarried. The *Dames Tantes* were allowed to marry at any time, by renouncing their vows, which were regarded as temporary, and giving up their house and prebends. The *Dames nièces* might marry without the formal leave of the abbess, provided that they wrote to communicate their intention to her and to their aunt.

The Comtesse Marie-Antoinette de Messey de Bielle used often to stay at Remiremont towards the

end of the eighteenth century, as her aunt was one of the canonesses. Her reminiscences tell us that in those days the number of canonesses had dropped to fifty, but they were never all there at once. Some enjoyed the use of two houses. She describes the offices in the church: seven services in the day, beginning at five in the morning in summer and six in winter; with a High Mass later, and Vespers and Compline at three. The young nieces under twelve years of age were excused from most of them, and told to say a psalm instead. If a canoness were not present, however, her niece was under the obligation of taking her place and singing a versicle or reading a lesson in her stead. Madame de Messey describes such a child gravely descending from her stall with her mantle trailing over the marble floor, approaching the altar and curtseying before it, walking across to the abbess's representative, to receive her benediction, and then proceeding to the lectern for her task.

The festivals of the Church each had their particular celebrations. On Palm Sunday, after the abbess or her deputy had blessed the palms and they had been distributed, a table was set below the choir lectern. The Secretary installed herself there, with her officer to the right and a clerk to the left, and all the mayors of all the abbey's fifty-two villages had to appear before her or be fined. On the Eve of St. Bartholomew there was a solemn procession round the town of Remiremont, and the canoness on duty blessed the fountains and released the prisoners in the abbey prison. In the spring, at the feast of St. Romaric, the tenants of the abbey farms brought garlands to his grave: Dommartin a bough of juniper, St. Amé lilies of the valley, St. Vabord green rushes, St. Etienne willow boughs, Vagney elderberry blossom, Saulxures willow boughs, Rupt oak, Ramonchamp pine, Ravon broom, Plombières and Bellefontaine hawthorn and wild roses. The girls from the villages sang hymns, and afterwards there was a fair and a feast. On Whit-Monday the village of St. Maurice, lying at the foot of the Ballon d'Alsace, owed the abbess a due of snow: it was brought into the sanctuary in two hollowed tree trunks, and laid before the stalls of the abbess and the *Doyenne*. If spring had fallen early

even in the Vosges, and there was no snow, the village owed two white oxen instead.

III

Remiremont was perhaps the most famous house of noble canonesses in France, but it was far from being the only one. That useful year book, *La France ecclésiastique pour l'année 1788*, gives a list of no less than twenty such chapters.¹ Of these the most important were those of German origin along France's eastern frontier.

To conciliate them, and thus not to antagonize the very considerable number of noble families whom their members might influence, was an obvious point of policy for France; to absorb them into the *ancien régime* as natural a process as the absorption of the great families of these provinces into the Court of Versailles. Yet such a house as Andlau, where, as at Remiremont, the abbess was a Princess of the Empire, where every canoness had proved eight generations of nobility and each bore the title of Baroness, where a statute read: '*Les dames ne font aucun vœu: elles peuvent se marier quand elles le jugent à propos*': such a house had more links with Vienna than with Versailles and not even an Austrian queen could make

¹ Alix	in the diocese of		Lyon.
Andlau	"	"	Strasbourg.
Avesne	"	"	Arras.
Beaume les Dames	"	"	Besançon.
Blesle	"	"	St. Flour.
Bourbourg	"	"	St. Omer.
Bouxieres	"	"	Nancy.
Chateau Chalon	"	"	Besançon.
Denain	"	"	Arras
Épinal	"	"	St. Dié.
Estrun	"	"	Arras.
Coyze en l'Argentiere	"	"	Lyon.
Leigneu	"	"	Lyon.
Lons le Saunier	"	"	Besançon.
Loutre	"	"	Trèves.
Maubeuge	"	"	Cambrai.
Migette	"	"	Besançon.
Montfleury	"	"	Grenoble.
Montigny	"	"	Besançon.
Neuville en Bresse	"	"	Lyon.
Poulangy	"	"	Langres.
Poussay	"	"	Toul.
Remiremont	"	"	St. Dié.
St. Louis de Metz	"	"	Metz.
St. Martin de Salles	"	"	Lyon.

the Chapter very French. Maubeuge, too, with its demands of a legendary nobility from its members, might be willing to accept, if without enthusiasm, the king's gift of a ribbon no less blue and no less wide than that of the Order of the St. Esprit, fixed with golden tassels, and supporting a medal with the effigy of Ste Aldegonde the patroness; but it continued to be oriented in spirit to the east rather than the west of the frontier.

