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INTRODUCTION

JANE DIEULAFOY MIGHT BE the most famous French person you have never heard of. In 1882, Dieulafoy and her husband, Marcel, a civil engineer and architecture enthusiast, left their comfortable home in the southern city of Toulouse to travel the unpaved roads and mountain paths of Baghdad and Turkey all the way to Persia, in what is modern-day Iran. They hoped to excavate the ancient city of Susa, which British explorer William K. Loftus had located decades earlier but failed to unearth. What they found exceeded their wildest expectations: extensive palaces buried underneath the sandy, rock-strewn hills, forgotten by time and nature. After two government-sponsored missions, the couple finally returned to France in 1886 with forty tons of artifacts from the royal homes of Darius and Artaxerxes. Resettled in Paris, they were celebrated with the opening of the Salle Dieulafoy at the Louvre, leading to record-breaking crowds for the museum's new Department of Oriental Antiquities. Jane and Marcel Dieulafoy were a veritable fin-de-siècle power couple: they lectured about town, hosted an exclusive salon where they staged theatrical performances, hobnobbed with Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré, and were regularly invited to President Félix Faure's receptions.

All the while, the staunchly Catholic Dieulafoy went about in the most stylish men's suits.