



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part I: The mystery of her ancestry and youth (4)

A great marriage of convenience

FOR Valence de Marillac and Catherine de' Medici, wife of Louis de Marillac, it was no very difficult matter to find somewhere about the Court a young man with a future, who would make a suitable husband for Louise. Choice was made of Antoine Le Gras, Secretary of the Household to the Queen, Marie de' Medici, a sufficiently minor official, but with a future more than promising. He was a mere squire, and not a gentleman, so that his wife would not be entitled to the style of 'Madame', but only to that of 'Mademoiselle', like any other woman of the bourgeoisie. The family was originally of Montferrand in Auvergne, where the surname in use was 'Gras'. But when they rose in the social scale and settled in Paris, they inserted an article before the surname, which made them upper middleclass and on the way to rank, as members of the *noblesse de robe*. They were of old and honourable stock, steady and regular in business, especially good and charitable to the poor. Moreover, they combined with a very orderly administration of inherited property a most persevering attention to their further enrichment. Little is recorded of Antoine Le Gras beyond his health, which was poor, and his temper, which was quick. He appears to have been rather dull, better fitted to attend to small matters, albeit with dexterity, than to embark on great ones.

The marriage contract was drawn up and signed at the Hotel d'Attichy, residence of the Superintendent of Finances to the Queen Mother. It was thought appropriate on this auspicious occasion to accredit the bride with a domicile above reproach: she was stated in the document to be a resident in the Hotel d'Attichy. The marriage bond was witnessed by a series of very honourable names.

'There were present in person, M. Antoine Le Gras, secretary to the Queen mother of the King, son of the late noble gentleman, M. Antoine Le Gras, in his lifetime a Councillor, and elected for the King in the election of Clermont in Auvergne, and of Damoiselle Marguerite, *nee* Atour, his wife; these his father and mother being likewise present, being resident at this time in Paris, rue des Francbourgeois in the parish of Saint-Gervais, to speak for him and in his name; on the one hand; and Damoiselle Loyse de Marillac, natural daughter of the late Louis de Marillac, in his lifetime Knight, lord of Farinvilliers, using and having the enjoyment of her rights, and living in the residence of the Sieur and Dame d'Attichy hereinafter named, to speak for her and in her name; on the other hand;

The which parties of their goodwill recognised and acknowledged as lawful the future marriage which in the good pleasure of God is shortly to be made and solemnised in the face of holy Church between these two, in the presence and by the advice of Messire Octavien Dony d'Attichy, counsellor to the King in Council, Intendant of his finances and of those of the household of the Queen; Dame Valence de Marillac, his wife; Messire Michel de Marillac, counsellor to the King in Council; Louis de Marillac, gentleman in ordinary of the bedchamber to the King; Dame Catherine de' Medici, his wife; Damoiselle Cornelia Dony, widow of the late Sieur Goriny; Dame Genevieve Dony, wife of Sieur le comte de Chateauvillain; Messire Paul de Miremont, lord of Montigny; Dame Victoire Scolary, his wife; and Damoiselle Louyse Hennequin, widow of the Sieur de Vernoy, counsellor in the Court of Pleas at the Palais; all being mutual friends of the two betrothed parties aforesaid.'

Even if we assume that Louise was already advanced in humility, she was too much a woman not to regard this brilliant gathering as some compensation for the bitterness of her years as a poor pensioner. True, there was still bitterness mingled with the sweet. She had to hear read, and she had to sign, a document which particularised the ancestry of her future husband, and named his father and mother, while it described Louise herself in blunt terms as the natural daughter of Louis de Marillac', and made no mention of her mother's name. Those eminent persons, moreover, who added their signatures as witnesses to the foot of the contract—Michel and Louis, her uncles, Valence and Catherine, her aunts—were merely styled as 'friends'. An iron law regulated even such trifles as these, and played its part at every stage of the proceedings.

After the religious ceremony in the church of SaintGervais these particular clouds were dissipated: there was no longer any need to look for a place for Louise in the de Marillac family tree. Before God and in full view of society



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she was Mademoiselle Le Gras, attached by marriage to the household of the Queen Mother. The young couple was borne up on a wave of hope and public favour. She now had her hour of well-being; upon her were fixed the eyes of many who hoped for recommendations and support in their approach to the great. She was ready to take her rightful place in public life, for we hear of the Le Gras family incurring, in their palace in the Marais, heavy expenses for household maintenance and for entertainment. The bill amounted to more than 18,000 *livres* per annum. They also added a turret to the building. This turret, which made no pretensions to being a tower, marked a stage on the family's journey towards the nobility. The palace was kept in fashionable style and attracted that youthful and vivacious section of Parisian society which was then turning to account the rapid rise to fortune of the Concini. Louise had met both Concini, the Marechal d'Ancre, and his wife Leonora at the home of Michel de Marillac, at which, as she tells us herself, she was now a frequent visitor, and at the home of Louis, always absent himself, where Catherine de' Medici, his wife, virtuous and radiant, shed light on all around her. Mademoiselle Le Gras could almost meet high society at the Hotel Doni d'Attichy, where the children were most attached to her. Anne, in particular, who grew up to become the comtesse de Maure, loved her dearly. She was also frequently to be seen about the Court of Henri IV, to which her duty, if not her taste, bound her firmly.

This period of happiness, and even of brilliant social success, a time made brighter still by the birth of her son, Michel, on 10th October, 1613, was not of long duration. A brief and devastating storm wrecked many an illusion. Concini, the Marechal d'Ancre, was assassinated; the queen was disgraced and exiled to Blois and it is not certain whether her secretary, Le Gras, followed her into retirement, or remained with his wife in Paris. The vivid group of social climbers which had grouped itself about the Medici was scattered and stunned. Earthly fortunes change and no human disposition is secure.

Louise suffered keenly throughout these months of political crisis and she was also assailed by anxieties of a more personal nature. She loved her child with a warm and tremulous passion, but the boy was dull-witted, and only very slowly did his mind develop. This son, as we shall see, was to be a constant trial to her and a cross to be carried to the very end of her life. Now she was racked with anxiety, straining all her powers to emancipate that backward mind from the thralldom of an ungainly body.

The Doni d'Attichy died, in the flower of his youth. That was in 1615, and Valence followed him in 1619. They left behind them seven children and a seriously embarrassed estate. Michel de Marillac, the children's tutor, burdened with a thousand other cares, invited Antoine Le Gras to take over the management of the d'Attichy property. Antoine had met his wife in the d'Attichy household and had not forgotten the delicate courtesies of Valence and her husband: he readily undertook the duty. With much patience and by skilful management he was able to save the children from imminent ruin, but he was of a generosity so immoderate that in preventing their beggary he incurred a certain risk of precipitating his own. He neglected his business, pledged his property, and parted with a great deal of his capital. These are the terms that Louise uses, complaining gently of her husband's conduct, though she was undoubtedly just as warmly concerned as he was. Love can be a tyrant, and gratitude sometimes becomes an imposition. It came to pass that the d'Attichy children took offence at the assiduous services of Antoine Le Gras, and gave Louise to understand that they could recall a time when she herself had stood in need of succour. The wound thus wilfully inflicted must have been a sharp one, for Michel de Marillac, a man of known discretion, was obliged to intervene. He had to rebuke his d'Attichy nephews for their lack of manners, and reminded Louise of the virtue of forbearance.

In all these ways, bitter sufferings worked on Louise's soul and penetrated it, and they found her fully open to their attack. Throughout her youth her soul had been cramped in the exercise of its powers, and now she could do no more than resign herself to sorrow, as to a fate laid on her in her cradle.