

# A SAINT OF THE STAGE.

## EVE LAVALLIERE.

By Charlotte Kelly.

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**‘Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved much.’**

CHRIST’S WORDS of Mary Magdalen might fittingly be applied to that penitent of the twentieth century, Eve Lavalliere. A great sinner and a great saint. Surely, we might describe the brilliant French actress who, for the love of God and to atone for her sins, voluntarily embraced a life of poverty and hardship, of terrible sufferings cheerfully endured and, hardest of all, of long periods of spiritual darkness and desolation. She risked her salvation for the applause of the world; but when God sent her the grace, she unhesitatingly sacrificed that world and sought henceforth only to do His will. Poverty and wealth, obscurity and fame, worldly ambition and absolute detachment from the world; these are some of the striking contrasts which we find in Eve’s life – a life begun in tragedy was to end in a great peace.

Eugenie-Maria-Pascaline-Feneglio was born on Easter Sunday, 1st April, 1866, near Toulon, where her father worked in a costumier’s shop. Her childhood was overshadowed by the violent scenes that took place continually between her father and mother. The former was a passionate irascible man, subject to periodical fits of unreasoning jealousy. At such times, nothing that his wife could say or do would calm his outbursts of ungoverned rage, and he would hurl insults and accusations at the unfortunate woman, while Eugenie and her brother looked on in horror and dread. When Eugenie was ten, the family moved to Perpignan, but matters did not improve. Feneglio grew steadily worse and kept his wife and children in constant state of apprehension. But Eugenie had one consolation. When things got too bad at home, she could take refuge with a neighbouring family who willingly gave shelter to the terrified child. It was at this home among the boys and girls who composed the family, that the budding talent of the future actress first showed itself. Eugenie organised amateur theatricals for the young folk, with considerable success. These plays and recitations gave her the only happiness she had known up to this, for they made her forget the miseries of her home life, and she lived for the time in a wonderful world of her own. As composer, stage manager, costumier and principal actor, all in one, she was the leading spirit of these little entertainments and gained whole-hearted applause.

When she was seventeen the unhappy Feneglio ménage came to an end with tragic suddenness. One day as Eugenie and her brother stood trembling with fear, unwilling witnesses of a more than

usually violent 'scene', her father pulled out a revolver and fired at his wife. She fell to the ground, wounded, and Fenoglio turned the weapon on his daughter, who saved her life by a swift movement to one side. Then as she stood paralysed with fright, the wretched man pointed his revolver at his own head and blew his brains out.

Screaming with terror the children fled from the house; Eugenie to summon help, from a neighbour, her brother to disappear for ever.

The remembrance of that scene never wholly left Eugenie all her life, and at times of stress and trouble, it came back with startling clearness.

Madame Fenoglio lingered for two months and then died of her injuries, leaving her daughter to face the world, a penniless orphan. She was given a temporary home by her only relative in Perpignan, Madame Garnier, a strict puritanical woman who fiercely resented the disgrace that had fallen on the family, and determined to rule her niece with a rod of iron. But the high-spirited temperamental girl with her lively disposition and love of gaiety, did not submit easily to the new conditions. Nor was she any happier in the Good Shepherd Home at Perpignan to which her aunt sent her. She rebelled against discipline of every kind and she brooded over her unhappy childhood, particularly the tragic events that had made her an orphan.

Above all, she longed for freedom to see the world. Her only pleasure was the weekly walk when the girls passed through the town in long rows. Eugenie cast eager glances at the crowds, the lights, the shops filled with beautiful things. It was her only glimpse of that wonderful world from which she felt herself debarred. One day passing a shop window a picture of the great French actress, Jeanne Granier, caught her eye. Entranced, the orphan gazed upon this vision of beauty and success and although she had never heard of Jeanne Granier, her picture became the symbol of all that she longed to have and to become.

Meanwhile the monotonous round of life at the Home went on, with its punishments, reprimands and restrictions, for Eugenie disregarded all rules and broke them consistently.

At last, she decided that she could stand it no longer and she ran away. She arrived at her aunt's house to find her welcome far from warm. But all Madame Garnier's threats could not persuade her to go back to the Home. Seeing that she was obdurate, Madame subjected her to virtual imprisonment. She might not leave the house except with her aunt and then only to visit her parents' grave. Eugenie escaped one day and hurried alone to the cemetery with some vague idea of making known her miseries to her parents. She wandered disconsolately down to a stream that bordered the cemetery, and was standing at the edge of it, half-formed ideas of ending her existence running through her mind, when she was discovered by her aunt, who as a punishment kept her locked in for a month. At the end of this time, Eugenie, desperate, made her escape and sought refuge with a kindly woman who kept a shop near-by. Pitying her wretched condition, the neighbour offered her a home if she would work in her millinery shop, an offer which Eugenie gladly accepted.

At last, she was happy – for a while at least. She was treated kindly; she had companions of her own age and work for which she possessed a distinct flair. She soon became popular both with the girls and with the customers, for while her happy disposition endeared her to the former, her clever fingers and perfect taste made her indispensable to the latter.

It was here that she gained the name that was to become familiar to the world of the theatre in a few years time. With a Frenchwoman's instinct for clothes, she always made the most of her modest wardrobe, and she came into the shop one day with her dark frock adorned with a broad white necktie, known in the trade as a 'Lavalliere' after the famous duchess of that name (Louise de La Vallière, a mistress of King Louis XIV who later joined a Carmelite convent).

'Oh-ho! La voila, Lavalliere,' cried one of her companions, (Oh-ho! There is she, Lavalliere,) and the nickname given in an idle moment, stuck to her. Even the customers soon knew Lavalliere by no other name. 'Send me Lavalliere! She is a bright child and knows what one wants.'

The girl herself was delighted with her new name. Fenoglio, with all its gloomy associations was no more. Lavalliere had taken its place. But she was too ambitious to remain a milliner's apprentice in a provincial town all her life. The advertisement of a travelling theatrical show awakened her old love for the theatre, and she decided to try her luck on the stage. Dreading to hurt her kindly employer, she arranged to leave in her absence, but chance brought the milliner back in time to intercept the runaway.

