



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (1)

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Marillac family origins

IT is HARD today to appreciate the role played by the great families of France in the seventeenth century; they stood between the nobility on the one hand, and the rising bourgeoisie on the other, a group of powerful old families, holding in their hands the effective *administrative* power of the country. They formed the lesser nobility and the judicial class, the *noblesse de robe*, many of them holding large estates by right of inheritance. They were the members of the *parlements*, the holders of the key military posts, of the bishoprics, the abbeys, the embassies, the titles and offices of the magistrature, and positions in the central government.

In 1590, when Louise de Marillac was born, these families were still the real strength of the nation, the active and influential core of French society. The Marillacs were longstanding and important members of this class. They came originally from the region of Mauriac, in Le Cantal, that cold and rugged part of Auvergne which is as hard as the rock of its river beds. In the thirteenth century they were already making themselves felt. A fifteenth-century head of the house, Guillaume de Marillac, definitely brought the family to the front ranks. Two of his children acquired fame. Charles, a diplomat, was ambassador at Constantinople, in London, and in the Low Countries, and later Archbishop of Vienna. Guillaume, who was always known as 'Guillaume II', to distinguish him from his father, became eminent as a financier. By 1569 he had risen to be controller general to the king.

This 'Guillaume II' married twice, in 1560 and 1571. By his first wife, Renee Alligret, he had eight children, among them Louis de Marillac, seigneur de Ferrieres, the father of our Louise, and Michel who rose to be Keeper of the Seals and eventually Chancellor of France, the first gentleman of the realm after the King. By his second wife, Genevieve de Bois-Leveque, Guillaume had four sons. One of these, Louis, comte de Beaumont, entered the army and eventually became marshal of France. A daughter by this second marriage, Valence, married Doni d'Attichy, Superintendent of Finances to Queen Marie de Medici¹

In this torrent of great names, we tend to overlook Louis, lord of Ferrieres and Farinvilliers, eldest son of Guillaume II. He was to some extent eclipsed by his brothers, and quite outdistanced by the brilliant marriage of his half-sister. Yet he was as handsome as any of them and had as good a head, though something of a fop and ladies' man. By profession he was a soldier, a captain of the guard in the royal household. He died young, at forty-eight years of age, leaving no mark on history save that he was the father of Louise.

Thus Louise de Marillac was born of a sturdy line, and came from a family of high ambition which was nourished by the noblest of alliances and the finest of natural gifts and graces. She was destined to play a far-reaching role in the religious and social history of her country, and to achieve happiness for herself. But in her youth, and for long after, she was bowed down by the weight of a mysterious dispensation of providence.