

# The Flight to Varennes

Marisa Linton takes us on a coach journey across France.

On the night of 20 June 1791 a portly middle-aged man, dressed inconspicuously in brown, with a dark green overcoat and his hair covered by a grey wig, walked out of the Tuileries palace past the guards. For the past 12 nights the Chevalier de Coigny, dressed in a similar fashion, had left the palace at the same hour. The guards had grown used to the Chevalier's exits, and gave him barely a glance. Yet this time it was not the Chevalier, but the king himself, Louis XVI. The king was making a midnight escape from Paris, going on the run from the forces of the French Revolution. As the king emerged from the palace he was met by a tall, handsome cabman who guided him to where a line of hackney carriages, their lamps lit, stood waiting for passengers. Inside one of the carriages Louis's children were already waiting: the six-year old Dauphin, Louis-Charles, disguised in a girl's dress, and his 12-year-old sister, Marie-Thérèse, known as Madame Royale. Also in the carriage were Louis's sister, Madame Elizabeth, and the Duchess de Tourzel, the children's governess. Moments later another woman appeared out of the shadows to join Louis: his queen, Marie-Antoinette, dressed for the first time in her life in plain clothes, a brown dress and heavy black veil (she had already sent on her hairdresser ahead of her, considering him indispensable for a queen planning a long journey). The dashing cabman was in reality a Swedish nobleman, Count Axel von Fersen. He was devoted to the French monarchy, and more particularly to Marie-Antoinette; in all likelihood they were lovers. Fersen and the queen had planned the details of the flight between them, though with the full acquiescence of the king.

There had been rumours for weeks that the king would flee revolutionary Paris. One of his brothers, and his two aunts had already departed. His other brother fled that same night. National Guardsmen (the revolutionary militia) had been posted in force around the



King Louis XVI by Antoine-François Callet.

exits to the palace, under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette. There were several informers among the royal family's servants. The flight had already been put off from the previous night due to one of the serving women, a revolutionary sympathiser, having shown suspicion at signs of preparation for a journey and asking awkward questions.

Why would a king fly from his own capital city and leave his country? Louis XVI had been raised to be an absolute monarch, making laws at his own will, and in theory (if not always in practice) consulting no will but his own. This was how it had been for hundreds of years. Then in 1789 the French Revolution began, and everything changed. In place of autocratic monarchy, entrenched



RETOUR DE VARENNES ARRIVÉE DE LOUIS SEIZE À PARIS,  
le 25 Juin 1791.



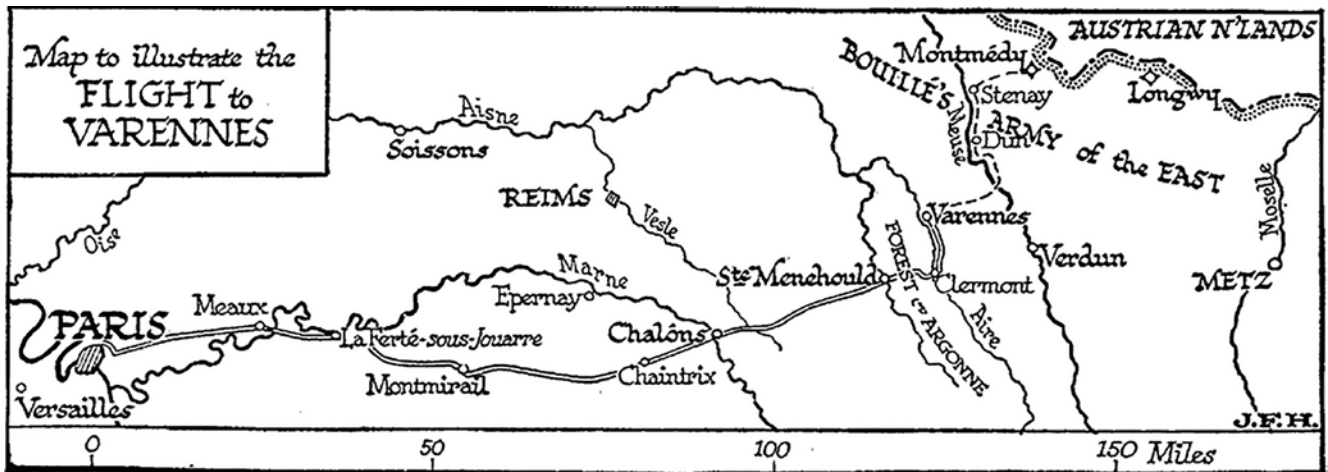
social hierarchy, and deference to a privileged nobility, there was liberty, equality and the *rights of man*. A new political world had come into being; one to which Louis, by education, formation and temperament, found it impossible to adjust. He now had to share power as a constitutional monarch with a National Assembly. Of all his autocratic powers few now remained to him, except the power to block the Assembly's proposed laws for a limited time. In 1789 the king had been forced under duress from the revolutionary crowd to abandon his palace at Versailles and come to live in the Tuileries, under the watchful eyes of the Parisian crowd and the National Guard. The king had lost his freedom of movement and felt himself hemmed in by the Revolution's forces. While moderates like Lafayette remained in power, the security of the monarchy was assured, but Louis and Marie-Antoinette did not see it like that; in their eyes Lafayette was a traitor of the worst kind, one who in supporting the Revolution had betrayed his own caste. Even worse, in the king's view, the Assembly had been busy for the last two years in preparing the final form of the new constitution. That task had almost come to an end. Soon Louis would be required to sign the constitution and give it his formal backing. It was to avoid this outcome that the king, who had been hesitating for two years, finally took the decision to join the growing ranks of nobles who had fled France and