Bourbourg in the diocese of St. Omer was another house with strong territorial connexions; it had been founded as a 'noble' Benedictine house in 1102 by the Count of Flanders, and demanded sixteen proved quarters of nobility on each side, maternal as well as paternal. Once these had been proved, the Governor of the town called upon the abbess and her canonesses and presented the candidate to them. The day before she was to be received she was ceremonially given bread and wine in the church in the presence of the abbess and the *Demoiselles* (as they were called here) and her family. The next day she was magnificently dressed in white brocade, with her hair loose about her shoulders beneath a diamond coronet, and led in procession to a ballroom. The family formally danced in the presence of the abbess, the ladies and the legal officer of the abbey, and, the dance over, the girl asked her parents' blessing and bade them farewell. She was then led to the church, preceded by the musicians who had played for the dancing, with bridesmaids going before her and one to carry her train. After the Mass her father led her to the altar, and she waited there while the *Demoiselles* went to the chapter house and decided upon her admission. Two canonesses were sent to ask her if her resolution to become a canoness were final; and, after reaffirming it, she was led by her father to the chapter door, handed over to the canoness who was to be her aunt (here called *Maitresse*) and led before the abbess for a short exhortation. Next she was dressed in the habit of a novice: a white dress hemmed with grey squirrel, with a black surplice worn over it and a white veil. The community then returned to the church, where the abbess gave her a diamond ring in token of her espousal of Christ. After a year's

probation final vows were taken, and the regular habit assumed: a long-sleeved black dress hemmed with ermine, with a pleated surplice, with a pointed bodice, basque skirt and flowing sleeves worn over it, and a long mantle furred with grey squirrel to wear in choir. The headdress was white, with an elaborate coif and veil like that of an early seventeenth-century widow.

Bourbourg, then, as an extremely conservative house that retained more vestiges of its Benedictine origins than most chapters, remained quietly and obstinately Flemish although Marie Antoinette took it under her especial patronage, assumed the title of *Première Chanoinesse* and granted a cross with a figure of the Virgin and her own portrait to be worn on a yellow ribbon with a black edge.

Denain was a less important but no less Flemish house. Its eighteen canonesses all bore the title of Comtesse d'Ostrevan, and had all proved eight quarters of nobility.

Further south, French influence slowly increased round the nucleus of the Duchy of Lorraine. Of Loutre, in the diocese of Trèves, we know little, except that it had an abbess, a dean and eight canonesses. St. Louis de Metz, formed in 1762 by the union of the two abbeys of St. Pierre and Notre Dame, exacted the same degrees of nobility as did the Court of Versailles: that is to say, proof of noble birth back to the year 1400. It was, indeed, closely attached to the Court; its reform was under the aegis of Louis XV, and its eight-pointed cross, surmounted by a royal crown, and worn on a blue ribbon with white edges, had the inscription *Ludovici decimi quinti munificentia*.

Bouxières-aux-Dames, near Nancy, an ancient Benedictine house that claimed foundation by St. Gauzelin, had early lapsed from the strict Benedictine rule, and an attempted reform in 1553 had been a failure. It then became secularized as a college of canonesses, conveniently near to Nancy and conveniently well endowed with feudal estates. Its original community of an elected abbess, dean, treasurer, secretary appointed by seniority, and eleven canonesses, *capitulantes* and nieces, served by three canons, was in the eighteenth century increased until

it had twenty-three *Dames Tantes*, with the title of Countess, and twenty-four *Dames Nièces*. In 1789, however, it had only thirteen canonesses all told.

Poussay, in the diocese of Toul, was another Lorraine house, founded as a Benedictine nunnery in the tenth century. Its rules were easy; after proof of nobility no particular vows were asked for, and all the canonesses could marry. After holding a prebend for eighteen months, a canoness could nominate a niece, provided she was more than seven years of age. The ladies wore a blue ribbon with a gold edge and an eight-pointed cross, crowned, with the figures of their patroness Ste Menne and of St. Leo. A similar house, in the neighbouring diocese of St. Dié, was Epinal, founded by Thierrî I, Bishop of Metz, about 970. Here the Abbess, Dean and Secretary alone bore the title of Countess; all the canonesses had a blue ribbon with an eight-pointed cross with the figures of the Virgin and St. Goeri, their patron. Eight degrees of nobility on either side were exacted from its members, but its prestige was always somewhat overshadowed by the proximity of Remiremont.

