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*The Red Notebook*



I WAS BORN IN LAUSANNE on 25th October 1767. My mother, Henriette de Chandieu, came from an old French family which had taken refuge in the Swiss canton of Vaud to avoid religious troubles; my father was Juste Constant de Rebecque, a colonel in a Swiss regiment in the service of Holland. My mother died a few days after I was born.

1772

The first tutor whom I can remember more or less distinctly was a German. He used to beat me a lot and then hug me so that I wouldn't complain to my father. I promised not to and faithfully kept my word, but when, despite that, it was discovered, my father dismissed him. He had, incidentally, worked out a very ingenious method of teaching me Greek: he had suggested to me that we should have a private language, just for the two of us, that only we should know. I enthusiastically agreed. First of all, he invented an alphabet made up of Greek characters, then we started to make a dictionary in which every French word was translated by a Greek one. All this became superbly imprinted in my mind because I thought it was I who was doing the inventing, and I already knew a whole lot of Greek words and was

starting to give these words, which had been created by me, some general laws, which means that, when my tutor was dismissed, I was learning Greek grammar. I was at the time five years old.

1774–76

When I was seven, my father took me with him to Brussels and wanted to take over my education himself. He soon gave up and got me a French tutor, Monsieur de la Grange, chief surgeon in his regiment. Monsieur de la Grange was a professed atheist. Apart from that, as far as I can remember, he was also rather second-rate, very ignorant and extremely vain. He tried to seduce the daughter of the music master who was teaching me piano. He had a number of scandalous affairs. Finally he took me with him to share rooms in a house of ill fame, where it was easier for him to indulge in his pleasures. My father arrived from his regiment in a fury and Monsieur de la Grange was sacked.

While I was waiting to be given another mentor, my father sent me to live with my music teacher and I spent a few months with him. This family, which had been lifted by the musical talents of their father from a very lowly social position, fed me and looked after me very well but could do nothing for my education. I was given a few teachers whose lessons I skipped and there was a library nearby which contained every novel which had ever been written and all the anti-religious works fashionable at the time. For eight to ten hours a day I read everything I could lay

my hands on, from La Mettrie to Crébillon's novels. My head and my eyes have felt the effects ever since.

1776–77

From time to time I was visited by my father; he had met an ex-Jesuit who had suggested himself as being suitable to take charge of me but nothing came of it, I don't know why. At about the same time, a former French lawyer, who'd had to leave the country as a result of some shady business and was living in Brussels with a young tart whom he was passing off as his housekeeper, wanted to set up a teaching establishment and offered his services so persuasively that my father thought he'd found the right man. Monsieur Gobert agreed, for a very high fee, to take me into his house. He only gave me lessons in Latin – a language which he knew very poorly – and history, which he was teaching me for the sole purpose of getting me to copy out a book he had written on the subject and wanted additional copies of. But my handwriting was so poor and I was so careless that I had to keep on starting every copy over and over again. After working on it for more than a year, I never managed to get beyond the introduction.

1777–78

Meanwhile, Monsieur Gobert and his mistress had become the talk of the town and my father came to hear of



it. There followed scenes which I myself witnessed and I left my third tutor's house convinced for the third time that these men who'd been given the task of tutoring me and forming my character were themselves very ignorant and very immoral.

My father took me back with him to Switzerland, where I spent some time on his country estate, under his charge alone. One of his friends told him about a quite elderly Frenchman who was living in retirement in La Chaux-de-Fonds, near Neuchâtel, and who had the reputation of being intelligent and knowledgeable. My father made enquiries and learnt that Monsieur Duplessis – that was his name – was an unfrocked monk who had escaped from his monastery, changed his religion and was living in reclusion in order not to be pursued by the French, even in Switzerland.

Although this information was hardly very encouraging, my father sent for Monsieur Duplessis, who turned out to be better than his reputation. So he became my fourth tutor. He was a man of very weak character, but kind and witty. My father immediately conceived a great contempt for him and didn't hide his feelings from me – hardly a good preparation for the relationship between teacher and pupil. Monsieur Duplessis performed his duties to the best of his ability and I made a great deal of progress. I spent just over a year with him, in Switzerland as well as in Brussels and Holland. At the end of that time, my father became fed up with him and made plans for me to go to a university in England.

1778–79

Monsieur Duplessis left to become tutor to a young Comte d'Aumale. Unfortunately, this young man had a quite good-looking sister, very loose in her behaviour, who thought it would be fun to turn the poor monk's head. He fell passionately in love with her, though he hid the fact because his position in the household, his fifty years of age and his looks offered little hope of success. Then he discovered that a wig-maker, not so old and not so ugly, had been more successful. He started to do all sorts of wild things for which he was shown no mercy. He went out of his mind and ended up blowing his brains out.

1779–80

Meanwhile, my father took me with him to England and after a very short stay in London went with me to Oxford. He soon realized that that university, where the English go to finish their studies at the age of twenty, wouldn't be suitable for a boy of thirteen. So he confined himself to teaching me English, going on a few excursions around Oxford for his own pleasure, and we left after two months with a young Englishman who'd been recommended to him as being a suitable teacher for me, despite not having any title or claim to be a tutor, something which my father had grown to loathe after the four previous experiences. Hardly had we set off with Mr May before my father began to find him ridiculous and unbearable. He confided his impressions to

me, as a result of which I treated my new companion with constant ridicule and disrespect from then on.

