

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE OF THE DUC DE LAUZUN,
COMMANDER OF THE TROOP OF CAVALRY WHICH
BECAME KNOWN AS "LAUZUN'S LEGION" IN THE
REVOLUTIONARY WAR.

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Armand Louis de Gontaut, duc de Lauzun, afterwards duc de Biron, was born at Paris on the 15th of April, 1747. He served in the guards as early as 1761, and in 1767 made the expedition of Corsica as aid-de-camp of de Chauvelin, and on coming to announce the success of the undertaking on June 29th, 1769, he was made chevalier of the order of Saint Louis.

Married early in life to Mlle. Anne de Boufflers, who was entirely uncongenial to him, he left her and travelled in various parts of Europe where he spent his time in idle frivolity. In his *Memoires* he pretends to look upon this as merely an occasion for indulging in various love affairs. Having wasted his fortune in dissipation and being reduced to the utmost extremities he transferred, in 1777, his estates to the prince de Guéméné upon the payment of an annuity of 80,000 livres. But the prince afterwards became a bankrupt and the annuity was reduced more than half. About this time he published a *Memoire* entitled *l'état de defense d'Angleterre et de toutes ses possessions dans les quatre parties du monde*, which attracted attention to him and led to his being sent, in 1779, with some ships under the command of de Vandreuil on an expedition to Senegal and other coast possessions of the English. Arrived at Cape *Blanc* he seized the fortress (30th January 1779) which, however, was recaptured directly after his departure during the same year. He received on his return to France the title of colonel of

hussars, and became proprietary colonel of a foreign regiment which was to bear his name.

Appointed brigadier on the first of March, 1780, Lauzun decided to take part in the War of American Independence, and embarked at Brest on the *Province*, of 74 guns, commanded by de Champaurein, on the 12th of April. Contrary winds held him back and it was not until the 13th of July that he arrived with his two regiments of hussars, his grenadiers and his chasseurs at Newport and took up his winter quarters at Lebanon. During the march between Providence and the Hudson river, Lauzun protected the right of the army with his cavalry. He also supported brilliantly before New York, on the 3rd of July, 1781, a reconnoitering party of general Lincoln. At Elk the infantry of his legion, with all the grenadiers and the chasseurs of the army, were embarked on all sorts of boats and put under the direction of Custine. They hoped thus to bring help to Lafayette. Custine, in fact, soon arrived alone at the mouth of the James river, but Lauzun, with the troops and general Lincoln, who were following on other boats, had to stop at Annapolis, to await news of de Grasse. The presence of an English fleet had been signaled, and it was necessary to wait until de Grasse had driven it off or dispersed it, which took place two days later, on the 3rd of September, 1781, after a combat glorious for the French and decisive for the success of the campaign. Lauzun had just arrived, with neither artillery, men nor powder, when he was charged with the blockade of Gloucester, already begun in a scarcely serious way by general Weedon and his 3000 American troops. Lauzun having asked the general-in-chief for what was indispensable, took his place under the orders of de Choisy, who arrived with the artillery and 800 men taken from the ships.

Lauzun had immediately the chance to show his brilliant courage. He beat back, with French impetuosity,

the cavalry of Tarleton, three times as numerous as his own, and forced it to retire precipitately into Gloucester. This fight brought him the honour of going to Paris to bear the news of the capitulation of Yorktown with Guillaume de Deux-Ponts, who had directed the attack on the great redoubt. They left on the *Surveillante* on the 24th of October, and after a twenty-two days passage they reached Brest.¹

Lauzun started again from Brest, on the 12th of May, 1782, with de Segur and de Broglie. He stopped at Terceyre and reached the mouth of the Delaware, whence he rejoined the army with his numerous travelling companions. Finally Rochambeau, on his departure, left the command with de Lauzun, who received the order to sail for France on the 11th of March, 1783.

On his return to France he was made Mareschal de Camp, and on the death of his uncle, Louis Antoine de Gontaut de Biron, five years later, he took the title of the duc de Biron.

In 1789 he was returned as deputy to the States General by the noblesse of Quercy and attached himself to the revolutionary cause. He entered the party of the duc d'Orleans and later was accused of being the confidant and secret agent of that infamous prince. He several times mounted the tribune to exculpate him and in the proceedings of the Chatelet, relative to the crimes of the 5th and 6th of October, 1789, he was accused of having appeared with him in the midst of the assassins.