Knowing the girl's restless temperament, she wisely refrained from attempting to dissuade her, but finding that her plans were of the vaguest, suggested that she should go to her uncle who lived at Nice. Lavalliere, impatient to be off, agreed, and it was arranged that her uncle should be informed of her coming. Once on her journey, however, she availed herself of her newly acquired freedom to get off the train at Montpellier and to spend a few days there on her own.

Then, her money exhausted and her spirit of independence satisfied, she resumed her journey to Nice. But she was three days overdue and her uncle, glad perhaps of the excuse to rid himself of an unwanted burden, met her at the door with harsh words.

'You can go where you like,' he said; 'but I don't want to have anything more to do with you!'

The door was shut in her face and Lavalliere was left without a penny to fend for herself.

What was she to do? Where was she to go? Hours passed and weary of walking the streets, the girl sat down on a roadside bench and abandoned herself to her distress. A passer-by stopped to enquire the cause of her weeping and listened to her eagerly-given confidence with suspicious readiness.

'I tell you what,' he said at last, 'I am leaving tonight for Paris and there's a free place for you if you care to share my company.'

To go to Paris! Never had she hoped for such a chance! Joyfully she accepted and set off on the long journey, marvelling at her good luck and at the kindness of the stranger.

Her disillusionment on the latter point was speedy and complete; but her confidence in herself and in the future was unabated. She was going to Paris – to be a star!

Eve Lavalliere, as she now called herself, was not many days in Paris before she realized the difficulties that lay before her. She could earn her living, singing and dancing in the cafes of Montmartre, it was true, like hundreds of other girls, but she wanted more than that. She wanted to go on the stage; to be a great success; to have the theatrical world of Paris at her feet; to get to the top. If she could only get a start!

Walking slowly along the *rue Paradis* one day, her eye was caught by a notice that said: ‘Elocution, Singing, Dancing.’ Plucking up her courage, she went in and confided her ambitions to old Père Duraulens who gave lessons in these subjects. The latter was not encouraging. He had heard stories like hers many times, for to go on the stage was a common ambition with young and pretty girls. He explained to her how difficult it was to gain even moderate success. She would have to work hard, very hard and be prepared for failure and disappointment. . . . Eve listened, unmoved. Her faith in her ability to become a star was unshaken, and she did not mind how hard she worked.

At last, the old man said grudgingly: ‘Very well, I’ll try your voice.’ The result astonished him. Lavalliere sang with a vivacity and lilt that promised well for the variety stage. Her voice was not the voice of a prima donna; but it had a spirit and feeling that convinced Duraulens that she had at least a chance of success. He was confirmed in his opinion after a few weeks’ lessons, and announced in triumph one day that he had obtained an audition for her with the Director of the *Variétés*, Eugene Bertrand.

Lavalliere’s heart beat fast as in obedience to the Director, she stepped upon the stage of the theatre for the first time and began to sing. She had hardly finished her first verse when the voice of the Director boomed out from the empty stalls: ‘That will do. Turn out the lights.’ The girl went white. It was finished. She had failed. She had not even been allowed to conclude her song. Then Bertrand spoke again: ‘Well, don’t stand. There, looking like a death’s head! I merely said it will do.’ While Lavalliere gazed at him in bewilderment, he turned to Duraulens and added brusquely ‘Mademoiselle Lavalliere will start next week at 80 francs a month.’

She was engaged! She was on the stage – in Paris! Lavalliere’s joy was intense and it was shared by her master who exclaimed with eyes full of tears: ‘Oh, I knew it, I knew it! There’s good stuff in you. You’ll make a name all right! And I knew I couldn’t be the only one to see it!’

Eve’s part was a very modest one, in the chorus of *La Belle Helene*, but to the ambitious girl it was the first rung of the ladder, that was to lead her to fame. A few weeks after her engagement, she had a stroke of luck. One of the principals of the play fell ill and Lavalliere was called upon

to take her part at a few hours' notice. It was the chance she was waiting for! The result justified Bertrand's choice. She made a success of the role and her salary was promptly raised to 300 francs a month. As she sat in her dressing-room, trembling with excitement and waiting for her call the first night, the door opened and Jeanne Granier came in. It was a gracious act on the part of the star of the *Variétés*, and her words of encouragement helped Lavalliere to take her cue with the assured conviction that she would be a success.

Shortly afterwards, however, Bertrand left the *Variétés* and his successor, Fernand Samuel took no notice of the 'promoted chorus-girl'. Eve gradually slipped into the background. For ten long years from 1891 to 1901, she played only minor parts that gave her no scope for her talents. Her ambitious spirit chafed under this neglect. Duraulens urged her to have patience; but that was a quality for which Lavalliere had very little use and she raged at her obscurity.

She was not so unnoticed as she imagined, however, and in 1901 Lucien Guitry, looking for an actress to play a prominent part in his new production *La Veine* (The Vein) selected Eve. Playing with Jeanne Granier, the comparatively unknown Lavalliere 'stole' the piece and established herself permanently in the hearts of the Parisian public.

The story of Eve Lavalliere for the next sixteen years is one of repeated triumphs. She went from success to success. She was the acknowledged queen of the light-comedy stage and all Paris was at her feet.

Her greatest achievement was, perhaps her playing of the heroine in *Le Roi* (The King), a skit on parliamentary democracy which had a sensational 'First Night' on the 24th April, 1908. So brilliant was her interpretation that Sarah Bernhardt, sparing as a rule of her compliments, was one of the foremost to pay her tribute after the performance. The great tragic actress was outspoken in her admiration. 'What wonderful gifts you have!' she exclaimed. 'I have seen a fair number of actors in my time, but never anyone in the least like you! . . . What you have cannot be learnt. It must be inborn. Those repartees of yours, which suddenly flash out when you are on the stage, are more like genius. . . . You have something of the genius in you, since you create. . . . That's fine, very fine!'

It was just this 'creative gift' which was sometimes very disconcerting to the actors who played with Lavalliere, for it led her to indulge in brilliant extemporisations which confused her colleagues and were hardly complimentary to the author. But she persisted in 'gagging' (joking and quipping) in spite of all remonstrances, and since her sparkling improvisations invariably assured the success of the piece, there was nothing to be said.

