Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (2)

The mystery of her birth

THE FACTS are as follows: Louis de Marillac, lord of Ferrieres en Brie and later also of Farinvilliers, spent his youth in the army and carried out with competence the commissions with which he was entrusted. In 1584, he married Marie de la Roziere, a kinswoman of his father's first wife. In 1588 or '89 she died, childless.

Louise was born on 12th August, 1591. If we had her certificate of baptism, we should probably know her mother's name. But the registers for the years 1590 to 1595 have disappeared from the archives.

To fill this blank, historians have suggested a marriage between Louis and one Marguerite Le Camus in 159o. But of this lady and this marriage no trace can be found. If this Marguerite had existed, the genealogists, always so painstaking, would surely have made some reference to her. As things stand and until the contrary be proved, we must say that Louise was born of Louis de Marillac and an unknown mother. From the day of her birth, her father provided for her by settling on her an annual pension of ioo livres, and by the bequest of a field on the Ferneres domain.

On January 12th, 1595, Louis de Marillac contracted a second marriage, with Antoinette Le Camus, aunt of Jean-Pierre Camus, who was later Bishop of Belley, and friend of Francis de Sales. Ten days before the date of the contract, Louis made further provision for his daughter:

`Before the undersigned, Toussaint Gleaume and Claude Trouve, notaries of our lord the King, in Le Chatelet at Paris, there appeared in person Louis de Marillac, knight, resident at Paris in the rue St Antoine in the parish of St Paul, who recognises and acknowledges, and by these presents acknowledges to have given . . . to Louise de Marillac, his natural daughter, being absent … eighty-three and one-third *ecus* in payment of an annual and perpetual pension. . . . The said . . . renunciations being made for the good friendship which he has always had, and has, for the said testatrix, and so that she shall have the better means to support herself after the death of the said testator, and to provide for her marriage. . . Louis settled on her after his death an annual pension of 83 *écus,* or 235 *livres,* payable quarterly.

It is remarkable that in this official document Louis de Marillac should describe Louise as 'ma fille, ma naturelle'—his 'natural daughter'. He knew that she was legally incapable of inheriting from her father, even though recognised by him, and that this was a principle on which Church law agreed with civil law. The contract for his second marriage, which took place shortly after the date of this settlement and which enumerates the qualifications of the bridegroom, makes no mention at all of his daughter Louise, as if she did not, in law, exist. On the other hand, specific mention is made that Antoinette Le Camus, the widow Thiboust, had four children, who are all named, and who were at that date being supported by the public funds.

On December 28th, 16ot, there was born of this marriage a daughter, Innocente. Since she was legitimate, this child was fully capable in law of inheriting property and possessions from her father. Once again Louis de Marillac settled upon Louise, his natural daughter, a sum of money, 1,200 *livres,* and a small personalty (which, in those days, meant such things as linen and jewels). It looks as though he was taking a further step for the protection of his first child.

Finally, in the marriage contract of Louise herself with Antoine Le Gras, in 1613, Louise being present and signing, she is described as the natural daughter of the late Louis de Marillac, and there is no mention of the name of her mother.

In the present state of our knowledge of the de Marillac family, it is evident that Louise was born out of wedlock, that she was illegitimate in law, that she was recognised by her father and that her mother was a person of such condition that, by the social customs of his class, Louis de Marillac could neither marry nor recognise her. It is very probable that she was a servant-girl. Society drew a great distinction between the child of an unknown father,

especially if abandoned by the mother, and the child born out of wedlock of an unknown mother and a father who recognised and reared it. The first was a foundling and would always live on the fringes of society. The second was `the son of his father', recognised as such, and deprived only of legal claims upon the family. The Church herself (in the question of admission to holy orders) drew a distinction between the two classes of illegitimacy. When, in our own day, the question arose of introducing the cause of Louise de Marillac, the Superior-General of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity enquired in Rome whether her birth would not be an obstacle to her beatification. The reply was negative and the cause was therefore provisionally introduced.