become émigrés. Louis was heading for a fortress at Montmédy, just short of the Austrian border. From this vantage point Louis thought he could negotiate with the National Assembly with military back-up from his brother-in-law, the Austrian Emperor, to strengthen his hand. That such protection could easily lead to an Austrian invasion of France was a risk the king was prepared to take.

Beyond the city gates, the riskiest part of the venture behind them, the travellers transferred into a capacious Berlin coach. It had been chosen for its size and luxurious fittings, so that the family could travel together in comfort as befitted their station. As the chosen vehicle for a secret escape it was a bizarre choice. Drawn by six horses, it was painted an eye-catching yellow and black, with yellow wheels and white velvet upholstery. Three bodyguards accompanied the coach, dressed in bright yellow liveries. Behind followed a smaller coach, carrying several royal servants. It too was painted yellow. No one seems to have given much thought to the need for the travellers to be inconspicuous and avoid attention.

Fersen parted company with them, and the royal family travelled on under false identities, as the Baroness de Korff (in reality the Duchess de Tourzel), her children, her steward (the king), and her other staff. During the long hours on the road north-east the king passed the time following their route on a





map – geography fascinated them, and he had travelled little in his life – and imagining how Lafayette and the other revolutionary leaders would react when they woke up to find the birds had flown. The plan was to rendez-vous with troops led by the Marquis de Bouillé, whose military escort would provide protection on the last stages of the journey. But the travellers were beset by delays – they had started late, the huge and heavily-laden coach travelled more slowly than Fersen had calculated; a wheel was damaged, traces snapped, and several times the horses stumbled and fell. Meanwhile detachments of mounted troops sent to provide escort were confused by the delays and encountered unexpected hazards of their own: they were, variously, beset by suspicious peasants with pitchforks, lost in forests, and in one case were drinking in a tavern when the coach unexpectedly arrived and their commander, fearful of hostility from locals if he tried to marshal his soldiers, let the king pass on unaided. Bouillé, distrustful of the loyalty of French

soldiers, had sent foreign, German-speaking troops, and their presence in itself attracted suspicion. Mile after mile the yellow coach travelled on alone. The king showed so little understanding of his situation and the extent of the very real support for the Revolution among his people, that he persisted in travelling with the blinds up, so that all might see him and his distinctive features, his large nose and double-chin (made familiar from the currency), and even descending from the coach in full view of bystanders. All along the road rumours began to fly that something was not right about the mysterious travellers.

Meanwhile, the Assembly reacted with consternation to the news of the king's disappearance. Lafayette and the other moderates, fearful of the political unrest that would ensue if people realised that their king had abandoned them, invented a story that he had been kidnapped against his will from the palace. This fiction might have been more plausible if the king had not left behind a Declaration

in which he repudiated his apparent acquiescence to the Revolution – for the past two years he had been acting under duress, he said. The moderates were in a difficult situation. How could one have a constitutional monarchy without a monarch? Meanwhile radical orators at the Jacobin Club revealed that the king had gone of his own free will and began to call for the deposition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. The moderates held the line with difficulty, stalled for time, and began a frantic search for the errant king.

The king's flight came to an end on the night of 21 June at the small town of Varennes, some 40 miles from Montmédy and the border (now the Belgian border but at that time part of the Austrian Empire). A man called Drouet, a postmaster who managed a relay stables, had recognised the king earlier that day, and had ridden across country to intercept him. The locals, informed by Drouet that the party of odd travellers staying at The Golden Arm were actually the king and his family, entered the inn to confront them. At first the king and queen tried to bluff their way out, denying the allegation. Then a townsman was produced who had lived at Versailles and uttered the stammering words, 'You, sire!' Louis admitted the truth – yes, he was the king. He then demanded the townspeople provide fresh horses and let the royal family continue. The townspeople were deferential, but would not lend themselves to such an action. Within hours, massed troops loyal to the Revolution had arrived. For Louis and Marie-Antoinette it was the end of the road.