The diocese of Besançon included much of the territory acquired by France to the east, and consequently a considerable number of chapters of noble canonesses. Baume les Dames, originally a Benedictine House, had only eleven prebends for its noble ladies, but retained a number of feudal officers: five *Grands officiers gentilshommes*, a *Grand Prévôt*, a *Grand Maire*, a *Grand Gruyer*, a Squire and a Cross-bearer. Its handsome domed eighteenth-century church now serves as a corn market. At Château Chalon, another such foundation, famous for its Tokay-like *vin jaune*, the Abbess was Princess of the Empire and the *preuves de noblesse* were as strict as at Remiremont. Each canoness was only allowed to have one niece, or two sisters, with her. The King awarded the canonesses a black ribbon with a gold edge and a medallion with the figures of the Virgin and St. Benedict. The Chapter at Lons was unusual in being in its origin a Franciscan foundation of the thirteenth century. It was not so large or important a house as those heretofore mentioned, but yet demanded eight degrees of nobility on both sides of the family from its novices.

The habit was of black silk, with a cross worn on a black ribbon; the cross of the abbess was like a bishop's. Each lady had her own house and servants. Migette was another ex-Franciscan house in the Besançon diocese, with eighteen prebends. The eight generations of nobility of its postulants had to be sworn to by four gentlemen of the Knightly Order of St. George in Franche-Comté. Each lady was allowed to have three nieces with her, who were to inherit her house and furniture at her death. The prebends went by seniority. The canonesses had the right to wear a blue ribbon with a white edge with an eight-pointed cross with the figures of St. Clare and St. Isabel.

Montigny-lès-Vesoul, a third Franciscan house in the diocese, founded in 1286, exacted the same *preuves de noblesse* as the Knights of Malta. The canonesses wore a cross on a black ribbon; the abbess a bishop's cross on a violet one.

In the north of France, Avesnes, in the diocese of Arras, only demanded four generations of noble birth. St. Renfroys at Denain, an ancient Benedictine house secularized in the fifteenth century, exacted '*seize quartiers de noblesse ancienne et militaire*,' that is, unsullied by alliances with the *noblesse de robe* who followed the profession of the law rather than the sword. Its members were always free to return to the world, and its prebends were awarded by the vote of the community. Etrun, in the same diocese, claimed to have been founded in the time of Charlemagne. It was exceptional in retaining its Benedictine vows, though without enclosure. The abbess alone had the right of nominating to a vacancy; consequently in 1788 only the abbess, Madame Geneviève de Samette, was left to enjoy its revenues.

In the reign of Louis XV it became impossible to be presented at Court unless the *debutante's* family was already noble in 1399, that is to say before the earliest known ennoblements by decree. These three centuries of noble descent had to be proved by documentary proof for each generation, presented to, and passed by, the King's official genealogist. They corresponded fairly closely with the eight generations of nobility demanded by most Chapters: to be *présentable* was to be *chaptirable*. Only ninety-four

families in all France were thus admitted, and these ninety-four families formed a world of their own. The Queen herself would sometimes herself present her ribbon and cross to a canoness: the lady-in-waiting held them on a gilded salver, and the Queen would pass them over the canoness's head. These decorations, half royal and half religious, were the only ones that might be worn in the *Petits Appartements* of Versailles.

IV

The inclusion of all these half-German chapters in the territory of France had its influence upon more purely French houses. Obviously such colleges of noble canonesses met a real social need; they endowed girls of good family with an income, a position, and a way of life, without putting insuperable difficulties in the way of their marriage.

In the diocese of Langres, within the zone of Rhenish influence, the Benedictine foundation of Poulangy was reformed as a chapter of noble canonesses in 1776, with the exaction of strict proofs of noble birth. Royal favour awarded a blue ribbon with a black edge, and an eight-pointed cross. Further south, in the diocese of Lyons and the neighbouring sees of St. Flour and Grenoble, seven ancient foundations were reformed as noble chapters.

Montfleury, in the diocese of Grenoble, a house founded in 1342, remained comparatively obscure. It demanded only four generations of nobility on the father's side, and had only the status of a priory, with a prioress elected every three years. St. Pierre de Blesle, in the diocese of St. Flour, was a much more ancient nunnery, founded by Hermengarde Countess of Poitiers in 886. It had been reformed as an *Abbaye Royale* in 1516; the Benedictine vows were lightly kept, and it needed little change to become a noble chapter of twenty canonesses. Here again only four generations of nobility were exacted. A few of the canonesses' houses still exist.

