Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (3)

The mystery of the 'poor Demoiselle'

THEN LOUISE was withdrawn from the convent school at Poissy. When? Why? On whose authority? Of all those strange mysteries which abound in the childhood story of Louise de Marillac, this is the most obscure.

Was she taken away by her father in 1602, when his lawsuit with Antoinette de Camus was stretching his resources ? Or did she have to leave after his death in 1604, because no one else would come forward to pay her fees, which must have been high? Most of her biographers have recorded that she was removed `so that she could be taught those things which a woman ought to know', meaning, we may suppose, the crafts of housekeeping, cooking and dressmaking. Were such things, then, not taught by the learned ladies of Poissy? It is difficult to understand such anxiety, to the extent of taking her away from her studies at the age of thirteen, for the domestic formation of a child of noble family, whose grandfather had controlled the finances of a queen.

Who could have intervened in such a way? Who acted as her tutor? Other biographers have naturally considered the grave and forceful Michel de Marillac, her uncle, and master of pleas in the *Parlement.* It is known that Michel was at one time tutor to her half-sister, Innocente, but we have no knowledge that he had anything to do with the education of Louise.

It looks as if; her father being dead, Louise was abandoned with indifference by the entire family. They turned their back upon this child who had no rightful place in the genealogical tree, this girl who, most embarrassingly, bore the Marillac name and who must therefore be found a home somewhere or other. Louise was now thirteen years old; she knew and understood; and her heart was wounded. Her vocation to suffering was being made plain to her.

There could be no question of Louise returning to her father's home to live with Antoinette Le Camus ; she made not the slightest overture to her step-daughter. Louise had her small pension, her few personal possessions, her little nest-egg; these would suffice to maintain her in some modest lodging. So it came about that she was boarded with a 'poor spinster', a woman who had already gathered around her a number of destitute children of about the same age as Louise. At a later day, such a home would have been called a `dame school', or even a 'domestic school', and here Louise was to begin to learn 'those things which a woman ought to know', and which most small children learn at their mother's knee.

The 'poor spinster' seems in this way to have gained a living of sorts. Her house was apparently literally an orphanage, and she had a struggle to make ends meet. Louise, a girl of warm feeling, with already plenty of decision and a practical mind, speedily devised means to help. She persuaded Mademoiselle to allow into the house the materials for all sorts of domestic work. She rallied the other girls to her help, with such good results that 'Mademoiselle' began to find herself well provided for by the income from the lace, embroidery and linen goods made by her pupils and other guests. There was no lack of work; we know the importance of embroideries and laces in the fashions of the time, not least in male attire.

We cannot but admire the spirit of this child, who emerges from the shelter of a royal convent and proceeds, with all the simplicity of a peasant girl, to bring well-being to a woman who is a stranger to her. That holiness which had already struck roots in her soul was moving her to great achievements. We arc full of admiration for her, but it is difficult to understand the terrible silence, the frozen indifference of her noble family, who could abandon to the hard life of a working girl an orphan child of their own blood. Nor is it any easier to sympathise with 'Mademoiselle', who was content to live on the labour of her boarder. There must be an explanation for these curious circumstances, and there is no reason why we should not risk an hypothesis, and see whether it leads to a solution of the mystery. We will argue as follows :

We do not at present know who was the mother of Louise. Yet a mother she certainly had, and apparently the woman came from the peasant class, since the Marillac family would not acknowledge her. She may have been a

domestic servant, but she was in any case one whom, by the usages of his day and class, the child's father could not marry. The man is none the less a Christian; he has his principles. He will not suppress the woman, and neither can he just turn her out and so sentence her to a life of wretchedness. Is it not possible that he looked around him for some means which would enable her to earn a living—even that he set her up in a boarding house for orphan girls, the children of unknown mothers ? And having so established her, why not entrust to her care their own daughter, at a time when his shrinking means made it impossible to keep her at the royal convent at Poissy ?

Even if such a plan did not occur to Louis himself, yet his brothers, to whom every detail of the child's circumstances must have been known, could well make provision of this kind when the father died, which would dispense them from the more human and natural act of taking the orphan girl into one of their own families. By such an arrangement, every responsibility would have been discharged: the mother was succoured without being acknowledged; the child was in a place of safety; ihey would be able to develop affection for each other with no harm done to public opinion. Justice, morality, sensibility were satisfied, and all concerned could sleep quietly. Louise would thus have spent the years of her adolescence (1604-1613) in the company of her own mother, who tenderly loved her, and who taught her the domestic arts—with what success, we shall see presently.