The return journey was very different to the outward one. It was a road of bitter humiliation for the royal family. At all stops they were confronted with large, hostile and increasingly threatening crowds. The three bodyguards, still in

*La famille des Cochons ramenée Dans L'étable* (The family of pigs returned to the cowshed).



their jaunty yellow outfits, were threatened and intimidated. They had reached about midway on the journey when the coach was met by two Jacobin deputies, Barnave and Pétion, sent by the Assembly to restore authority and order in its name. The deputies got into the coach to travel with the king and queen. It was crowded and hot. The children sat on the women's knees. The coach moved with aching slowness. Refreshments were handed into the coach. Pétion, eager to show that he was not under the spell of royalty, ate chicken and drank wine with a plebeian air, throwing the chicken bones past the startled king's face and out of the window. Pétion flattered himself that Madame Elizabeth was smitten with him and that, had they been alone, she would have succumbed to his manly charms. What she made of him is not recorded. Pétion marvelled at the iron self-control of Marie-Antoinette and Madame Elizabeth who never once, in 12 hours, asked that the coach be stopped so they could relieve themselves. Barnave, sitting knee by knee beside the queen, changed his loyalties on that journey, and went from proud revolutionary to servant of the monarchy. Taking advantage of moments when Pétion slept, Barnave promised Marie-Antoinette his faithful service and to do all in his power to protect the monarchy and restore its influence. She accepted the service graciously, but she put no trust in moderate revolutionaries. In her mind she was already deciding to put her faith in military intervention by her Austrian relatives. War was coming.

Historians are often invited to play the counter-factual game, to ask what could have happened if events had turned out differently? The failure of the royal family's flight hinged on so many small circumstances that did not go their way. What if the serving woman had not grown suspicious and the flight had not been put off another day? What if the royal escapees had made better time and reached the rendez-vous with the troops who were looking for them? What if the king and queen had not been recognised? They so very nearly reached Montmédy and the soldiers waiting for them. Had they done so they themselves would probably have been safe, but for France itself the consequences would have almost certainly been disastrous. The king maintained that he had not meant to cross the border, but to negotiate with the Assembly a constitutional settlement that was more to his taste. That plan was never likely to have succeeded. The flight of the king to a point so close to the Austrian border, within easy reach of Austrian soldiers and French émigrés, would have left the Assembly in an untenable position. In all likelihood the king – whether he wanted to or not – would have quickly been obliged to cross the border and put himself under the direct protection of the Austrian Emperor in order to ensure his personal safety and that of his family. Civil war would have been the almost certain result.

On the other hand, what if the king had remained at his post in Paris? Up until the moment when the king took flight there had been considerable loyalty to him. Most revolutionaries saw him as a man of goodwill, who genuinely wanted the good of his people. When they blamed the court for opposing the Assembly, it was Marie-Antoinette, or the king's ministers on whom suspicion lay, not Louis himself. The ill-considered flight to Varennes shattered that loyalty. As one revolutionary put it, 'We wanted him, he never wanted us.' We cannot know for sure what might have happened, but there is a good chance that with the king in place, the constitutional monarchy would have been secure; the moderate revolutionaries would have held the line; over time the moderate constitution would have established itself, in a form not that different to the British monarchy and parliament; and war, civil war, terror and republic would not have ensued.

We cannot be sure of what would have happened. But we know very well what *did* happen. The king had forfeited the trust of his people. Radical revolutionaries called for the

deposition of the monarchy. Moderates like Lafayette and Barnave resisted, and tried to destroy the radical wing of the Revolution. But a movement to flush out the king and queen as conspirators against the Revolution, led by the Girondin leader, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, resulted in war with Austria, which in turn led to a second revolution in August 1792, and the overthrow of the monarchy in a pitched battle at the Tuileries. France became a republic and erupted into bitter political divisions, war, and terror.

Of the people who made the return journey in that Berlin coach, the consequences of that flight proved disastrous. Louis XVI was put on trial for treason and in January 1793 was decapitated by the newly-invented guillotine; Marie-Antoinette followed him in October. A month later it was the turn of Barnave, accused of conspiring with the monarchy, to mount the scaffold. Madame Elizabeth perished in the same way. Pétion, who had become an opponent of the radical Jacobins, escaped a similar fate by fleeing and going into hiding, before eventually, exhausted and terrified of recapture, shooting himself on the edge of a forest, where his body was found, half-eaten by wild animals. The fate of the Dauphin was still more pitiable: imprisoned in grim conditions, beaten and coerced into repudiating his parents and his heritage, he died a miserable and lonely death, probably from a combination of tuberculosis and neglect, in 1795. Of all the passengers on that fateful journey, only Madame de Tourzel, imprisoned after the fall of the monarchy, and the king's daughter, Marie-Thérèse, survived the Revolution. In December 1795 Marie-Thérèse was exchanged for French prisoners and immediately left France for Vienna, the last living member of her immediate family.

### Further reading

T. Tackett (2003) *When the King Took Flight*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

J. Hardman (2016) *The Life of Louis XVI*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

P. McPhee (2016) *Liberty or Death: the French Revolution*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

W. Doyle (1989) *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press

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