The most important of these essentially French chapters were all in the diocese of Lyons. Alix, for example, a Benedictine nunnery founded in the twelfth century, was given reformed statutes by Louis XV

in 1754, together with the right to wear a flame-coloured ribbon with a cross of eight points, surmounted by a count's coronet, enamelled on one side with the Virgin and the motto *Votis nobilis insigna* and on the other with St. Denis and *auspice Galliarum patrono*. No canoness was to be admitted without written proofs of five generations of nobility on both sides. It was at the moment of this reformation that the Marquis de St. Aubin decided that a prebend at Alix would admirably provide for his seven-year old daughter, Stéphanie Félicité du Crest de Saint Aubin, now more famous under her married name of Madame de Genlis. Her own words need no summarizing.

‘ My mother, my aunt, my cousin and I, set out together in an immense *berline* to go to Lyons, for we were to be received, my cousin and I, as canonesses of the noble Chapter of Alix. As it was first necessary that the Counts of Lyons (that is to say, the canons of the Chapter there) should examine the proofs of nobility offered by the candidates, we remained at Lyons for about a fortnight. Our proofs being in order, we went to Alix, which is not many miles from Lyons. This college with its immense buildings provided a curious prospect. It was composed of a great number of pretty little houses all just alike, and all with little gardens. These houses were so placed that they formed a half-circle with the Abbess's palace in the centre. I enjoyed myself very much at Alix ; the abbess and all the ladies overwhelmed me with kindnesses and sweets, which confirmed me strongly in my vocation to the estate of canoness.

‘ The day of my reception was a great day for me. Its eve was less agreeable ; they curled my hair, and tried on my habit, and drilled me in what I had to do. At last, the happy moment come, they dressed my cousin and me in white, and led us in pomp to the church of the community. All the ladies were in the choir, dressed as in society, but with gowns of black silk over paniers and great mantles lined with ermine.

A priest, whom they called the Grand Prior, questioned us, made us recite the Creed, and then made us kneel on velvet cushions. Then he should have cut a tiny lock from our hair ; but as he was very old and almost blind, he cut a tiny bit off the tip of my ear instead, which I bore heroically without crying out ; people only saw what had happened because my ear bled. This done, he set a ring of consecrated gold on my finger, and fixed on my head a little piece of black and white stuff, a finger's length long, that the canonesses used to call *un Mari*. He put on me the emblems of the Order, a red ribbon and a beautiful enamelled cross, and a sash of a wide black moiré ribbon.

'When this ceremony was over, he made us a short exhortation, after which we went into the choir to embrace all the canonesses ; then we heard High Mass. The rest of the day, except for the hour of service, passed in banquets, in visits to all the ladies, and delightful little games. From that time I was called Madame la Comtesse de Lancy. My father was *Seigneur* of Bourbon-Lancy, which is why I was given this name. The pleasure of hearing myself called *Madame* surpassed all others in my estimation. In this chapter one was free to take vows at the prescribed age or later, or not to do so ; when one did not take them one gained nothing from being received but the title of *dame* and countess, and the honour of wearing the decorations of the 'Order.'

An unhappy lawsuit, in which the chapter of Alix was involved, illustrates the complicated legal position of such communities under the *ancien regime*. One of its canonesses found herself with child by the notorious Chevalier d'Eon de Beaumont, and died in childbed. Her family brought an action for rape against him. The chapter, party to the suit, claimed royal foundation and the right of *committamus*, and refused the jurisdiction of the *Parlement de Bourgogne*, alleging that a case that concerned them must be heard before the *Grand Conseil*. Meanwhile the Bishop

of Autun had claimed jurisdiction in his diocesan court by reason of the case's being one of sacrilege. The Chapter of Alix appealed to the Metropolitan Court at Lyons, that upheld the rights of Autun, and thence to the *Officialité Primatiale des Gaules*, which confirmed the original jurisdiction. This tangle was eventually cut by a royal decree quashing the whole affair.