Mr May spent a year and a half in our company in Switzerland and Holland. We lived for quite a while in the little town of Geetruidenberg. It was there that I fell in love for the first time. She was the daughter of the Governor, an old officer and friend of my father. I'd spend every day writing her long letters, none of which I ever sent, and I left without having declared my passionate love to her, which lasted for a good two months.

1780–81

I've met her since and the thought that I'd loved her aroused in her an interest or perhaps just curiosity to learn things about me. Once she made a sort of move to ask me about what my feelings had been for her but we were interrupted. Some while later, she got married and died in childbirth. My father, whose only desire was to get rid of Mr May, seized the first opportunity to send him back to England.

1781–82

So we went back to Switzerland where he turned to a Monsieur Bridel to give me a few lessons; he was quite well-educated but very pedantic and very pompous. My father didn't take long to feel shocked by the self-importance,

the disrespectful tone and the ill manners of this latest mentor he'd chosen for me and, exasperated by all his failed attempts to provide me with a private education, decided to find me, a fourteen-year-old, a place in a German university.

The Margrave of Anspach who was in Switzerland at the time, suggested Erlangen. My father took me there and himself presented me to the little court of the Dowager Margravine of Bayreuth, which was her residence. She welcomed us with the eagerness that all bored princes or princesses feel for anyone who comes from across the border to amuse them. The Margravine took to me; in fact, as I would say the first thing that came into my head, poked fun at all and sundry and expressed, quite wittily, the most ludicrous ideas. I must have been quite an amusing person to meet, for a German court. For his part, the Margrave treated me equally kindly, giving me a title as Groom of the Bedchamber at his court, where I used to go and play faro and run up gambling debts which my father made the mistake of being kind enough to pay.

1783

During my first year at university I studied a great deal but, at the same time, did a lot of very silly things. The old Margravine forgave me for all my stupidities and liked me all the more, and, in such a small town, the favour that I was enjoying at court compelled all those who judged me

more severely to keep their opinions to themselves. But I wanted the prestige of having a mistress. I chose a girl of rather poor reputation, whose mother had, at some time, I'm not quite sure when, in some way or other, I don't quite know how, been rather rude to the Margravine. The odd thing was that, on the one hand, I didn't love the girl and, on the other, the girl wouldn't let me have her. I'm probably the only man she ever said no to. But the pleasure of making people think, and hearing them say, that I was keeping a mistress was a consolation, both for spending my time with someone whom I didn't love as well as for not going to bed with the woman I was keeping.

The Margravine was greatly offended by my affair; her reproofs only made me feel more attached to the girl. At the same time, the mother of my supposed mistress, who still hated the Margravine and felt flattered by the sort of rivalry that had arisen between the princess and her daughter, kept urging me to do all sorts of things to give offence to the court. In the end, the dowager lost patience and gave orders that I was not to be admitted into her presence. At first I felt very hurt at falling into disgrace and made an attempt to regain the favour that I had done everything I possibly could to lose. I failed to do so and all the people who had hitherto been prevented from speaking openly about my scandalous behaviour were now able to get their own back. There was a general upsurge of criticism and disapproval.

I was so angry and embarrassed that I did further stupid things. In the end, informed by the dowager about all that had been happening, my father ordered me to

come and join him in Brussels and we left together for Edinburgh, arriving there on 8th July 1783. My father had old acquaintances there and they welcomed us with the hospitality and eagerness to please and general friendliness for which the Scots are so well known. I was lodged with a professor of medicine who took in boarders.

## 1783–84

My father stayed in Scotland for only three weeks. When he left, I eagerly got down to my studies; it was the pleasantest year of my whole life. In those days, it was the custom in Edinburgh for young men to work: they formed philosophical and literary clubs. I joined some of them and made a name for myself by my writings and speeches, although I was doing it in a foreign language. I also made a number of close acquaintances, who later on became well known – Mackintosh, who's now a high-court Judge in Bombay, and Laing, who was one of the ablest historians to follow up the work of Robertson, the Principal of Edinburgh University. And there were others.

Among the most promising of these young men was John Wilde, the son of a tobacco merchant. All his friends looked up to him admiringly, despite the fact that most of them came from far wealthier families. He had vast knowledge, worked immensely hard, was a brilliant conversationalist and a man of excellent character. His ability had been recognized when he was made a professor and had published a work which had been very well received.

And then he went completely mad and must now be shut up in a cell, sleeping on a straw mattress – unless he's dead. What a miserable thing the human race is! What hope is there for us?

1784–85

I spent eighteen months in Edinburgh, having a wonderful time. I did a fair amount of work and everybody said nice things about me. But as ill luck would have it, a little Italian, who was giving me music lessons, introduced me to a faro club run by his brother. I gambled, lost and ran up debts left, right and centre, and my stay there was completely spoilt.

When the time in Edinburgh that my father had allotted for me came to an end, I left, promising to pay the people whom I owed the money but leaving them very dissatisfied and with a very bad impression of me. I went back to London where I spent three weeks wasting my time and was back in Paris in May 1785.

My father had made arrangements for all sorts of activities which would have been pleasant had I been willing and able to take advantage of them. I was to be living in the house of Monsieur Suard, where many literary figures used to meet; and he had promised my father to introduce me into the best Parisian society. But as my apartment wasn't ready, I was put into a room in a hotel where I met a very rich and very licentious Englishman whose wild conduct I tried to imitate. Before I'd been a month in Paris, I was