Why have we stressed these details which earlier writers on Louise have, as though by common consent, appeared not to know, or passed over in silence, or concealed? We believe the facts are important for the better understanding of her mind, of the pattern of her life, and of the special ways in which her activities developed. A nature such as hers, where everything discloses a sensitivity without protection, and the sorrowful forcefulness of intuition, must have been shaken to its depths on that day—and it occurred at an early age—when the child first learned the facts of her origin.

We will not speak of revolt, for that would be out of character and would introduce an element of romance out of keeping with our subject. The nobles of France were accustomed to disregard sentimental considerations and the conventions; I would be inclined to say morality also, were it not that, in recognising the fault, they did acknowledge the existence of a fundamental morality. Louise did not `rebel' but she was bent and bowed down by a burden mysteriously laid upon her in her cradle.

We know nothing of her infancy. Her father appears to have loved her dearly and to have taken all the care of her that his frequent changes of domicile allowed. He declares in his will, with transparent truthfulness, that Louise had been given him to be his consolation in affliction.

After her father's remarriage, in ti95, how did Louise get on in the care of Antoinette Le Camus, with her family of three daughters and one son, already quite grown up? It is useless to berate the stepmother. She may have been affectionate towards Louise. But the latter never, to our knowledge, spoke of her. And we do know certain things about Antoinette which give us cause to think. We learn that in 1602, after the birth of Innocente, Louis, returning from Lyons, brought a court action against his wife, Antoinette, for some kind of misconduct into which 'she had been driven by urgent need of money'. There is evidence of a double interrogation of the accused woman, of an indictment, and even of a confrontation of accuser and accused in court. What could have been the occasion for such a process in law—since, in the old French legal system, divorce was not recognised—we do not know. Perhaps it was to obtain an injunction against the squandering of the family funds. At all events, it is evident that the domestic atmosphere was disturbed and scarcely favourable to the upbringing and happiness of a ten-year-old girl.

In fact, Louise was no longer at home. We do not know the exact date that her father, as a matter of prudence and to give her a distinguished education, placed Louise in the royal convent at Poissy. This was a house of Dominican nuns, and its prioress was a Gondi—a member of one of those great families of Italian origin which, as we have mentioned, controlled in this period every sphere of French public life. Under her rule the life of the house was tranquil and fervent, though still untouched by the reforms which had become widespread in religious houses since the Council of Trent. To this fashionable convent came the children of the most eminent families; it was said—with what truth we cannot tell —to bestow a classical education.

At least there was in this community—and perhaps she was not exceptional—a humanist nun of some eminence in her day: Louise de Marillac, great-aunt of our Louise. She had a reputation for piety and wisdom, was a lover of the fine arts and had a knowledge of both Latin and Greek. She had rendered the 'Little Office of Our Lady' into very elegant French. She was naturally put in charge of the little girl's education and took a delight in teaching her, finding in her exceptional gifts. It is not without significance that the future saint should at an early age, and for some years, have been in close association with a fine mind of this stamp. She was saved, once for all, from futility and acquired a taste for intellectual food of a very solid kind. More than one biographer has testified, for example, to the range of her knowledge of philosophy, a subject on which she is said to have conducted Long conversations with her father.[1] She developed a taste for painting in oils, an art in which she became an adept: she acquired a good knowledge of Latin as then taught, for the reading of classical authors and as an

accomplishment. Vincent de Paul put a somewhat dry emphasis on this ability of hers, when with the faintest touch of malice he happened to quote in a letter some Latin passage or other: ‘You will be sure to understand this Latin, so I won’t translate it’. ‘This Latin’ became part of the architecture of her mind. It gave her language a robust precision, her spirituality the sap of the liturgy and of theology, and perhaps her heart the joy of a more direct contact with a Church which prays in the language of St Jerome and thus enabled her to conform ever more closely with the tradition of Rome.

Everything leads us to believe that the period spent at Poissy was entirely happy, far from the storms of her father’s home, in the innocence and earefreeness of youth, in the society of an aunt who knew so many things and in an environment which could not but gratify the daughter of a great house.