

Madame Claude was perhaps the classiest madam in the history of prostitution. Now in forced retirement, she still gets seated at the best tables in Paris

On a cold, bright blue day in Paris I stood by the fireplace of a beautiful apartment in the Palais Royal waiting for Madame Claude's hand on the bell, the sound of her foot on the same long wooden staircase that Colette and Cocteau used to climb. There never was a madam as gifted or successful in the history of prostitution, certainly since the invention of the telephone, as the remarkable Madame Claude. Little had been heard of her for almost 10 years, since she had fled to America: she had always been discreet to the point of mystery, and invisible to all but a few.

"Prostitution," I had been told, was not a word Madame Claude liked to hear attached to herself or to her business. She also forbade the use of the word "client". These were the words of brothels and bawdy houses. The clients were her "friends", even her "family", and they included kings (the Shah of Iran, who had a weekly standing order for Claude girls on the royal flight to Tehran on Fridays); a Middle Eastern king, "between two marriages", presidents, ministers, ambassadors, and many "leaders of industry", particularly, apparently, of Italian industry.

Throughout the years of De Gaulle and Pompidou, and some of Giscard — who, she believes, moved against her — she ran a call-girl service of such high quality and exclusivity that she became almost an extension of the French state and was considered to have its protection.

The speciality of the "Claude girls" was that they were indistinguishable from the most beautiful young women you might have seen from the late Fifties to the late Seventies at Maxim's restaurant, at Jimmy's in Montparnasse, or at Castel's, the perennially fashionable nightclub in the rue Princesse. They were elegant, trilingual, *sortable* — they were summoned at short notice to official dinners by the Quai d'Orsay (the foreign affairs ministry) or the Elysée (presidential) Palace. A New York investment banker who used Madame Claude's service in the 1960s, and who left his Phi Beta Kappa key on a Claude girl's



CALL ME MADAME

Profile by James Fox. Portrait by Helmut Newton

bedpost, told me: "It reached the point where if you walked into a room in London or Rome, as much as Paris, because the girls were transportable, and saw a girl who was better dressed, better looking and more distinguished than the others, you presumed it was a girl from Claude. It was, without doubt, the finest sex operation ever."

Even for Paris, she had little

competition. The brothels had been closed in 1946 and the only other glamorous figure was Madame Billy, 20 years Claude's senior, who ran an old-fashioned clandestine brothel once patronised by King Farouk, Maurice Chevalier, and the tumbling politicians of the Fourth Republic.

Madame Claude herself was a figure of myth and speculation, a phantom

bourgeoise rather strictly dressed, I heard, in grey cashmere and pearls. I imagined her as a Stéphane Audran or a Coco Chanel. She knows a great many secrets — her own speciality was to match her clients knowledgeably with the girls of her creation — and this, with her proven discretion for 20 years, was where her power lay and probably lies even today. She ran her business tightly >>>> 27

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and for great profit until 1977, when she fled to Los Angeles in the face of a huge tax demand that she had ignored for many years and simultaneous threats that she would be jailed for *proxénétisme* (procuring) if she didn't pay up. The protection of the Elysée Palace and the Quai d'Orsay seemed to have been ungratefully removed. She returned to France and, on the New Year's Eve before last, was arrested in the house of Françoise Sagan's brother and, still refusing to pay her taxes, was finally incarcerated for four months. Under French law she cannot be jailed again for the same offence, although her property could be confiscated. But Madame Claude, according to her friends, was declaring herself ruined anyway.

She had said nothing about her humiliation by the French state. Now she had agreed to a meeting, although it was not clear why. The approach had been through intermediaries, and her only request was that she should not be visited in her borrowed Paris apartment. I had chosen the meeting place carefully. It was a supremely elegant apartment furnished with objects and pictures from the period of Colette, whose bust stood near the front door. The view through the tall windows looked across to the Palais Royal, where the French Revolution began in the brothels and cafés beneath the colonnades. The young Breton maid retired to make a tray of tea and coffee. I had been warned about Madame Claude's fearsome sense of punctuality and, indeed, at the appointed hour, the bell rang.