Her most ambitious dreams were now realities. She had fame and wealth and the power that comes with the possession of both. Managers of other theatres clamoured for her services. As a comedienne, she was unique, for she had gaiety, freshness, vitality, and intense feeling, combined with a tenderness both appealing and naive. She never 'acted', she lived her parts, hence the perfect naturalness of her interpretations. Her admirers were not only those belonging to the

theatrical world. Her reputation for wit and her gift of repartee made her popular with writers, politicians, and cultured people of all kinds. She was sought after by the greatest in the land; royalty asked to be introduced to her and she received them as equals and refused to be patronised. She had her full share of 'temperament', and many stories are told of her capriciousness. The following is a well-known example.

The King of Spain, Alfonso XIII, arrived at the *Variétés* where she was playing in *Le Roi* when the curtain had already gone up. Lavalliere was on the stage and the King's arrival caused a momentary distraction to the audience. One of the actress' best lines went unapplauded and the favourite's vanity was piqued. She vowed that she would 'revenge herself' upon the royal culprit and to show her displeasure refused to receive him during the interval. When she appeared again on the stage, she was radiant. She had defied a king! But her ill-temper was short-lived and meeting the king in a restaurant shortly afterwards in Biarritz she seized the opportunity to make amends. Alfonso XIII had risen from his seat to bow to her and when the meal was over, she went to sit at his table. Seeing his ill-concealed surprise at the newly-acquired jet-black tint of her hair, Lavalliere said prettily: 'I knew that you would be here tonight, Your Majesty, so I had my hair dressed like a Spaniard's!'

Another kindly admirer of hers was Edward VII of Britain, who was passing through Paris about this time, and who announced his intention of going to see the star in *Le Roi*. It happened that she was ill that day and did not intend to play that night. When asked by telephone if she could make a special effort in honour of the distinguished visitor to appear, she replied that it was impossible; but that if His Majesty could wait until the following night she would do her utmost not to disappoint him. The King graciously consented to postpone his departure and Lavalliere rose from her sick-bed to play her part. The next day she was obliged to leave Paris for a rest-cure.

Her popularity increased rather than waned with the years. Her wealth was enormous, both from her theatrical earnings and from her friends and admirers: She had a sumptuous flat in the *Champs Elysees*, decorated and furnished in the latest fashion, which included concealed lighting – then practically unknown, – and a room furnished in polished ebony with purple hangings. Eve hated the room and privately thought it hideous; but it was good publicity so it had to remain. To get away from it, she took another flat in Auteuil and spent most of her time there. Her days were crowded now with social functions in addition to her work at the theatre, for she was always in request and no fete was complete without her.

Yet behind all the glamour and glitter that surrounded her, Eve's private life was not a happy one. She had long given up the practice of her religion, which would have accorded ill with her manner of living, and she led a brilliant, restless existence that brought her no real satisfaction. She had no home nor any knowledge of the happiness of home-life. Fernand Samuel of the *Variétés*, who had passed in common estimation for her husband, had left his chateau in the Vosges to their only child, a girl. Lavalliere was alone in a world that applauded the great artist, but knew and cared nothing for the woman. Yet she had not forgotten the religion that she had

deserted.

In 1911, she had a serious operation and spent some weeks in a nursing-home conducted by the Sisters of Saint Saviour. The ten days that followed the operation was the first period of peace and calm she had known for many years. Her courage and patience edified the Sister in charge of her, to whom she spoke of the life she was leading and of which she repented. But after that ten days, her door was opened to visitors and the world claimed her once more. Her repentance if genuine was short-lived, and after a period of convalescence at the fashionable watering-place of Evian, she resumed her old life. Yet her disillusionment was increasing with every year. She had tasted all that the world could offer her: fame, wealth, excitement, admiration; all her dreams had come true.

And she saw the emptiness, the hollowness of worldly success. 'Even when I was at the height of my success,' she said years later, 'I used to leave the stage victim to sadness I cannot describe.' And again: 'A voice seemed to follow me everywhere saying: "Eve, you weren't made for this sort of thing," and sometimes I despaired even to the point of wanting to commit suicide.'

Except for a short visit to London in 1916, where she played in aid of war charities, Eve spent the first three years of the Great War in Paris. But the strain of extra charity performances to which she gave her services generously, in addition to her usual work and the difficulties of living in war-time Paris, was too much for her and brought her in May, 1917 to the verge of breakdown. She had just signed a contract with Lucien Guitry to tour the States in the coming winter, and it was essential that she should take a complete rest away from the city. She decided to look for a chateau in Touraine, and with that object left Paris accompanied only by her maid and companion, Leona Delbecq, a young Belgian refugee.

That journey to Touraine was the turning point in Lavalliere's career. When she left Paris she left more than her luxurious flat and her wealthy friends; she left her profession, her old life, her old self, everything that in the estimation of her world made life worth living. And in return, she found God.

On making enquiries at Tours where she took rooms at the *Hotel de l'Univers*, Eve was told that the Chateau of La Porcherie, some miles from Tours, was to let. The management of the property was in the hands of the parish priest of Chanceaux-sur-Choiselle, a neighbouring village. Lavalliere, in her impatience to conclude the matter drove out at once to inspect the Chateau and interview Father Chasteigner the Cure. The property proved all that could be desired and in a few days' time, the actress and her household were installed.

The day after her arrival was a Sunday and in the afternoon, Father Chasteigner decided to pay a visit to his new tenant. He found her in the byre seated on a three-legged stool, watching with a town-dweller's interest the cows being milked.

Reluctantly leaving the novel spectacle, she enthused over the perfections of country life to the

Cure as they strolled up and down the farmyard. Monsieur le Cure listened smiling, for awhile; then he said quietly: 'By the way, Mademoiselle, I did not see you at Mass this morning.'

Lavalliere was startled. It was a long time since anyone had challenged her so directly.

'Well, Monsieur le Cure,' she said at last, 'I didn't like to come without your permission; after all, you know who I am – 'Lavalliere of the *Variétés*' – Still, if you've no objection. . . .'

Now, the Cure knew too much of the world to be surprised at her absence; but she was one of his parishioners now and he would treat her as such. So he replied: 'Objection? Why should I object? The church is open to everyone. Anyway I shall continue to expect you.'

Lavalliere smiled and no more was said. But the following Sunday she was at Mass, kneeling in the midst of the peasant folk. Father Chasteigner preached of great penitents, beginning with Magdalen and continuing the series each succeeding Sunday. One day, Lavalliere, who was now on very friendly terms with him, ventured to say: 'There is one thing you forgot to put in your sermon.'