In 1791 he was sent by the Constituent Assembly to receive the oath of the army of Flanders, and then

¹ De Lauzun returned to Brest on the *Surveillante*, Captain de Cillart; there were with him Duplessis-Pascaut, Captain of the *Intrepide*, which had been burnt in the harbour of the Cape, and who was carrying despatches from Count de Grasse; Lord Rawdon, his wife, the brother of Lord Cornwallis, and a major of the English army, captured during the siege. The last two went immediately to England. Lord Rawdon spoke highly, in a letter, of the courtesy de Lauzun showed him.

returned to take his place in the Assembly where he continued to sit until its dissolution in September of that year. He then went to Valenciennes where he took command of the department of the North under Marshal Rochambeau. In 1792 he accompanied Talleyrand in his embassy to England. Shortly after his arrival he was arrested for debt by an emigré from whom he had borrowed money fifteen years before. He was, however, released by the English government on account of his semi official character upon condition that he would immediately leave England. He returned to Valenciennes and in 1792 he was appointed to the command of the army of the North and ordered to march against Mons. Having at first taken possession of Quiévrain, and being encouraged by his success, he chose to make a new attack next day; but he was beaten and driven back to the walls of Valenciennes. He was then re-placed by Marshal Luckner, and on the 19th of July was sent to Strasbourg to take command of the army of the Rhine, with the duty of watching the movements of the Austrians who were concentrated between Rhinsfeld and Philipsbourg. Later he was sent to the army of the Var where he succeeded general Anselme. It was then that he was commissioned to arrest the son of the duc d'Orleans, who was on his staff. He submitted to this order with a readiness that could not have been expected from a friend of that prince.

On the 15th of May, 1793, he was transferred to the army of La Rochelle operating against the insurgents of La Vendee. He gained several successes, among them the capture of Saumur and the victory of Pathenay; but the insubordination of his troops and the intrigues of revolutionary agents made his position intolerable and he sent in his resignation and went to Paris. On his arrival he found that Marat and Boyer-Fonfrede had already procured a decree for his recall. He was thereupon accused by the notorious Carrier

of incivisme, undue leniency to the insurgents and severity towards Rossignol, then lieutenant-colonel, whom he had caused to be arrested. He was deprived of his command, which was given to Rossignol, and imprisoned in Sainte-Pelagie,² and then transferred to

² Hardly imprisoned in Saint Pelagie than Biron demanded to be tried and he sent to the Committee of Public Safety the Memoire which he had written. In this memoire he defended himself with great skill and loyalty. He clearly showed that with the body of untrained peasants that he had been given to command the impossibility of doing anything with such troops: "Ma conscience ne me reproche rien," said he very simply; "j'ai fait tout ce qui dépendait de moi, et, dans ces circonstances difficiles, je ne crois même pas qu'un autre eût pu faire mieux à ma place. . . . Si l'on veut jeter un coup d'oeil sur ma vie tout entiere, on verra si jamais j'ai hésité un instant entre mes intérêts personnels les plus cheors et ceux de ma patrie." And he ended with these words of noble pride. "Je demande donc que, sur le compte rendu à la Convention nationale et par le Comité de salut public et par le Conseil exécutif provisoire, il soit décrété que j' ai bien servi la République et bien mérité de la patrie, et que j'emporte dans la retraite, que ma santé nécessite, cette jouissance vraiment digne d'un soldat républicain." But these courageous words found no echo. New denunciations prevented the Convention from being just and Biron remained at Sainte Pelagie. His health grew worse daily and gout and rheumatism scarcely permitted him to move. He sent a letter to the Convention asking to be tried without further delay in order that he could retire to the country to restore his shattered health. The letter was read at the session of the 4th of September, 1793, and his old friend Lecomte-Puyraveau ventured to speak in support of his request. "Je demande" said he "que Biron ait la même faveur que vous avez déjà accordée à Anselme et à Ferrand, contre lesquels il pouvait y avoir des soupçons aussi graves que contre Biron. Sur leurs demandes leur détention à l'Abbaye a été convertie en une détention chez eux. Je crois que vous devez à L'humanité de faire pour Biron, qui est malade, ce que vous avez fait pour Anselme et Ferrand, et je demande que Biron soit en arrestation chez lui, sous bonne et sûre garde." The Assembly seemed at first to be well disposed, when a voice was heard claiming the previous question: "M. Biron est suspect, pour ses sentiments et pour ses actes," said a conventionnel; "il doit rester dans les prisons, comme tous les autres, jusqu'à son jugement." And the previous question was carried.