Up the staircase and into the doorway came a small woman, her blonde hair cut in a French *coupe*, wearing a very large pair of tortoiseshell glasses, looking in her mid-fifties although I knew she was 63. She was wearing a beige silk raincoat and carrying a beige golfing umbrella. She handed these to the maid as she talked about the rain in bright tones, turning about and smiling pertly. She looked like the sort of woman you might see at a family lunch in a three-star restaurant in the provinces on a Sunday, eating away neatly and discreetly for France and the bourgeoisie. She had quite beautiful brown eyes above a successful face-lift (the work of Pitanguy, the Vuitton choice among the tuck masters) and a thin, wide mouth. Her face had a boyish quality.

She sat down in a high-backed chair against the light. The maid brought coffee, China tea, and "strong English tea" – which she chose. She said that she was not pleased to be back in France; how much she disliked it; how rude the French were; how they jostled you in supermarkets; how astonished they were when you went into a shop and said "Good morning"; she didn't intend to stay; she might go to Brazil or Mexico.

I asked about her experience in jail. By the French statute of limitations, she said, she should have been immune after her long exile. But, despite the *exorbitant* fees, her lawyer had made a mistake. She

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was, however, a calm person, not easily frightened, and her sentence had not been painful. She had refused to pay her taxes because the state had said she was in the business of procuring, which is illegal. "Why should I give bad money to the state?" asked Madame Claude. "I don't want the French state to become a procurer with me." If they had recognised her business as legal, she would gladly have paid – "I am an honest woman".

"Prostitution is legal in France," she said. "What is not legal is living off immoral earnings – a man who takes money, who waits. *Voilà*." She waved her hand. "That was not at all my case. I offered a service that meant far more than just introducing a man to a lady.

"The girl had to be exactly what was needed," she said, "so I had to teach her everything she didn't know. I played a little the role of Pygmalion. It consisted, at the start, of the physical aspect [which Madame Claude elsewhere formulated as 'surgical intervention']. Often they had to be transformed into dream creatures because at the start they *were not at all*. Often I had to teach them how to dress. At first they had to be tall, with pretty gestures, good manners. I had lots of noses done, chins, teeth, breasts. There was a lot to do. Eight times out of ten I had to teach them how to behave in society. There were official dinners, suppers, weekends, and they needed to have conversation. I insisted they learn to speak English, read certain books." You were very demanding? "I was ferocious," said Madame Claude, smiling the smile of a successful headmistress.

"It's difficult to teach a girl how to walk into Maxim's or the Dorchester without looking ill at ease when they've never been there. To find yourself in front of a king, three princes, four ministers and five ambassadors at an official dinner. Day after day one had to explain, *explain again, start again*. It took about two years. There would always be a man who would then say of her, 'But she's absolutely exceptional.'"

A New York publisher who visited the Palace Hotel in Saint Moritz in the early Seventies told me: "I met a whole bunch of them there. They were lovely. [The clients] wanted everyone to know who they were. You asked them where they came from and they all said 'Neuilly' [the rich leafy suburb outside Paris]. Claude liked girls from good families." More to the point, she had invented their backgrounds. At one point she told me, "I have known, because of what I did, some exceptional and fascinating men. I've known some exceptional women,

too, but that was less interesting because I made them myself." Madame Claude's successful graduates are now married to, among others, a major international arms dealer, the heir to a wine fortune in France, a senior figure in the art-auction world in New York, two French marquesses and a Portuguese duke.

Madame Claude had about 200 girls she could call on, with a central core of 20 or 30 favourites. In 1977 she charged Fr 1500 (£200) for an afternoon, Fr 3000 (£400) for an evening (8pm–2am), Fr 5000 (£666) for a whole day. Weekends were negotiable. Out of this she would take a 30 per cent commission.