Another house of noble canonesses in the diocese of Lyons was Leigneux, a tenth-century Benedictine foundation. This had fewer pretensions: it demanded five quarters of nobility on the father's side, but only one on the mother's. Its ribbon was white, edged with blue; its cross bore the effigies of the Virgin and St. Benedict. Neuville en Bresse, sometimes called Neuville les Dames, demanded nine generations of nobility on the father's side. It, too, had been originally Benedictine, but was reformed as a chapter of canonesses in 1750, though the dean still had to take the Benedictine vows. As at Alix, all the ladies of the chapter bore the title of Countess. The cross had figures of the Virgin and Ste Catherine, with the legend *Genus, decus et virtus*; the ribbon was blue with a red edge. The canonesses wore mourning, and had a long mantle lined with ermine to wear in choir. St. Martin de Salles, in the same diocese, was an ancient Benedictine nunnery of the Order of Cluny, and was only secularized by Louis XVI in 1782, under the patronage of the Comte de Beaujolais. A wooden gallery had served the nuns as the place from which to hear mass, but proper stalls were then erected by the fashionable architect Delorme. Madame de Ruffey, the prioress, summoned Désarnod from Lyons to plan the canonesses' houses and her own. He designed a magnificent scheme, which was engraved by Berley in 1784: a new church was to stand in the middle of a wide tree-planted square, entered by a fine gateway with two pavilions, and lined by the houses of the canonesses. The scheme had not begun to be realized before the Revolution, and Salles remains ancient and picturesque, with a battered Romanesque church and one walk of its original twelfth-century cloister.

The canonesses, who bore the title of Countess, wore the usual black dress and ermine-trimmed cloak.

with a violet moiré ribbon with a gold edge and tassels, and an eight-pointed cross with a count's coronet and fleurs-de-lys in the angles. On one side it was enamelled with a figure of the Virgin and the motto *Virtutis nobilitatisque decus* and on the other with St. Martin and the legend *Comtesse de Salles*. The chapter had its own genealogist in Paris : M. Berthier, rue des Grands Augustins.

Since Salles had no great antiquity or wealth as a college, the parents of a girl who was to enter the community had to give her a small dowry and build her a little house, like the other houses of canonesses grouped round the chapel. Girls usually entered the community when they were fourteen or fifteen, and remained for a time under the mild surveillance of an older canoness ; then, at twenty, they took over their own house, and generally had a friend of their own age or younger to share it. They usually spent the summer months at Salles and the winter with their families. When they were in residence they had to attend chapel twice a day, but had no difficulty in absenting themselves if they wished. The evenings they generally spent together playing or singing or reading under the benevolent eye of the oldest of their number. The canonesses were each allowed to receive their brothers in their own houses, and to introduce them to their friends. It was thus that the Chevalier de Lamartine, visiting his canoness sister, met a younger member of the community who lived with her—Alix des Roys, who was to become his wife and the mother of Alphonse de Lamartine. She was the daughter of the *Intendant Général des Finances* of the Comte de Beaujolais, who had the right to nominate a certain number of the canonesses, and had been thus nominated when she was fifteen. All her life—a life notable for its spiritual beauty—she maintained certain traditions of conduct learned at Salles : never to employ anyone on her personal service ; to dress and undress herself, prepare her own bath, and light her own fire, in token of Christian poverty and humility.

Coyze en l'Argentiére, the remaining chapter of noble canonesses in the diocese of Lyons, had been founded by the Comte de l'Argentiére in 1273 for his

three daughters and nine others, as a nunnery of the Order of Savigny. It had always been a noble house, and was reformed as a Chapter of noble canonesses in 1777. It exacted eight degrees of nobility on the father's side, but only three on the mother's. These had to be strictly proved, and the proofs presented to the chapter and accepted by them. No one could be admitted before the age of ten, except the nieces of a canoness, who could be accepted at any age. Never more than four sisters could be in the community at once. Formal admission could not take place until the age of fourteen, after three months' residence as a postulant with one of the canonesses. A postulant had to bring with her a dowry of 4,000 livres and 150 for expenses; the third and fourth sisters in a family only paid 2,000. On admission, if the girl were not taken in by an aunt or another canoness, she was given a piece of ground on which to build a house. Thus admitted, she became a *chanoinesse agrégée*, and had to live at home or at l'Argentière, unless she had the special permission of the chapter. Between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-nine she had either to make her profession, after one year's strict residence, or to give up the habit and its ribbon. This profession was not a solemn taking of monastic vows, but a simple promise to obey the rules and observances of the chapter. It served, however, to make the canonesses incapable of holding property, of inheriting patrimony, and of receiving gifts or bequests of real estate. They could only hold a life interest. Thus the family who gave them a dowry to enter l'Argentière could be certain that they would not later diminish their brothers' patrimony by taking their legal share.