During his long imprisonment, the Duke had without doubt a plan to corrupt his jailors and escape. He requested the Marquis de Gontaut to obtain for him a large sum of money, offering him in exchange the cash which he had in the Bank of England. The Marquis consented the

the Abbaye where he wrote to the Convention for a speedy trial. His letter was read at the session of the 4th of September, but no regard was paid to it. He was at last taken to the Conciergerie and appeared before the Revolutionary Tribunal on the 29th of December. A voluminous dossier was drawn up against him, which included among other grave charges those relating to the operations of the army of La Rochelle

more readily as his brother and sister-in-law had emigrated to England and this sum would be of great service to them. But unfortunately just then the Marquis and his wife were arrested and the negotiation could not be carried out. It was then that he learned of the fate of the Duke d'Orleans and he knew he would not long survive the friend of his infancy who more than any other had drawn him into the path of the Revolution. He said to a fellow prisoner M. Beugnot, "Il y a trop longtempis que ces gens-là m'ennuient; ils vont me faire couper le cou, "mais au moins tout sera fini" and at the tribunal he even disdained to defend himself.

It was not until the 25th of December that Biron was put on trial at the demand of Robespierre.

On the 9th Nivôse, at 10 o'clock in the morning, the Duke appeared "libre et sans fers" before the revolutionary tribunal.* He had as his

* The following is the bill of indictment drawn up against Biron :

Antoine-Quintin Fouquier-Tinville, accusateur public du tribunal criminel extraordinaire, expose :

Qu'honoré de la confiance de la République pour le commandement de ses armées, et surtout de celle destinée à exterminer les brigands de la Vendée, au lieu de la justifier en déployant le zèle et l'activité que la patrie avait le droit d'exiger de lui, il est devenu par le force d'inertie en quelque sorte colonne de l'armée ennemie, dont il a par cette inaction coupable favorisé l'accroissement et les succès sur les braves et courageux soldats de la République qu'il devait conduire à la victoire et qui ont été les victimes de la lenteur et de la négligence combinées dont il n'a cessé de donner des preuves; qu'en effet Biron, né dans la caste des ci-devant privilégiés, ayant passé sa vie au sien d'une cour corrompue, à ramper servilement sous un maître, n'a pris le masque du patriotisme comme trahes Custine, La Fayette, Dumouriez et tant d'autres que pour tromper la nation, aux intérêts de laquelle il paraissait se dévouer, et abuser plus sûrement de la confiance qu'elle lui donnerait pour la remettre dans les fers du despotisme; que d'ailleurs il s'est toujours montré l'ennemi des patriotes qu'il a persécutés, des braves soldats qu'il a cherché à décourager en les calomniant, système qui a toujours été celui des Dumouriez, des Wimpffen et autres trahes; qu'il a toujours affecté de s'environner d'Allemands avec lesquels il pouvait, au moyen d'une langue étrangère, concerter ses plans perfides.

"D'après l'exposé ci-dessus, l'accusateur public a dressé la présente accusation contre Biron pour avoir conspiré contre l'unité et l'indivisibilité de la République et la tranquillité de la sûreté intérieure de l'Empire français et trahir les intérêts de la République en abusant de sa qualité pour . . . etc."

"Fouquier-Tinville"

that the actor Grammont "chef of the etat major general of the revolutionary army" sent to Fouquier-Tinville with his comments (1st of December, 1793).

counsel and official defender citizen La Fleutrie. The examination of the accused only lasted a short time. What he was especially accused of was his relations with the ci-devant Duke d'Orleans and his sons.

The public accuser then summed up the case; the counsel for the accused was heard and the session adjourned to continue it the following day at 8 o'clock in the morning.