'Quite possibly. What is it?'

'My name at the end; because it was certainly for my special benefit that you were preaching.'

The grace of God was beginning to work in Lavalliere's soul. Aided by the Sunday Mass and also by the thought-compelling quiet of the country, she began to take stock of her life and to realize the futility of it. For the first time she spoke to Leona about religion and was genuinely shocked to hear that she had not made her First Holy Communion.

'Not made your First Communion? Oh, but you must put that right. . . . I made mine at Perpignan, and I shall never forget what a happy day it was, the only really happy day of my life. . . . Of course, making your First Communion is a serious matter.'

She continued . . . 'I suppose you really do want to make it?'

'Yes, if it's not too late.'

'Very well, I shall see the Cure about it tomorrow.'

The following day, Eve approached Father Chasteigner. 'Monsieur le Cure, Leona here has not made her First Communion. Could she make it now?'

'Why not?' the Cure replied. 'Of course, I must instruct her first.'

'And . . . may I . . . go with her?'

'Well . . . after all, your case is rather different, isn't it? I'd have to get the Archbishop's permission first. But in any case there is nothing to stop your attending the instructions with

Leona.’

So for the next few days, the famous star of the *Variétés* and the young Belgian refugee came almost daily to Monsieur le Cure and listened to his instructions with deep attention and humility.

On one occasion, they had been talking about the supernatural and Eve declared that she had sometimes taken part in spiritist practices. Father Chasteigner smiled. ‘Ah, so you do believe in the devil’, he said. ‘Well, all I can say is, be careful. You may end by finding yourself in direct contact with him.’

His words impressed Lavalliere and she said to Leona later: ‘Monsieur le Cure may very well be right, because if there’s a devil, there’s a God.’ And how had she treated that God all her life? She thought long and seriously that night, and it was a quieter and more subdued Lavalliere who attended the next Catechism class. Father Chasteigner noted her changed demeanour and gave her Lacordaire’s *Sainte Maria Madeleine*, (a life of Saint Mary Magdalen) which she read with tears.

Her changed outlook showed itself in her general attitude, to the alarm of her servants who had copied their mistress in neglect of all religious practices. But they dismissed it as ‘another crazy fad of hers. She’ll get over it.’ But Eve did not ‘get over it’. On the contrary, her sorrow for her past life and her desire to do penance for it, increased every day. At last, to her joy Father Chasteigner received an answer to his request for permission to receive her back to the Sacraments. ‘I give you all the permission you need,’ wrote the Vicar-General, ‘you have begun far too good a work to leave it now unfinished.’

The Cure arranged that Eve and Leona should make their Communion together on Sunday, 19th June. With intense fervor, Eve prepared for the great event and confessed her sins with humility and sorrow. She received Holy Communion on the appointed day with tears of joy. It was truly a new life that had begun; henceforth she counted her age from that day. Her years of triumph and success in Paris were forgotten. Eve had never been lukewarm nor hesitant in her desires, and now she let nothing stand in the way of her union with God.

To get daily Mass entailed a walk of six and sometimes ten kilometers over rough cobbled roads; but the woman who had come to Touraine in a luxurious limousine, walked to hear Mass and receive Holy Communion several times a week for the rest of the time that she was at the Chateau.

And her future? She had to come to some decision about that. ‘And now,’ she said one day to Father Chasteigner, ‘what are you going to do with me?’

‘Do with you? But you’re going back to the theatre, aren’t you?’

‘Oh, no. I have done with all that.’

‘But why? You can be a good Christian and a good actress at the same time.’

‘No, no! You don’t understand. Now that I know what it is to live I can’t possibly go back to that existence.’ And that sentence summed up as nothing else could the depth and sincerity of Eve’s conversion.

The Cure looked dubious. He was distrustful of a decision taken so quickly, but Eve continued: ‘I know what you think but let me tell you this: You know that I’m supposed to be studying a play here. Well, I haven’t looked at a word of it since the day of my Communion, and I don’t intend to.’

To further convince him, she wrote at once to cancel all her theatrical engagements, offering to pay the necessary compensation; but making it quite clear that her decision was irrevocable.

The fashionable world of Paris was thunder-struck. Furthermore, it was bewildered and refused to take Lavalliere’s plain statement as the truth. The wildest of rumours circulated in the Press as the reasons for her retirement. She had been disappointed in love, she had been disfigured by an experiment in beauty treatment; she had made use of her friendship with a German diplomat to indulge in espionage and was now in prison. There were the inevitable wiseacres who smiled knowingly and spoke of ‘publicity’. Lavalliere had a genius for publicity. This was simply a ‘stunt’ to attract public attention and ensure a sensation with a dramatic return to the stage.

The real reason was simply ignored. It was too fantastic. After all, Lavalliere was . . . Lavalliere! It was not to be believed.

Meanwhile, the cause of all this excitement was leading a quiet life at La Porcherie, leaving her letters unanswered, and refusing to open her door except to a few privileged visitors. Her career as an actress was finished, forgotten. All that concerned her now was how she might best use the future for the glory of God and the salvation of her soul. Eve’s conversion was very thorough. The strong will and ardent spirit that had brought her worldly success was now directed entirely to union with God. But her piety was also practical. Remembering her own unhappy childhood, she thought of opening and directing a refuge for waifs and strays. But upon reflection, she realized that she had neither the disposition nor the experience necessary for such an undertaking, and she decided to wait a little before coming to any definite decision.

Her days were passed in prayer and self-sacrifice and in works of charity. Her love of the poor and her good heart led her to an impulsive if high-handed action that showed that her conversion had not destroyed her sense of humour. A certain Ambassador who had been one of her greatest and most generous admirers wrote begging for an interview. He received the following reply: ‘Reception impossible. Send cheque 10,000 at once.’ Delighted to hear that the star was at least alive and free, he dispatched the money, which Lavalliere promptly distributed in charity. She seems to have repaid him with her prayers for after her death he made a pilgrimage to the house

at Thuillieres where she spent her last days and returned subsequently to the practice of his religion.

But the desire to leave the world grew ever strong in Eve's mind and she determined to enter the Carmel. Nothing but the most complete sacrifice of herself would content her, and she burned for mortifications and penitential exercises that would expiate her sinful past. She begged Father Chasteigner to act on her behalf; but the Cure warned her that her health would never stand the rigours of life in Carmel and advised her to wait for a while.