A *chanoinesse professe* kept her own house, and might take in her nieces, but was not allowed to receive any men visitors but her father, uncle or nephew before she was forty. She could not be away for more than three months without leave. The right of succession to a house might be sold for not more than 1,200 livres. The revenues of the chapter, which were not enormous, were divided into five parts. One was to meet expenses, one to go to the prioress, and three to be used to provide twenty-five prebends, of not less than 600 livres, and six

half-prebends. The canonesses wore black dresses, with no trimmings of gauze or lace; caps of gauze or net, without lace, feathers, jewels, or any other trimming than a white ribbon with a black edge; cuffs and fichu of similar gauze or net, without lace; a hood for choir, black for the *professes* and white for the *agregées*; and the usual choir mantle of black lined with ermine. Their *deshabillées* had to be black, white or grey; they must not wear coloured shoes, or use rouge or make-up; and they must not attend balls or theatres. Each had the title of Countess and the right to wear a green moiré ribbon fixed on the shoulder with a tassel, and an eight-pointed cross, enamelled with St. Benedict on one side and Notre Dame de Coise on the other.

It was here that Lucile de Chateaubriand was accepted as a canoness in 1782. Her pedigree was established with some difficulty, an eccentric ancestor having used some of the family documents to cover his butter-pots; but it was established, to the satisfaction of the royal genealogist, Chérin, and Lucile was free to enter l'Argentiére and her brother to be presented at Court.

V

The French houses of noble canonesses shared in the common disaster of the Revolution. On 7th December 1790, the Vigil of the Founder St. Romaric, the ladies of Remiremont who were in residence were in chapel. On the morrow their grateful tenants would bring their wonted garlands to lay upon the tomb of the founder, and the canonesses would listen politely to the rustic hymns of the villagers. They felt secure, beloved and happy. A year before they had pulled down the half-ruined Gothic tower, and now an elegant new portal in the Doric style was rising in its place.

Mass was nearly ended when Poulain Grandpré, the commissary of the Department, with three colleagues, and a detachment of the national guard, arrived to take possession in the name of the nation. The abbess had gone to visit relatives in the Netherlands; the dean and the *Dame Secrette* made formal

protests in her name. It was in vain. A year before the Commune of Remiremont had petitioned that the abbey should remain in possession of its rights ; but since then agitators had come, and had told the village girls that when the privileges of the nobility were abolished, they too should be canonesSES and wear mantles edged with ermine. The canonesSES were allowed to depart unmolested, but the Commune and all the organization of the Revolutionary government laid violent hands upon the wide estates, the noble buildings and the vast and varied riches of Remiremont. Only one protest appeared, a pamphlet called the *Cri de l'Humanité*, that recalled all the benefits that the abbey had conferred : its almsgiving, its good agriculture, its school, its hospital, the thirteen poor women it maintained to watch over the dead : but it was written by Bexon, one of the priests at the abbey, and it had ceased to represent public opinion. The Commune of Remiremont enjoyed the abbey property, instead of the abbey alms, and its townsfolk re-christened Remiremont and qualified themselves as '*citoyens montagnards de Libremon't, l'inaccessible au fanatisme et à la tyrannie féodale.*'

Everywhere the drama was the same. The canonesSES, bereft of position and prebends, retired to their family houses. Many of them, like Lucile de Chateaubriand, suffered imprisonment as *parentes d'émigrés* ; a few were guillotined as belonging to dangerous families. The Revolution did something to relax the tyranny of the dowry in France, and more married than might have been expected. The rest were left, poor, obscure, neglected, but yet honoured and respected, to live out their lives in the country towns of France. Joubert knew and honoured one of eighty, who lived near him at Villeneuve sur Yonne. She lived on wine and water, and spent her time looking out of the window by her bed at the passers by. She was so pleased still to have a little house that she never complained ; '*J'aime bien ma petite maison*' was the constant burden of her conversation.

The last abbeSS of Bouxières died in 1825, in poverty and misery, but still proudly wearing the cross and ribbon of her Order. By then many of the older canonesSES were dead. Madame de Lamartine died

in 1829, Madame de Genlis on the last day of 1830. With their generation, except in those French noble houses where *souvenirs de famille* are honourably cherished, much of the tradition of the chapters of noble canonesses passed into oblivion.

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