A former Claude girl I met in Paris, whom I shall call Marie-France, told me that the girls were recruited by word of mouth, although Claude had her *rabatteurs* – the word for a beater in a pheasant shoot – among her friends. One particularly successful Danish girl was first picked up by a famous Paris restaurateur who saw her selling the *Herald Tribune* on the Champs-Élysées. The restaurateur didn't know she had joined Claude's network until, to his annoyance, he saw her in a nightclub with his best friend. Cases like this were frequent. Claude girls were like fish in water – Madame Claude's phrase – and her favourites could sign on and sign off at will.

Inevitably there were tragedies. A dentist's wife told me about a friend who, denied sex by his fiancée before marriage, had resorted to Madame Claude. Waiting for the girl to arrive, he noticed his girlfriend driving past in a taxi. *She*, it turned out, had been sent by Claude who finally forced her to return in tears. He exacted his contractual rights, and broke off the engagement. The story confirmed descriptions I had from two of her girls of Madame Claude's "ruthlessness".

The candidates would go up for examination in her office in the rue de Marignan behind the Champs-Élysées, where Madame Claude would sit behind a desk. She would ask first about their education. She had some nasty trick questions, like who was the wife of Louis XIV, what is the chemical formula for water, and which is the longest river in Europe. Having humiliated and rattled the candidate so far, Madame Claude would ask her to pass her handbag across the desk. She would turn this upside down and shake out its contents – the shortcut to a character reference. She would examine their teeth, according to one ex-Claude girl, and finally she would make them undress.

"That was a difficult moment," said Madame Claude. "When they arrived they were very shy, a bit frightened. At

the beginning, when I take a look, it's a question of seeing if the silhouette and the gestures are pretty. Then there was a disagreeable moment. I said 'I'm sorry about this unpleasantness, but I have to ask you to get undressed, because I can't talk about you unless I see you.' Believe me, I was embarrassed, just as they were, but it had to be done, not out of voyeurism, not at all – I don't like *les dames horizontales*." Madame Claude looked away with a whimsical, nostalgic smile and said, "It was funny because there were two reactions. A young girl, very sure of herself, very beautiful, *très bien*, would say yes, and get undressed. There was nothing to hide, everything was perfect. There were those who would start timidly to take off their dress and I would say" – she sighed – "I knew already. The rest is not sadism, but nearly. I would say, 'Maybe you should take off your bra', and I knew it wasn't going to be beautiful. Because otherwise she would have taken it off easily. There were some breasts that could be redone, some not. Sometimes it can be deceptive, you know, you see a pretty girl, slim, well dressed, and when you see her naked it is a *catastrophe*."

They called her "*Tantine*" – Auntie. She would arrange for cosmetic operations, against their future earnings. She would inspect their flats and sometimes move them. She would send them to a shop called Réty in the rue Saint Honoré, which specialises in clothes for aspiring *Dynasty* wives, instruct them to buy Vuitton luggage and to keep a suitcase (whose contents she would inspect) always at the ready. She sent them to the coiffeur. The girls would be sent to the same doctor each week for medical inspections. There was, as Madame Claude said, *so much to be done*.

The "new girls" in Madame Claude's exclusive finishing school would be tried out by a select group of "*essayeurs*" – men she knew and trusted. "I could judge their physical qualities," she said. "I could judge if she was pretty, intelligent and cultivated, but I didn't know how she was in bed. So I had some boys, good friends, who told me exactly. I would ring them up and say, 'There's a new one'. And afterwards they'd ring back and say, 'Not bad,' 'Could be better,' or 'Nulle'. Or, on the contrary, 'She's perfect'. And I would sometimes have to tell the girls what they didn't know."

The result of her talents was that in those promiscuous days of the 1960s Madame Claude turned into reality the fiction of Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*, in which Catherine Deneuve played a rich young housewife indulging her fantasies for sex with strangers, for money. It was widely believed that, for the right price, a liaison could be arranged with almost anybody, however famous and beautiful.