While she was thus undecided what to do, she got a letter from her daughter Jeanne Samuel, asking her to come and stay with her at the Chateau in the Vosges. Hoping that she might do some good there, Eve departed with Leona for the Vosges. But her sufferings at the irregularities of Jeanne's household were extreme. Her daughter's manner of living was a bitter sorrow to Lavalliere for the rest of her life, and only the desire of converting her made Eve stay on now in the Chateau. The atmosphere of luxury and wellbeing that surrounded her might well have caused her to relax a little her life of prayer and penance, but it only roused her to greater efforts. She and Leona spent many hours in the church beside the Chateau, praying for the unhappy household.

It was at this time that, referring to her daughter's life, she wrote to Father Chasteigner: 'The world which gives its approval is made up of beings who do not know God, who live solely for the life of this earth, and think neither of their souls, nor of death, nor of hereafter: It's a world which accommodates itself to everything and doesn't care. I can't do it; my whole being revolts at the idea, and if I remain joyful and calm, the reason is that God has changed my soul, has destined it for Himself, and wants to show me, before I definitely go to Him, the emptiness of everything else. I feel lonelier here than anywhere else. I am Earth's eternal orphan (*l'eternelle orpheline de la terre*): all my life I have sought in vain for my heart's nourishment, that nourishment of tenderness and affection, to which my heart has always aspired and yet never attained. My heart was being starved to death, for all that it was given was truffles and champagne, and it needed plain healthy food.'

Eve did not confine herself to devout sentiments. She and Leona went in pilgrimage to two distant shrines, rising on each occasion at four o'clock in order to arrive in time to hear Mass and receive Holy Communion.

The second time they did not arrive until 11 o'clock, but they travelled fasting and went to Holy Communion. Eve's prayers were offered continually for her daughter's conversion, of which for a time she had great hopes. But at last, she could no longer persuade herself that Jeanne showed any signs of real repentance, and sorrowfully she returned to Touraine. The idea of entering Carmel never left her, but as the obstacles were many, and as she neither desired, nor could afford to remain the mistress of a large country house, she decided to go to Lourdes where she might pursue her life of prayer and penance.

One thing remained to be done before she could make the break with the past complete. She was

obliged to return to Paris, to dispose of her costly flat fitted with all that money and taste could procure. But she did not linger; beauty and luxury meant nothing to her now, and she instructed her notary to sell everything that belonged to her. Furniture, pictures, ornaments, even her jewels and furs were sold at much less than their value since it was known that she was in a hurry to get rid of them.

The news of her presence in Paris and of her drastic disposal of her possessions started a fresh campaign of speculation in the less reputable newspapers. ‘I have had a lot to suffer here at the hands of the third-class Newspapers; there are some abominable things,’ she writes to her Father-in-God, as she calls Father Chasteigner. ‘I don’t mind, however, for with God’s good help I bore everything bravely. But even with these mud-slingings, as silly as they were cowardly, there has been much room for satisfaction. People are so full of admiration that I am confused and disturbed by it. I am leaving without a regret, without a turning of the head. I am leaving with a heart full of a sense of duty, and with a very real support from Above, and that is a joy which no one can understand, and which no one can take from me.’

That the change in Eve was not confined to her spiritual life but showed itself also in externals, is fully illustrated by the following incident.

A certain amount of theatrical business had to be gone through, and one day Eve was obliged to visit a theatrical agency. She was not recognised by the staff, who a few months earlier would have been thrilled by a visit from ‘the great Lavalliere’. She was told that the director was out and she sat down meekly, on a bench to wait for him. The director arriving a few minutes later saw a simply-dressed woman whose face, innocent of make-up, was half hidden by a shabby hat. Taking her for a suppliant of some kind – she could hardly be an actress in those clothes – he asked abruptly: ‘What do you want, Madame? What are you doing here?’

Lavalliere lifted her eyes, those dark unforgettable eyes, and the director gasped. ‘Lavalliere!’ he exclaimed. ‘Is it possible?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘it’s Lavalliere;’ and in a tone that brought tears to his eyes, she added simply: ‘I have never been so happy as since that day when God called me.’

Within a few days, Eve had started for Lourdes. Lavalliere of the *Variétés* was dead.

Eve stayed at Lourdes until January, living first at the Villa Bethane and later at the Convent of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. The story of those three months is best told in her own words. Her sensitive soul did not fail to respond to the spiritual atmosphere of Lourdes. ‘I am living in such an atmosphere of piety and faith that my own faith and piety increases with every hour of every day,’ she writes to Father Chasteigner soon after her arrival.

Her longing to enter Carmel intensified. ‘I desire it more than ever and I really believe that it is there that God wants me. . . . My place is not at Saint Baslemont (Jeanne’s home). In living that

sort of family life with Jeanne and her friend, I am myself living in sin and these young people cannot help but believe that they are doing no harm since I, her mother, live on friendly terms with them. . . . I do not know what will become of me; I am in God's hands and have confidence in Him. . . .'

But her efforts to enter the Carmelites were frustrated at every turn. The Carmel of Lourdes, of Lisieux, of Avignon, were besieged in vain. Then the Mother Superior of the Immaculate Conception convent was approached but her reply was that Eve must wait until the Superior could go to Rome to put the matter verbally before her council.

Eve did not give up hope, and in the confident hope that she would become a religious, she prepared herself by leading a life of absolute simplicity and conventual regularity.

Her food was of the plainest quality, and the fruit, which had become a necessity to her, is a subject for apology. 'It is simply and solely for our health that I allow myself this expense,' she writes to Father Chasteigner, asking him to order some cooking prunes to be sent to her from Tours since those at Lourdes are much inferior and 'horribly dear'.

As with food, so with clothes: 'We've bought some big flat-heeled slippers, a very rustic sort of footwear, which if it doesn't favour the foot, makes up for it by being solid, practical and warm.' Thus writes the woman who, six months previously, could not find anything in Paris good enough for her. She had been the first to set the fashion for bobbed hair: now she was letting her hair grow, heedless of the unbecoming effect. When a front tooth fell out she refused to have the gap filled, suffering the disfigurement as a punishment for her former vanity.

Her life would have been hard for anyone; for the pampered luxury-loving variety star, it was positively heroic.