The next day the president ordered the trial to be resumed; twelve witnesses were heard for the prosecution, among whom was Grammont the comedian, the general chief of the staff of the army, Merlin, Chaudieu, etc., and four testified in his favor. After the examination of the witnesses the question was submitted to the jury "Citoyens juréz, il "a existé une conspiration contre la sureté intérieure et extérieure de la "République, Armand-Louis-Biron, ex-général d'une des armées de la "République, est-il convaincu d'avoir participé à cette conspiration?" The reply was in the affirmative.

The tribunal condemned Biron to the pain of death and decreed that the execution should take place in twenty-four hours.

The Duke received the sentence with a smile and his habitual calmness did not desert him for a moment.

Arrived at the guichet used for the condemned he asked for a chicken and a bottle of Bordeaux and after calmly dining read for the rest of the evening and then laid down on an uncomfortable matrass, which had been furnished him by Langlois, the jailor. He slept as peacefully as if he had been in his own home.

The next day he left the Conciergerie and mounted the fatal tumbril. The weather was raw and day was drawing to a close. There was only a small crowd which accompanied the funeral cortage. Biron preserved his serenity during the passage to the scaffold, the expression of his face never changed and he delivered himself up to the executioner without showing the slightest sign of fear.*

Thus perished obscurely and of a horrible death this man who in his character combined all the charms, the graces and the seductions of his century. Ferson has truly said "C'est l'ame la plus noble et la plus "elevation que j'aie connue."

* The record of the death of General Biron is as follows:

"Du 20 nivôse (9 janvier 1794), l'an second de la République, acte de décès de Armand-Louis Biron, du 11 (31 décembre 1793) de ce mois. Profession: commandant en chef des armées de la République, âgé de quarante-six ans, natif de Paris, y domicilié, rue des Piques, et à Montrouge.

"Signé: Deltrot."

Le Duc de Lauzun et la cour de Marie-Antoinette by Gaston Maugras page 520 and following.

On the 27th of December he was examined by Subleyras, the judge who questioned him on his relations with the duc d'Orleans, and with the towns which had risen against the Convention after the 31st of May; he asked him why he had employed the son of the ci-divant duc d'Orleans with him in the army of Italy, and why he had remained inactive in La Vendée after the defeat at Fontenay? Ten witnesses testified against and four in his favour. But an ex-noble could expect no mercy and was declared guilty of conspiring against the Republic and condemned to death. Biron received his sentence with stoical calmness and on his return to the Conciergerie he said to his fellow prisoners: "C'est fini, messieurs, je pars pour le grand voyage." He then asked for some oysters and a bottle of wine. Just before he finished his repast the executioner entered "Mon ami" said he turning him "je suis a vous; mais "laissez-moi finir mes huitres, je ne vous ferai pas "attendre longtemps, vous devrez avoir besoin de "forces, au metier que vous faites; vous allez boire un "verre de vin avec moi."

When on the scaffold he pronounced these words "I die punished for having been false to my God, my King and my order."

The duc de Biron was courageous, handsome and well educated for the time in which he lived. But he had the fault of allowing himself to be carried away by the follies and easy loose morals of a corrupt age; it is but just, however, to say that he was universally beloved and almost idolized by his relations and friends, and if his last words on the scaffold do not entirely clear up the ambiguity of his conduct concerning his supposed tampering with the royal party, they at least show that he had, at some time or other, served the Republic. Some of the charges against him were undoubtedly well founded. In regard to his inactivity in La Vendee especially; for while Westermann, com-

manding the van guard of his army, was fighting at Chatillon to great disadvantage against the most able Vandean generals, he was lying perfectly inactive before Niort, within sixty miles, with sixteen or seventeen thousand choice troops. This neglect or oversight left Westermann to be surrounded a few days afterwards, and caused him to lose all his infantry and flying artillery, escaping with his cavalry only, and that with the greatest difficulty.

In 1822 there was published under his name in two volumes in 8vo some *Memoires*, extracted from papers found after his death but which only came down to the close of the war in America (1783). In 1865 M. Maistre de Roger de La Lande, a descendant, edited for the first time *Lettres sur les etats generoux de 1789* sent to friends in the country. It is an account of the sessions of the nobility before they joined the Tiers Etat.