Maid of Orleans

A Short Story based on Fact

By Maryanne Peters

I was born a princess, something that my much-loved guardian Aunt Sophia, would never let me forget. I was given the names Elisabeth Charlotte, but in putting those names together I was known by everybody as Liselotte, or Lieselotte in my native German. My first given name came from my grandmother, who was the granddaughter of King James the First of England, and given the name in honor of his predecessor, Queen Elizabeth.

For myself, the title of princess means very little. I am a woman. I understand my function in the world we live in. I am a mother, and a good one. That is all that I want to be: Good at the role I have been born to. I was also supposed to be a wife. But it is hard to be a wife to another woman.

The portraits of me are very kind. It might have been said that Philippe agreed to marry me on the strength of a portrait, but in truth I do not think he really cared one bit. He would have left me a maid were it not for the fact that I was determined to be who I needed to be. But after my children were born, my only concern was for them.

He seemed like a match worthy of a princess – not just the brother of the King of France but the brother of the Sun King, the effective ruler of Europe and the most influential man in the world. At 31, Philippe, Duke of Orleans had returned from military successes and he had recently been widowed. His wife had been Princess Henrietta of England, a renowned beauty and a favorite of the French Court, but he was not pining for her.

I had no idea of his proclivities then, as I learned of them after the marriage contract was signed, I also learned of his upbringing and found it hard to condemn him. He was unquestionably a pretty man – there is no better word for it. And by all accounts he was so pretty as a child that his mother Queen Anne had dressed him in feminine clothes from an early age and referred to him as “my little girl”.

I had always assumed that he would be able to take me as a wife as he had fathered children with his first wife, but I heard it whispered that it was his brother who was the father of all of his children, or at least the oldest Marie Louise who would marry King Charles II of Spain. It was confirmed that, after Philippe ran to his mother as he was inclined to do, Queen Anne had reprimanded both her older son and her younger son’s wife for their intimacy.

I was told that the father of his second child, a son who died in infancy, was the Comte de Guiche, and man who had claimed to have made whores of both “Les Madames d’Orlean”, meaning both Philippe and Henrietta had been his mistresses.

The father of the youngest could have been anybody, the king included. But I was determined that my children should carry the blood of my husband. It was just a question of how.

Philippe could hardly hide his disappointment on our wedding day. It is true that I claim to be no beauty, but why should it concern him? As I discovered he was vitally interested in feminine beauty, but on his own personage. It was vanity, not desire that made me undesirable to him.

Only a day of two after our wedding he appeared before me dressed entirely as a woman ready to attend some ball on the arm of a man. There were plenty who were willing. He was quite unashamed to say that he had being doing just this from his youth, apparently encouraged by his mother and others.

I even heard it said that his brother approved of his behavior due to the lasting effect of the treacherous affairs of Uncle Gaston, the prior Duke of Orleans. And of course, while Philippe was cavorting with young men, the Sun King was brightening the life of his brother’s wife.

As his wife I should have been horrified. But seeing his there I began to understand. I approached him and adjusted the ringlets hanging from his wig and the sash, before announcing that he was the prettiest women in the world.

I heard it said that of my husband more than once that he was: the "silliest woman who ever lived". It seems apt. My little gesture made his so deliriously happy. I knew how I would mother our children.

With the help of some of my ladies I was able to secure masculine attire including an undergarment which bond my breasts. When my husband arrived back from the ball I had his escort escorted out so that I could introduce myself to him anew, in the deepest voice that I could conjure, as Jules, his male lover. Addressing him alternately as “my pretty one” and “bitch” I had my way with the helpless girl, impaling myself on that oddly out of place organ.

For the first years of our marriage, this ruse made our marriage a modestly happy affair. I needed to be accepting of the fact he really wanted to be a woman and to be loved by a man. But we could share a bed so long as I was the man and he was the woman.

But in the end he still craved what only a man can give a woman. I did not. From the moment I had children the sordid arrangement of me being a man could be, as they say, put to bed.

Tragically our first sone Alexandre died young, but I still have my son Philippe and my daughter Elisabeth (whom I can claim to have fathered as well as mothered) and of course I am beloved mother to Marie Louise and Anne Marie, my husband’s other children.

So what of my husband? I found it hard to believe that he had ever been a soldier let alone an heroic one. But after the birth of our youngest child and no longer sharing any intimacy, Philippe announced that he was joining the army and would lead it to battle in the low countries. For the second he became a hero at the Battle of Cassel where, engrossed in decorating his tent in feminine style his camp was invaded by the Dutch in what turned out to be an accidental trap. As the commander at the scene he won the accolades much to his brother’s disgust.

He returned to Paris in glory in May 1677 and promptly resumed his feminine life donning his wigs and petticoats.

We never shared a bed again but we lived together as two women can, especially when they share the love of the same family.

And what of the men in his life? I have already mentioned le Comte de Guiche who died soon after we were married, and there was the Marquis d'Effiat whom I quite liked, and then there was the Chevalier de Lorraine, whom I despised. It was not that he was ploughing my husband that made him objectionable, but that seemed to want to drag us down.

The late Henrietta had prevailed upon the Sun King (who perhaps owed her favors) to have him exiled, but after she died, he returned. To be honest I preferred my sweet Phyllis (as I called Philippe) to appear as a pretty and youthful maid as was possible in advancing years and to pursue younger men in preference to having Loraine anywhere near our family.

I was never pretty the way my husband was. Motherhood suited me, and to some extent made the shape of the woman I was. Phyllis could remain forever the shape of the ideal woman he always wanted to be, and even more so as his corsets shaped a body that would seldom appear again in male attire. I helped him to look pretty because it pleased him and that pleased me. To me he had ceased to be a man ever since he let me make love to him as if I was one. But that did not make me care for him any less.

My husband died in 1701 at the age of 61. His title went to our son, the younger Philippe, who after all was the only man in our family.

The End

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Author’s Note:

Elisabeth Charlotte died at age 70 on 8 December 1722. She and her husband, the Duke of Orléans, an effeminate homosexual who often appeared dressed as a woman, were the founders of the modern House of Orleans. Their only surviving son, Philippe II, Duke of Orleans was the Regent of France during the minority of Louis XV. Other descendants include Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor the royal families of Portugal and Brazil, and also Citizen-King Louis Philippe, the last king of France.



Liselotte in later life