'Rise at a quarter to six. At half-past six after a wash in cold water, we go down to the little chapel to make our meditation. Mass at seven and Holy Communion every day.

'Breakfast at eight. Then Leona does our two rooms while I myself knit or read a little. Then I go for my hour of adoration from nine to ten and Leona from ten to eleven. Then we go to the Grotto to say a decade of the Rosary; I bathe my eyes, we drink a little water, and we climb back home; there's one's mending to do and then it's the Angelus and lunch time. The afternoon varies: sometimes we visit an old lady who is a lodger here for the end of her days; sometimes we go to gather wood or to do our errands. Then we sew, knit, read until five, time for Benediction. After the ceremony, Mademoiselle Caplat gives us an hour's catechism, explained as to children – which is what we are. At half-past six, I say my evening prayers – which are fairly long, because I add lots of things to them; then

comes the Angelus and dinner. We go upstairs to bed; say a few more prayers – and that’s that.’

It was a drastic change for one whose days had been passed in an atmosphere of excitement and admiration, amidst luxurious surroundings, and it was inevitable that Eve should suffer. She suffered cruelly and to mental anguish was added physical hardship. – ‘It is very cold, snowing; the climate is severe; my hands are swollen and I am perpetually frozen,’ she writes.

‘We drink nothing but ice water, and I’m afraid we may not be able to hold out against such cold. Three days ago, I fell victim to a real moral depression and was seized with despair, so cold did I feel in my room at six o’clock in the morning, with the draught coming through the badly fitting door, as well as through the window, where the cambric curtains were floating out like a flag.

‘At the thought of having to live and suffer like that all my life, I grew discouraged; however, I pulled myself together and it’s all over and here I am, getting along as well as ever. A good point, worthy of note, is that the idea of resuming my former life never even came into my head. Oh, no! The past is more hateful to me every day; and whatever my present physical or moral sufferings may be, I love them and would prefer to die rather than fall back again into the old life.’

Christmas and New Year came and passed with their memories of happy reunions and merrymaking in cheerful surroundings. It was a hard time for Eve. ‘I am feeling very melancholy,’ she writes to her Father-in-God, Father Chasteigner. ‘The feast of the family and I feel so lonely. Jeanne wired to me several days ago that she was leaving Paris in response to an urgent business call, and I have had no further news since; I don’t know even where she is. We had planned to celebrate Christmas together and we are separated to such a degree that if something happened to me, I wouldn’t even know how to give her warning. All, that is making me sad as you can imagine!’

Just at this time, renewed endeavours on the part of the theatrical world to discover her whereabouts, caused her further anxiety. ‘I don’t want letters,’ she wrote to Father Chasteigner, ‘I don’t want anything at all except to be shut up in Carmel as soon as possible. . . . If it’s not God’s plan to have me in Carmel, I shall resign myself, I shall do what He wills. I am on earth henceforth only to obey, the rest does not matter.’

But mental worry combined with the unceasing austerities she practised proved too much for Eve’s delicate constitution, and she contracted a severe chill which kept her in bed ten days and then left her in a state of unutterable depression and weariness. She was badly in need of a change, but the poor cannot afford to take holidays, so for a while she struggled on. But at last, she wrote to her Father-in-God a letter of great desolation of spirit, in the course of which she says ‘One doesn’t pass suddenly from so active a life as was mine, to this sort of existence without suffering considerably by it. If I were in a convent, I should have a rule to follow, a fixed

round of toil; the boredom would be impossible for me.

‘Whereas, living like this, without moral support, without distractions, continually shut in with my thoughts and scruples, is giving me cerebral anaemia, and at times I find the service of God too wearisome. Books frighten me, for never, never shall I arrive at perfection. Everything frightens me, especially myself. I love God, I ask Him to make me die rather than offend Him wilfully: so you see how things are!’ . . .

She begged Father Chasteigner to look out for a little house and garden where she and Leona might housekeep for them-selves, do a little good round about, and have the great advantage of the spiritual guidance of Father Chasteigner. She had not given up the hope and desire of entering Carmel for she adds: ‘Until God’s will for Carmel be made manifest.’

Father Chasteigner willingly consented; for it was obvious that for one of Eve’s temperament, the life that she was leading was unsuitable.

Shortly after this, Eve was summoned to Paris on business and gladly obeyed, hoping to get into touch with her daughter. But on her arrival in Paris, Jeanne calmly refused to come up to meet her and to make matters worse, Leona fell ill and was ordered to hospital for ten days. Eve was distracted. She felt ‘like a poor lost dog’ in Paris, but she couldn’t desert Leona and was obliged to remain. It was at this time that by chance she met two of her former associates, both now at the top of their profession, Monsieur Sacha Guitry and Yvonne Printemps. They hailed her with delight, taking it for granted that her presence in the city meant her return to the stage.

‘Ah, so the big joke is over, is it? Are you coming back to the stage? We were just about to go to Lourdes to fetch you. You see, we’re off to America and it has got to be a parade of stars.’

Eve shook her head. ‘May you have the same success as I – the grace of God!’ she said, and Yvonne Printemps broke down and wept.

The middle of April found Eve and Leona at Saint Baslemont. The Cure had not succeeded in finding them a home in Touraine, and the winter at Lourdes was too severe. So as an alternative to an hotel, they went to Saint Baslemont. There Eve had always the hope that she might obtain the conversion of her daughter. She availed of a Confirmation at Vittel to have herself and Leona confirmed during their stay at the Chateau; but otherwise it was a time of great distress to Eve, both on account of her daughter’s attitude which alternated between repentance and obduracy and on account of her own unsettled future.

She wanted to do God’s will, if she knew what it was. She had given herself entirely to God to do what He wanted, but He didn’t seem to want anything. Eve’s ardent impatient nature suffered intensely at this trial. Once again, she thought of Touraine and once again, Father Chasteigner tried and failed to find a suitable house. In August, 1918, Saint Baslemont became impossible, and because she could think of no other place where she would feel at home, Eve returned to Lourdes. This time she took a small apartment and at once, the peaceful atmosphere of Lourdes

had its effect on her troubled spirit.

