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HISTORIC GUIDE

The story of the Duke of Lauzun

Once upon a time...

Once upon a time, long ago, there was a clearing in the thick curtain of forest which covered the countryside. It was a little hill cleared by Gallo Roman axes, and which the Gauls cultivated with care. The autumn harvests always attracted many skylarks, and the locals used to call it 'Skylark Hill' – Losa in Latin. This was quickly changed in the rough celtic language into Lausa, Lausum, and finally Lauzun. A hypothesis as good as any other....

In order to protect the valley which their farms (villas) had succeeded in making rich and fertile, the Romans built a powerful fortress at the top of Skylark Hill. It was destroyed during the invasions of the 5th and 6th centuries, but served as a basis for the first castle, at the foot of which the huts of the serfs and villeins sought protection.

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He openly cheated on her with loose women. (It was in 1682 that he bought the lovely house on the Ile St Louis in Paris (quai d'Anjou), which is still called the 'Hotel de Lauzun'.)

La Demoiselle died in 1693 without wanting to see him again, and Lauzun remarried in 1695 at the age of 63; his wife was Genevieve-Marie of Durford, daughter of Marshal de Lorges, and she was 15 years old. She accepted him thinking she would soon be a widow, and would be a rich, free and great lady! Lauzun lived for another 28 years... he had a magnificent old age, entertaining sumptuously, always elegantly dressed, and sparkling with wit. He finally died at the age of 90.

Such was the life of Antonin, Duke of Lauzun, who left both his ancestors and his contemporaries in the shade.

It is known that already in the 12th century, the Caumont family were lords of Lauzun, but unfortunately, there is little documentation still in existence dating from the Middle Ages. Nompar I sided with the Crusaders and fought against the Albigensians. His son Anissant fought with Simon de Montfort (a leader of the Albigensian Crusade). During the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), the Caumont family stayed loyal to the Kings of France and Jean-Adam Caumont took the title of Baron of Puyguilhem.

No doubt the Caumonts took part in the wars in Italy, and they played an important role during the Wars of Religion (1562-1598). Francois de Caumont, still loyal to the Catholic faith, was one of Montluc's (Royalist general) most trusted captains. In August 1565, King Charles IX slept at Lauzun. In 1570, the baronetcy was elevated to an earldom.

In 1576, the future King Henry IV arrived at the gates of the castle of Lauzun, to dine and sleep. At once the bell was rung at full volume to call the vassals; so many came running that Henri of Navarre was put out: 'Cousin', he said to the Count, 'you are more powerful than I am – take that bell down so that I hear it no more'.



When the Estates General was convoked in 1614, the then Count of Lauzun was one of the first to be chosen as a representative of the nobility. Gabriel II of Caumont stayed loyal to the King during the civil war which laid waste to the Guyenne region during 1621-22.

Count Gabriel found it hard to tolerate the yoke of d'Épernon, who was then governor of Guyenne, and even more so that of Cardinal Richelieu. From the beginning of the 'Fronde' (a series of civil wars in France during the minority of Louis XIV – 1648-53) he was in the RC League. His wife Charlotte, daughter of the Duke of La Force, was a protestant and therefore against Cardinal Mazarin (Richelieu's successor, and first Minister during the minority).

On 18 January 1650, when the arrest of Prince Condé was discovered, the nobles' rebellion broke out. The Princess of Condé sought refuge at Bordeaux and was warmly received, and the Count of Lauzun was one of her strongest supporters.



King Henri the 4th
Painted by Guillaume
Heaulmé



Portrait of the Duke of Lauzun.
Exposition **Les Mousquetaires**,
Museum of Army, Paris

La Demoiselle now acted on his behalf, and persuaded the King and Madame de Montespan to sell his freedom, which they did in an odious manner. The King deigned to grant him an audience, received him coldly, and then dismissed him. He met La Demoiselle at Montespan's house. The meeting was chilly. He had aged, changed, gone out of fashion, 'the spell was broken'. She gave him several properties, but he complained 'that she had given him so little that he had trouble (pain) accepting it!' It was perhaps only then that the secret marriage took place, followed by two years of quarrels and arguments, an intolerable existence despite the reconciliations. He openly cheated on her with loose women. (It was in 1682 that he bought the lovely house on the Ile St Louis in Paris (quai d'Anjou), which is still called the 'Hotel de Lauzun'.)

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The prince was later liberated and nominated as governor of Guyenne, but this did not calm the situation. The conflict between Condé and the Royal government worsened and hostilities broke out, and Lauzun fought with Condé's army.

As a punishment for his disloyalty, the Royalist General d'Harcourt commandeered 2,500 rations of bread per day from him, between the 12 and the 25 May 1652. The Count's position was critical, as the Royalist Generals wanted to destroy his castle to punish him. At 'Les Batailles' their troops were driven back with such force that they broke up and ran away in confusion, leaving more than 50 dead. However, the Province was by then exhausted, and had to surrender.

Gabriel de Caumont died in 1660. He had married Charlotte de Caumont, from the La Force branch of the family, and they had nine children. Antonin, the 'beau Lauzun', whose adventures would be in the headlines for so long, was their third child.

His life was as long as it was eventful; Saint Simon wrote in 1705: 'If you wanted to write a short volume on the life of Monsieur de Lauzun, you would have to miss out an awful lot'; and La Bruyere (a classic 18th century writer) added: 'It is scarcely permitted to dream what he has lived'. It is indeed true that Antonin, an ordinary younger son from Gascony, without title or fortune, was to have a strange and brilliant destiny.