It is true that this hypothesis does not at present rest upon any documentary evidence. But there is nothing impossible about it and it is reassuring. The silence of a large, powerful and wealthy family creates around the orphan girl a lamentable desert. If we adopt this theory, the desert disappears. Those who keep silence know that they may do so without injustice; and the orphan is no longer alone.

We have the impression that Louise was well advised and guided in the defence of her interests. As the law stood, it was her half-sister, Innocent; who inherited the lands and personal property of their father, and who was bound to pay Louise the rents and pensions provided by contract. There is evidence that these monies were not regularly paid, for two judgments, recorded at Le Chatelet, order her tutor—who is none other than her uncle, Michel de Marillac—to pay to Louise, in the name of Innocent; a pension of 300 *limes* per annum. This is the clearest evidence we have as to her means, and it is the obvious source of the dowry of which she made conveyance at the time of her marriage in 1613.

We have a certain amount of light upon her spiritual development between 1604 and r6/ 3, from her thirteenth to her twenty-second year. The 'poor spinster' was not of the calibre of Soeur Marillac at Poissy, but she could assure that stability in which the early lessons could sink in and take root. Even without the constant help of tutors and masters, a proud intelligence which begins to feel the driving force of its own gifts will find the elements of culture in all things. Louise devoted herself seriously to painting, her favourite art, and it is probably from this period that we should date her watercolours, so touching in their simplicity. Her subjects are religious, for such was the natural tendency of her soul; she had been brought up in habits of piety, and breathed an atmosphere that was entirely Christian. We would give much to know what were the books she read in these years to have acquired the spiritual culture so plainly revealed in her letters and notebooks. She herself mentions Luis of Granada, the Spanish theologian and moralist, whose *Guide for Sinners* achieved a success which has endured to our own day. Vincent de Paul valued this book highly, and constantly returned to it. Luis is master of a form of stern and practical meditation which is always confronting the Christian with his own conscience, compelling him to exhaustive self-examination, and imposing resolutions wisely made but hard to keep. He does indeed preach love, but his love is not a gentle passion. The *Imitation of Christ* is quite different—it invites with sweetness, teaching the very elements of love. We know from her own statements that Louise de Marillac read both these books. It is probable, although she does not mention it, that she also read *The Pearl of the Gospels (La Perle Evangelique)* by the Flemish nun, a book which had lately been translated by Dom Beaucousin, and which was then in vogue with the devout laity. Later on, when she had obtained the necessary authorisation, she read the whole of the Scriptures. She heard the Jesuit and Capuchin preachers, reflected and meditated. In after years she confided in Marguerite Chetif, and told her that from her childhood she had had the attraction to meditation, and that it came to her easily. She spent much of her time in religious houses, which were then attracting the faithful by the renewed vigour of their observance and by their fervour.

These years at the beginning of the seventeenth century were for the Church, and especially for the devout laity, a time of spiritual renewal and opportunity. The long agony of the Wars of Religion had drawn to a close and the

Church was recuperating after the struggle. The wise administration of Henri IV was creating in the civil sphere the material framework for a religious revival, while the spiritual incentives and the necessary ecclesiastical discipline had been provided by the Council of Trent. The Council's measures had received widespread assent as salutary and necessary, even before their formal promulgation, so that for the Church the present was full of activity, and the future full of promise.

A young girl who was both pious and cultivated could not remain indifferent to the many manifestations of new spiritual life which she was able to see on every hand, especially when she had strong private reasons, and family reasons too, for noticing these developments in the religious life of France.

The Jesuits returned in 1603, and inaugurated a form of preaching entirely free from political bias. The Carmelite nuns of St Teresa of Avila were installed in Paris in 1605: their arrival and installation in Paris were the occasion of ceremonies and processions in which all the devout and the high-born of Paris took active part. Michel de Marillac was one of those who met the Spanish nuns at Longjumeaux, and headed the joyful procession into Paris. It was he who handed them the keys of their new house in the name of Queen Marie de' Medici and of the Duchesse de Longueville, taking so zealous a part in the proceedings that Madame Acarie (whose mission it had been to inspire the work from behind the scenes) told him he was temporal founder of Carmel and Berulle its spiritual father in France.

In r6o6, the Duchesse de Mercoeur, carrying out a wish of the widow of King Henri III, established the Capuchin nuns in Paris. The nuns entered Paris in procession, barefooted, the Archbishop of Paris in person at their head. The nuns set a striking example of the strictest asceticism, and radiated the light of Franciscan devotion. Well-known Capuchin friars befriended and assisted them : Father Joseph, the renowned 'Grey Eminence', confessor to Richelieu ; Father Benet Canfield; and Father Honore de Champigny. The last-named friar was a relative of Madame Bathe Acarie and a connection of Michel de Marillac. He was for a while confessor or director to Louise.