But many of the girls did it for sheer pleasure. "Remember," said Marie-France, "this was instant elevation. For most of them it was a dream existence, provided they liked the sex. A lot >>>→ 29

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of the clients were young, and didn't treat them like tarts but like someone from their own class."

I asked Madame Claude about her apparent obsession with beautiful young women. "I don't like ugly people," she said, "probably because when I was young I was ugly and I suffered for it. And that's why I've always been surrounded by people who are beautiful. And the best way to have beautiful people around me was to make them. I made them very pretty."

Her past is hard to reconstruct - she will produce only the barest details. Her real name is Bernande Grudet. She was born, she says, in Anjou to a well-off bourgeois family and educated by the strict order of Visitandine nuns, which provided her sense of discipline and her "passion for exactitude". Her father was "in politics". When the war came this solid, secure world collapsed. She had become pregnant by a man later killed in a concentration camp. She claims she, too, was sent to a concentration camp because her family were connected with the Resistance. Her daughter, whom she declared herself incapable of bringing up and handed over to her mother, is now a *fonction-*

naire in the provinces. Mother and daughter seldom communicate.

Madame Claude came to Paris after the Liberation and took a series of jobs, "the kind of jobs you take when you have no proper work". She was an estate agent, she sold bibles. Describing the next stage, Madame Claude clenched her fists and looked up at the ceiling. "I said, 'What the hell can work?' I had a friend who had this little organisation in Paris who was going away to get married to a doctor, so I took it over."

She herself had never been much interested in sex. Indeed, she seems to make a point of declaring to her friends that she is frigid. "For me it was something very *accessoire*," she said. Despite her two husbands - the first, a Swiss married in 1972, and the current, American husband - she said she had not lived with a man since she was 40.

"I think after a certain age," she said, "there are certain spectacles one should not give to others." Her two husbands at least provided her with a Swiss passport and a US green card. Now she had "a penchant for solitude". Her heart was broken only once. It happened 30 years

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ago, and ever since she has despised passion. "It's a complete destroyer," she said. "Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror and say, 'Break my legs, give me scarlet fever, an attack of TB, but never that.'"

Her first headquarters, in the rue de Marignan, was near to the Travellers Club which provided her with a steady flow of clients. A visitor there remembered that Madame Claude would sit in the kitchen while the client and the girl occupied the bedroom. Later she bought a small hotel in the rue de Boulainvilliers, a discreetly bourgeois part of the Sixteenth between the Seine and the Bois de Boulogne. Madame Claude denied to me that this 12-room establishment was ever a *maison de rendezvous*, although many remember it as such. It was here, I was told, that to Madame Claude's extreme annoyance a maid was corrupted by the girls to take part in plural sex. It was here, too, that an incident took place in the Seventies which signalled the beginning of her decline.

There was a troublesome German girl who had twice gone on trips with clients (once with an English lord to a Scottish grouse moor) but had insisted that she remain a virgin. "I called her into my office," said Madame Claude, "and said, 'Let us not exaggerate', and sent her away." She came back but was fired again, for drugs. She made menacing phone calls. Then she arrived at the rue de Boulainvilliers with a gun. She shot three bullets at Claude, the first of which struck her shoulder. "I was dressed in the fashion of Courrèges at this moment," she said. "He did very padded things. The bullet - *merci*, Monsieur Courrèges - stuck in the padding. I was thrown forward on to the telephone. I had one thought which went through my head: I will die like Kennedy. I turned round and put my hand up in a reflex. The second bullet went through my hand. I have two dead fingers. It's most useful for removing bottle tops. I was saved from the third bullet because it passed over my head." The maid called

the police, and the hotel was shut down. Somehow the girl was never charged.