The hard winter of the Pyrenees passed slowly by. Just before Christmas, Eve and Leona moved to some rooms close to the *Orphelinat Bernadette* (the Bernadette Orphanage) where they were able to get daily Mass and Holy Communion without difficulty. Eve's happiest hours were spent before the Blessed Sacrament in the little chapel of the *Orphelinat*. 'I have adored creatures and they have adored me,' she said one day to the Superioress. 'And to think that this Jesus whom I have never seen is the One whom I love above all things.'

It was a few months later that on the eve of leaving for the seaside (she and Leona had both been ill) she met Monsignor Lemaitre, Archbishop of Carthage. That meeting was destined to influence the rest of her life. 'God, who watched with a mother's love over His miserable creatures, put us on the path of Monsignor Lemaitre, Bishop of the Soudan (Tunisia, in fact),' she wrote to Father Chasteigner. 'He was leaving Lourdes himself the next day; but it was God's will that this meeting should take place – and it did take place. His Lordship gave me an appointment for the following morning, and after two hours' conversation undertook the direction of our souls. Magnificat! (My soul it magnifies the Lord!)

The first result of this was an invitation from Monsignor Lemaitre to attend a retreat, which he was to give to the Little Sisters of the Poor at Marseilles. Eve undertook the long journey joyfully and made it in the spirit of poverty, travelling third class and sitting eighteen hours on a wooden bench in a train packed with soldiers.

She was a long way from the old days when, as she once told someone: 'I didn't even know how to get myself a railway ticket; there was always a 'reserved compartment' waiting for me, all decked out in flowers.' Now she bore the weary journey uncomplainingly and her patience was rewarded.

'We see Monsignor Lemaitre almost every day,' she writes. 'He got us to make our general confession again and . . . our destiny is in his hands.'

Eve had hoped that the Bishop would allow her to enter the Missionary Order as a White Sister but she was disappointed. She fell ill again, and this time the doctor's verdict closed to her for ever all prospects of an active life. 'My grief came near to choking me,' she wrote, 'but now I have begun to realize that all is good and beautiful in this gift of Jesus, and it is with calmness, confidence, love and gratitude that I accept His decree.'

'We are at Marseilles for the moment,' she wrote later, 'but we are going to move on again in search of a corner in the sun, for the doctor wants me to have it. But it's very difficult to find the sun, the house and the church together.'

'The Superior of the White Sisters here, said yesterday that I was doing my Purgatory, valise in hand, and it's true. Still I abandon myself entirely to God. I have confidence in Him and nothing

else matters.’

It was a long road that Eve was travelling: Chanceaux, Lourdes, Saint Baslemont, Guethary, where she spent the third winter of her conversion and, finally, Thuillieres. It was at this little village in the Vosges that she eventually bought a tiny property.

Monsignor Lemaitre, who was still her spiritual director had strongly advised her against entering any convent; but he had no definite plans for her, and after one last unsuccessful attempt to enter Carmel, Eve realized that she must settle down somewhere ‘and devote herself to the one vocation which God had vouchsafed her – that of doing His will, with love at least, if not always with understanding.’ (*A Modern Magdalen, Eva Lavalliere (1866-1929)* by Father McReavy.)

In August, she hears from Monsignor Lemaitre. ‘His Lordship doesn’t want to hear anything more of the convent. It is my health, which has made him take this sudden decision? Perhaps it is ‘the Light’, which has enlightened him – Jesus, in His sublime Love, deigns to grant me who am but defilement, incomparable graces of Light and Love. My dear, kind Monsieur le Cure, I should need all my life, my days, my nights, to be able to give you a full glimpse of all that. I am the vilest of wretches, the most defiled, a veritable sewer, and Jesus surrounds me with His protection, in a word, loves me, and I feel His love. It is almost palpable! Here, then, you see God in all His infinite Mercy!’

On 15th September, 1920, Eve took possession of her home at Thuillieres. It was a small house with a kitchen-garden and a little orchard, just sufficient for their needs. She had the house painted white and the windows curtained in blue in honour of Our Lady Immaculate and she called it Bethany. Shortly after her arrival, she was received into the Third Order of Saint Francis, and began her religious life with a novitiate of seclusion, prayer and patience under hardship.

Life in the small house at Thuillieres was uneventful in the extreme. A visit from Monsignor Lemaitre is an event, which Eve describes to Father Chasteigner in a letter adding: ‘Apart from that, there is nothing new. I struggle as usual to reach a little nearer to perfection and find the same difficulty in attaining it; but all my being, all my will-power, are strained to this one and only end. To love, to love this God who loves us so much despite all our miseries, past and present.’

At Christmas, she writes: ‘Nothing new here, always the same little existence of complete abandonment to Jesus and His holy Mother. My health is not startling – it might be worse. Pray hard for us, dear Monsieur le Cure, that God may help us, for there’s a lot to be done, if I am to tame this horrible nature of mine!’

Their peaceful routine of work and prayer was suddenly broken by a letter from Monsignor Lemaitre. Eve had accepted unhesitatingly his decision in regard to entering a convent; now he was to help her to realize to some degree at least, her ardent desire to take an active part in the service of God.

Monsignor Lemaitre had organized an institute of nurses at Tunis, who as members of the Association of [Blessed] Charles de Foucauld, went into the Arab villages and tended the sick and the children, evangelising them less by preaching than by the example of their Christian charity.

It was to join this Association that the Bishop summoned Eve and Leona, a summons which they joyfully obeyed.

They sailed at once for North Africa and began their apostolate at Zaghouan, some forty miles from Tunis. They passed from one wretched village to another, nursing the sick and treating them for the terrible diseases of the eyes from which so many of the desert-dwellers suffered.

But Eve's delicate health could not withstand the hardships of the life and she contracted an African fever.

She was carried back to Tunis, where she lay for many months seriously ill. Yet her spirit never faltered. 'Our sweet Jesus will manifest His will when He pleases,' she writes to a friend. 'His poor sheep is waiting and with His grace will obey Him, whatever He may demand.' Speaking of her sufferings, moral and physical, she says: 'Of course I cry, I weep, I complain, I moan, but my will is willing to accept all that the will of my Jesus will; human nature is a vile hog (mine, I mean); it squeals like pigs do, before anything is done for them. The cowardice of the beast is a humiliating thing to admit, but I have to admit it. Then my will towers over it and says: "Expire if you will, but obey." Yes!'