In 1608, there appeared the *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales. Francis de Sales was a close friend of Madame Acarie and Michel de Marillac, and he had left behind him in Paris a memory of sweetness and light. Louise had read the *Introduction,* and we know how greatly she loved it. It is probable that she also read the *Sainte Philosophic* of Du Vair, and the *Bref Discours* which, if not actually written by &rune, contains the essence of his teaching, in which Louise was steeped. So we can trace the foundation of her spiritual attitudes and see the growth of her habitual approach, the blend of contemplation and action, the union of love and reason.

There remain many features of this period of her life which are most obscure, and one which is very perplexing. This is the question of her dealings with her uncle, Michel de Marillac. We encounter this man at the opening out of every new path in the life of his niece—yet we never meet them together. At a later date he wrote her a number of letters, which we possess, but it does not appear that he ever took any very direct interest in her affairs. He was a man of prayer, and three times a week he discoursed with Madame Acarie on the way of perfection. He could have had an important influence on the spiritual formation of Louise, a girl of exceptional gifts. Yet there is nothing to indicate that he ever made the attempt. It is difficult to avoid the impression that to some extent he shared the embarrassment of the family and cared but little for a girl who could not be disavowed, yet who could not be given a position in the family tree.

The family kept clear of her and this caused the child much suffering. The world rejected her—yet God drew her to himself. It is easy to understand that she should have wished to become a nun, and to shut herself up in their convent with the Capuchin sisters, devoted to a life of penance and prayer. This would have solved all the problems that perplexed her mind, and soothed away the troubles of her soul. She discussed the matter with her confessor, Father Honoré de Champigny, and he must have discussed the subject with his friend, Michel de Marillac.

Louise had a weak constitution. Her life was already what it would always be, an uninterrupted sequence of mild illnesses, no single one of which could ever put her life in danger, but which made it necessary for her to exercise constant care of her health. The Rule of St Clare, rigid and unyielding, would certainly not suit her, nor the Rule of our Holy Mother, St Teresa. Father de Champigny declared to her, as from God, that she could not become a

nun, but that it was his belief 'that God had some other design for her'. What a disappointment—a setback the more serious because it came too late. She had already taken the first steps, and secretly committed herself by promise to become a nun. It is said, and Louise herself said, that she made no vow. It does not appear that there was ever any question of a formal vow creating an obligation in conscience, either with or without her director's consent and advice. But years afterwards, in a time of anxiety, she came to believe that she had committed herself, and that by her marriage she had broken her vow. This was the dramatic crisis which opened the greatest trial of her life. The dramas of the life of the soul, though they are very often mere banks of cloud, will sometimes precipitate the most devastating tempests.

She could not, then, become a nun; there was no other course open to her but marriage. In later life, she insisted that she had a true vocation to the cloister, and that she only married out of obedience to her 'relatives'. Who were the relatives who would urge her to marry? Certainly not Michel, who had considered her welfare but little, and not Louis, who was absent on military service. Valence was a woman of generosity, and she would well understand Louise's anxieties, and it may have been she who counselled her to find a husband.

It would be possible, if not exactly easy, to find her a husband. Like all her family, she was handsome. The portrait that we have of her is based on a painting by Dechange, made from memory after her death. It is therefore separated by time from the model, but tradition declares it to be a faithful likeness. It depicts a face which is very regular, within the lines of a perfect oval. The veil, covering her head and part of her face, casts over her features a shadow which the artist has preserved, but which tends to make her look plain, though we are informed that her expression was one of vivacious originality. The mouth is small, the lips thin, the chin prominent and firm. The eyes, lowered as is fitting in a nun, shine, as we may suppose, with a restrained fire. She so often spoke to her Daughters of Charity of the eyes, and of the manner of using them; of the obligation to mortify them out of doors, yet without closing them; of the fruitful meditation that may be made on the eyes of Jesus, which, as the Gospels tell us, were subject to his will—that we may well believe her own eyes to have been beautiful, clear, luminous, the mirror of an impassioned soul. Yes, we may say that she was beautiful.

Louise may be described as handsome, but she was not wealthy. The whole of her fortune was the little pension of 300 *livres* which had been guaranteed to her by the Chatelet judgment. The few personal possessions given her by her father in 1602 she had left behind with Mademoiselle. She had little enough by way of dowry, but to compensate for the lack of means, she had relatives who were in a fair way to make large fortunes: an uncle and an aunt of the Queen Mother; a master of pleas in the *parlement* bestowed by the queen on Richelieu; and the queen's superintendent of finances. Finally, whether the family liked it or not, she was a Marillac, and the name was a most valuable asset.