The tax authorities had begun to chase her in 1968 and, in 1977, after she had sold her name to a film about call girls, she was on the verge of being arrested when she fled to Los Angeles. There she fell on bad times. She lost a great deal of money in a *pâtisserie*-and-restaurant business - indeed, she claims she was cheated and simultaneously denounced to the immigration authorities. The French, to her abiding rage, sent information showing, falsely, that there was still a warrant out for her arrest. She had many letters and gifts in jail; one, which deeply impressed the prison governor, had a royal crown on the envelope.

"Men used to tell me a lot of things," she mused. "I knew some for 20 years. I saw them *sans culottes*. I knew everyone at the head of government."

Why, I asked, had her protection fallen away? "I don't know," she said. "There's always a moment when people cease to please. I tried to find out. Ohhh yes. I ended up by more or less identifying the person. He was minister of finance at one point." She was referring to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who became president of the Republic in 1974, directly after five years as minister of finance. It is widely believed in Paris that he was responsible for putting her out of business by finally unleashing the tax authorities. Yet he was certainly no puritan.

But there was also the story of the Claude girl and the powerful French politician who, shortly before Claude's flight, were interrupted by the girl's lesbian lover. The lover threw a tantrum and drove the man of power into the night in his shirt-tails on the point of a kitchen knife. Imagining blackmail, or at least a blow to his vanity, the man of power set out to finish Claude's career. "This is what I hear, too," said Madame Claude mysteriously.

Her anger, her *sadness*, are directed at the French state. She hadn't come back to do anything

base or *mal élevé*. Wasn't it, nevertheless, a little reckless for the French state to disregard her like this, even to provoke her? "They were indifferent," she said, "or otherwise they knew me too well. And they knew I was incapable of . . . doing such a thing. That's the Visitandines. That's the way I was brought up."

When the interview was over, Madame Claude got up and stood by the fireplace. She began to relax; she became cheerful, almost coquettish. Sometimes, she said, she used to go home and think of all the ambassadors and kings and ministers and heads of industry she knew.

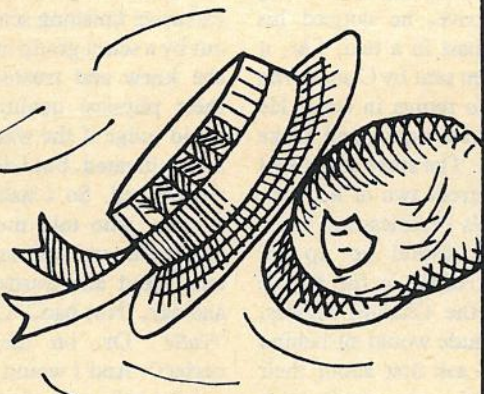
"There were men who could decapitate, kill and bomb their rivals who would be frightened of me. Some women have known powerful men because they're their lover. But I've known them all. I had them all," - she stretched out her arm, cupped her hand, dug her index finger into the palm, and said, "*here*."

Now Madame Claude claims she is broke and unable to work at the only *métier* she knows. The police treated her application to open a marital-guidance agency as a huge joke. But, she said, her friends had been very thoughtful to her since her return. Recently, "a charming Italian car manufacturer" had called to say that it must be so difficult for her getting to her cottage in the Lot region. He had one car too many on his production line and would send it to her.

She departed for lunch at Fouquet's restaurant on the Champs-Élysées. She likes going out these days, making herself visible, especially at the Brasserie Lipp on the boulevard Saint Germain, in some ways the smartest restaurant in Paris, and a place always full of politicians. The table system works like that of Mortimer's in New York: you are seated, or not, depending on status and looks. The owner, Monsieur Cazes, seats Madame Claude always, and immediately, at the best table, just inside the front door on the right, the best observation post and a singular Parisian honour.

In the Travellers Club, the voice of the bilingual old Gaullist boomed across the rococo bar. "All right, so she's an awful bitch to the core," he said, "tough with everybody, the clients, the girls. But the French state has been villainous and ungrateful. They've gone too far. They should give her the *Légion d'honneur* for services to the Republic." ●

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