When she was able to travel, she returned to Thuillieres to convalesce. Three times in the next few years, she made that journey to North Africa, working each time until her exhausted body got the better of her zealous spirit and she collapsed. Her last effort was made in the autumn of 1924, and before the end of the year, she was back in France – this time for good. Her health had broken down irreparably, and she came back to Thuillieres with a peaceful heart to prepare for death.

The last five years of Eve's life, which were passed uninterruptedly at Thuillieres, were years of great suffering, – patiently, even joyously endured, – complete detachment from the things of this world and an ever-increasing love of God. Her life was made up of prayer and sacrifice. She abandoned herself entirely to God's will. 'What does it matter where I am? What does it matter whether I live or die? Let Him reign alone, everything lies in that! To want, to do, to love nothing but His will . . . I want to die to the world and to myself in order that Jesus may reign alone in me.'

Her tiny income she devoted almost exclusively to charity, retaining only the minimum sum essential for existence, as extracts from an old account book show. In one month 6,070 francs were given in charity, while for the same period her household expenses amount to no more than 392 francs. She grudged every penny that she spent on herself, but in her alms, she was prodigal.

‘Her charitable donations,’ says the parish priest of Thuillieres, ‘both to pious causes and to the relief of moral and physical sufferings, were remarkable; she simply didn’t count what she gave.’

A description of her as she was at this period of her life is given in an article written by Robert de Flers, the playwright, who was one of the very few visitors admitted to her retreat at Thuillieres.

‘I found, of course, a great change in her, who was in her day one of the most charming and most precious glories of the stage and for whom the stage has found no substitute. Sickness has kept her in seclusion these many long months. Her face has become pale; but her eyes, while retaining their sparkle have grown in warmth. Their gaze stretches further and higher. Her emaciated hands seem to join as of themselves. . . . Her voice, which formerly used to switch and change from tone to tone with such irresistible gaiety, had grown grave. An air of indescribable sweetness had settled round this frail creature whose nerves in the old days were often strained to breaking point. She still continues to radiate life, but it is no longer the life of here below. Long did I listen to her with emotion and respect. Not a word did she utter that did not breathe genuine simplicity. In every single one, there was evidence of the perfection of her interior life. She is modesty itself, simplicity itself. She knows that there is no ‘top-o-the-bill’ in Paradise.’

That was Eve as she appeared to those around her. What her interior life was can only be guessed, but extracts from her letters and from her spiritual note-book give us some idea of the heights she had attained. She had but one desire left – to love God. ‘To love, whatever state or disposition I find myself placed,’ she writes. ‘May the will of Jesus be my law, may His love be my life.’

‘My God, Blessed are You, I love You with my whole soul,’ she prays. ‘Lord God of my heart and soul, behold me. I am Yours. The flesh is weak and complains, but my soul is ready. *Fiat voluntas Tua!* (Let it be done according to Your will!) Even did I wish to love something other than You, Lord, I could no longer do it. Anything that I might have loved is now only desolation, ruin, infamy.’

In the midst of her sufferings, her soul knew periods of heavenly joy, when she exclaims: ‘Oh, Jesus, what must Heaven be if I am to judge of those brief moments when my soul is no longer of this world, when my happiness is ‘beyond all description’, for words are finite and my happiness is infinite. My God, I love You.’

Her charity has already been referred to, but Eve knew that true charity consists in more than the bestowal of material benefits.

‘Love, love to give and have nothing of your own,’ she writes to a friend. ‘Give even your generous thoughts, give your sufferings, give your merits, divest yourself of everything in order to become the dearly-beloved of Jesus, in order to gain an immortal crown.’

Her sufferings increased rapidly until at last she could no longer leave her bed. Yet Eve was happy, supremely happy.

‘You cannot realize how happy I am,’ she said to Robert de Flers.

‘In spite of your sufferings?’

‘Because of them.’ And her last words to him were: ‘When people mention me to you, make it quite clear to them, all those who know me, that you have seen the happiest, indeed, the most perfectly happy of women.’

Yes, it was because of her sufferings that Eve was happy. ‘I am and always will be very seriously affected – failing a miracle,’ she writes to Father Chasteigner two years before her death. ‘But I don’t ask our Lady for that, because I know the value of accepted sufferings, and that everything which happens to us has been foreseen from all eternity for the glory of God and our own greater good.’

Her eyesight had begun to fail but it troubled her little. ‘Open the eyes of my soul,’ she prayed, ‘that I may contemplate You and love You, adorable Trinity, even if I must pay for it with the death of my bodily eyes.’ And God heard her prayer.

‘My gallant Eve is suffering horribly from her eyes,’ Leona writes to Father Chasteigner in 1929. ‘The left eye is completely lost. They had to perform a very painful operation on it, to avoid taking it out and that without deadening it first, because she couldn’t support the cocaine – what a martyrdom!’

But Eve never faltered. ‘You and I, Jesus!’ she said, and ordered the doctor to proceed. The operation was unhappily a failure, and the doctor decided that it would be necessary to sew up the eye-lids. An anaesthetic was again impossible, but Eve submitted to the torture with unbroken calm. ‘It is only just,’ she said, ‘that God should punish a sinful thing such as I am.’ Her sufferings were atrocious, yet she seemed to welcome them, and when they diminished, exclaimed: ‘There, you see, Jesus is abandoning me. He finds me unworthy to suffer because I complain too much.’

Yet in actual fact, she bore everything with perfect resignation. ‘If God wants me to live, He will cure me,’ she said. ‘If not, I shall go joyfully.’

It was the summer of 1929 and Eve’s long pilgrimage was nearly at an end. She felt it herself and said: ‘Saint Joseph will be coming to fetch me one of these days,’ and it was on his day, Wednesday, that the end came. She died at daybreak on 10th July, 1929, as the Litany of the Blessed Virgin was being said at her bedside. On her humble tomb in the little cemetery of Thuillieres may be read the words which – , . . . chosen by herself, sum up perfectly the motive of her life:

*I HAVE LEFT ALL FOR GOD. HE ALONE IS SUFFICIENT FOR ME.*

***Editor's Affirmation:***

*In obedience to the Decree of Urban VIII, I protest that, for the miraculous deeds and gifts ascribed in this little book to certain servants of God, I claim no other belief than that which is ordinarily given to history resting on mere human authority; and that, in giving the appellation of Saint or Blessed to any person not canonised or beatified by the Church, I only intend to do it according to the usage and opinion of men.*

Editor:

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