At the age of 14, his father sent him to Paris to his cousin Marshal Gramont, to learn to be a courtier. His life will show that he learned his lessons well. As a young man, he was such an elegant horseman that all the ladies of the Court were mad about him. His fiery expression made many hearts beat faster and caused many tears to fall, and his successes were numerous; he was the very image of the seducer.

He came to the attention of Louis XIV, who made him Colonel of his Dragoon Guards, then in 1660 Captain of the 'Hundred Gentlemen'. He became a favourite because the King loved his wit, his cutting repartee, his daring. The esteem in which the King held him, and the favours he enjoyed, made many people jealous of him. Louvois (Louis' Secretary of State for War) went out of his way to ensure that he was not nominated as Grand Master of the Artillery. Lauzun told Madame de Montespan (who was his great friend, and the King's official mistress) about his disappointment, and she promised to mention it to the King.



Engraving of king
Louis the 14th

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He spent two years in solitary confinement, enclosed in a damp dark dungeon with iron bars. At the end of one year he was unrecognizable. In 1676, having tried for three years to make a hole in his cell wall with old nails and knives, Lauzun finally got into the next cell, broke down an iron barrier, and with the help of a rope made with his sheets, got down into the moat; however he was spotted, re-arrested, and then watched even more closely. La Demoiselle, faithful and fanatical, never forgot him for a moment, appearing at Court festivals with a mournful face.

In 1677, his sister requested his release, and managed to visit him. Led into the daylight, Lauzun – pale, thin, crushed – was dazzled. He declared that he could no longer understand what his lawyer said to him. His sister did not recognize him and fainted.



Hôtel Lauzun,
Ile Saint-Louis, Paris

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Engraving
of Antonin Nompar de
Caumont, Duc de
Lauzun
Par J-F Cazenave
British Museum



He himself reaffirmed his obedience to the King, who, gratified, promised him more favours, which would rekindle the envy of his enemies. He was nominated governor of the Berry region, and given 50,000 livres. La Demoiselle, meanwhile, was inconsolable. (They had perhaps already married in secret at this point?)

However, the rancour of Madame de Montespan, who hated Lauzun, brought catastrophe: one day she presented Lauzun to the King, denounced him as a two faced liar, and said that her own life was in danger as long as he remained at liberty, so that in the end the King had him arrested and taken by d'Artagnan to the fortress of Pignerol, on the 25 November 1671. He stayed there for 10 years in very harsh captivity, receiving no news from outside. It was thought that he would lose his mind, as he was allowed no intellectual or physical distractions.

As a precaution, Lauzun (reckless and indiscreet as ever) decided to hide under her bed, and from there overheard their conversation. Instead of supporting him, she heaped abuse on Lauzun, spoke of his arrogance and his vanity, and persuaded the King to do nothing for him. A few hours later, Lauzun asked her for news of her meeting. She assured him that she had spoken on his behalf, quoted her supposed words... he let her talk, then took her by the hand and told her, softly and quietly, word for word, the whole conversation that had taken place between her and the King; and then, still softly and quietly, called her all the worst names under the sun, and assured her that he would personally cut her tongue out... Madame de Montespan arrived at the Palace more dead than alive, and practically unconscious. She and the King both believed that it could only have been the devil himself who could have given him such a prompt and accurate account of what had happened.

After this scandal, anyone other than Lauzun would have gone home and kept his head down – knowing he was 'persona non grata'. However, two days later he had the nerve to ask the King why the position he had been promised had not been given to him. He broke his sword in front of the King and said 'that he no longer wished to serve a King who would break his word for a worthless woman'. The King, white with anger but keeping himself under control, threw his cane out of the window, not wanting to beat a gentleman. Lauzun was arrested and locked in the Bastille.

He only stayed there for six months however, as the King liked his wit and his company too much, so he reappeared at Court, more insolent and influential than ever.

Already at this time, in 1662, the 'Grande Demoiselle' (Anne Marie Louise d'Orleans, extremely wealthy princess, and 1st cousin to Louis XIV) had begun to fall in love with him. She was 34, he was 28. Yet he was not handsome, and had more faults than good qualities – he was vain, fickle, ambitious, solitary, wild, morose, extremely courageous, not to say foolhardy, at times insolent, and a man who would stop at nothing to achieve his aims. He had no culture, no charm, but a haughty and imposing appearance; a nobleman in his ways and with a sharp mind.

He had something which cannot be analysed, the most mysterious of gifts, that of being likeable, and the 'Grande Demoiselle' adored him. In 1662 she was not so dazzled that she could not see him as he was, with his greying hair, tousled and often greasy, his lovely blue eyes (but often tinged with red), his red and pointed nose...'As for his mood and his manners, I refuse to acknowledge them, talk about them, or copy them', she said. From 1662 to 1672, as Lauzun's favour grew, so did the love of the princess.



At the siege of Courtrai in 1667, and that of Lille, he distinguished himself by his bravery. Completely taken with him, La Demoiselle resolved to marry him. But the gulf between them was immense, the King could never consent to such a union. The whole Court laughed at the princess for the romantic passion she had conceived for this man, at the age of 43. She deemed Lauzun to be the only person worthy of her hand. The affair carried on, Lauzun continued as if unaware of the rumours, but still full of respect for the princess. He even advised her to marry, then stopped seeing her in order not to compromise her chances. Exasperated, La Demoiselle declared her love to him. But the King, having initially consented to this mismatch, came to his senses and said no, after listening to the appeals of the indignant Court Nobles. La Demoiselle screamed, cried, was in despair. Lauzun comforted her and advised her to go and dine with the King, to thank him for having broken off an affair which she would surely have regretted within four days.