Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part II: The great accomplishment (3)

Thorns and smiles

The mother-house was now well established in the St Laurent district, opposite the priory and church of St Lazarc. The daily routine of this house and of its daughtcr- houses throughout France was enlivened by many an incident, colourful and gay or sorrowful and moving: small episodes, of little significance in themselves, which stick in the mind and stand out more clearly with the passage of time, like milestones along a road.

Mademoiselle was very reticent about events in her private life and it is only by chance that we come across any information about it.

It was only to be expected that, in the course of her journeys on horseback throughout the lie de France, Louise should meet a traveller who called a ceremonious greeting as he passed her by; and that she, being a Marillac, should with punctilious correctness acknowledge the courtesy. But the horseman, outwardly so much the gentleman, lacked the gentility to go with the appearance and maliciously spread a tale that Mademoiselle had accepted his offer of marriage. An insignificant and stupid incident, but one which deeply wounded Louise and plunged her into a state of despondency. She sank to a state so low that she had to go for consolation to Monsieur Vincent. But from this she drew a lesson for her community and made it a rule that Sisters travelling on the public roads should hold no speech with men.

Calumny may be a source of sorrow. At Liancourt certain scatter-brained young people spread a story that the Daughters were flighty and had joined them in doubtful recreations. The slander gathered substance as it passed from mouth to mouth, though Sister Mathurinc Guerin's bearing was well above suspicion. The Superior of the Nicolaïtes, the parish curate, a severe man tinged with Jansenism, interrogated the young accusers. They stuck to their story, though they brought no evidence, and the priest believed it. The Sisters were refused absolution and excluded from communion. They bore their sentence with humility and in silence, although they suffered painfully. There was a great scandal and many lies were accepted as truth. Inevitably the facts of the case were at length discovered. The accusers withdrew their lie, the Daughters were cleared of blame. They had done no wrong and so had suffered no loss. The trial had been a source of spiritual progress to them.

At Char the suffering was not of this dramatic character. Rather it was a long drawn out battle between the Jansenist curate and the Daughters, who did not understand Jansenism, but suffered because of it. Louise was most vigilant on this point and protected her Daughters from Jansenist contagion, just as carefully as Monsieur Vincent guarded the Priests of the Mission. She had her theological arguments for she knew her theology. But she also had her practical reasons: if her Daughters were to fill their heads with doctrine which they did not understand, they would no longer have the heart for their humble work. They were called to serve the sick and not to discourse upon theology.

Louise had lifted her girls from ignorance; she had taught them to read and write so that they could share their lives with her when they were away. What more natural than that one of her Daughters, proud of knowing how to write and eager to show off her skill, should carry on a secret correspondence with a village friend? This could lead to mischief if it were not guarded against. There is a protection in the simplicity of ignorance.

Another of the girls had her head turned by the novel responsibilities of her nursing career. She learnt in secret the art of drawing blood, received from a proud mother the gift of a lancet and proceeded to bleed her patients indiscriminately and quite without method or authority. When another Sister endeavoured to confiscate the forbidden lancet, the rebellious Daughter refused to give it up. She declared that she had thrown it away with the dressing to deliver herself from temptation.

It was hard to know what to do with cases such as these. Monsieur Vincent counselled moderation; the devil would grow weary of tempting, heads would cool, grace would flow again in torrents. There were times when

nothing could be done and then the girl had to leave. Perhaps there were faults on both sides, but a girl who had mistaken her vocation had to go back into the world. Occasionally her exodus was coloured by a touch of the picturesque. One of the girls who left the community carried away with her some of the poultry, and Mademoiselle had no reason to doubt that the culprit sold them for good money. Another went even further, for she took the money-box. This girl had been chosen, in answer to an appeal from Alain de Solminhac, to go to Cahors to manage an orphanage. Off she went, well supplied with money for her needs upon the road and with something over. She disappeared into the world without a sound, and Alain de Solminhac and his orphanage waited for two years—for a Daughter who was never heard of again. This was a serious matter, for the missing money had been provided by the Bishop of Cahors who was thus let down twice over.

These, however, were only small events in the life of a new community which was still defining its aims and finding its equilibrium. The greatest trial of all was inescapable: deaths occurred very frequently among the Daughters, for in the early years of enthusiasm the generous girls expended their strength without stint and died of exhaustion. Louise was always heart-broken; she held herself responsible for the deaths of her Daughters—she had not watched over them with sufficient care and God was punishing her for her sins by striking down those she held most dear.

In a way she felt constant dread on this score. She was always anxious for the girls, especially if they were in places where the plague was raging and nothing could protect them from contagion. She took the trouble to send to Sister Jeanne Lepeintre, at Angers, a box of some popular remedy which if carefully used would, so people said, give complete protection from the plague. All her Daughters were carried in her heart. She suffered whenever she thought that any one of them was aggrieved or disturbed. The Daughters at Ussel thought that life in their mountain solitude was something of a penance; they complained of ‘that wretched Louise’, and sometimes they grizzled outright. But Mademoiselle had no time for grizzlers. A Daughter of Charity should be gay and cheerful and not a grizzler.

At the mother-house, gaiety was the rule. There were always some girls who had their heads in the air and occasionally lost their tempers, especially when they had to take their turn of duty in the water-queue. The house had no well and the community was too poor to buy from the water merchant, so the girls had to take their turn at the public fountain, wait in the queue for it to open, and stand patiently among housewives who exchanged doubtful stories and poked fun at the Daughters. It happened one day that a Daughter on duty at the fountain was fed up, turned her back on the fountain, and carried her buckets to the door of the house at St Lazare, where there was a well, and asked the Brothers to draw water for her. To her confusion, it was not a Brother, but Monsieur Vincent himself who filled the buckets for her and carried them back to the door of the Daughters’ house. Mademoiselle at once decided that she must have her own well and a well she got.

There were in these unlettered girls great treasures of delicacy and feeling. These would come to light in quite unexpected ways, and Mademoiselle would be enchanted. She wrote:

‘I have been much consoled to learn that a poor patient has had a fight with one of our Sisters who, by the grace of God, did nothing to defend herself. The man was a little rough with his instruction. We are servants of the poor, and therefore we have to suffer such correction.’

We may almost glimpse the smile with which she told the story.

One Sister submits to attack from the poor fellow she is nursing; others decline to wait upon the rich. The duchesse d’Aiguillon, Queen Marie de Gonzague of Poland and the Queen of Austria herself, struck by the demeanour of the Daughters of Charity, all cherished hopes of having one or two of the girls as members of their own households. It was not easy to refuse the requests of ladies of rank so eminent as these, especially as they were people who truly loved the company and gave it valuable support. But Monsieur Vincent marvelled at the reply which was transmitted by the Daughters:

‘Yesterday, being pressed by Mme de Combalet to send her one of the girls for her own service, I mentioned it to Marie Denyse, as she seemed to me the most suitable girl to send; but she made me an answer worthy of a girl whose vocation is to God and to charity, which was, that she had left mother and father to give herself to the

service of the poor for the love of God, and begged to be excused if she could not change this intention to go and serve this great lady. After that, I spoke to big Barbara, without saying who it was for, or why, and sent her to wait for me at the house of the said Mine de Combalet, where I said that this good lady would employ her, partly in her own service and partly for the poor of that parish. She began to cry, but when she gave her consent, I handed her over to a maid of the said lady. But I was much astonished when, immediately after that, having gone to pay a call on the Abbe de Loyac, Barbara came to me there. She said she was dumb-foundcd to see such grand company, she could not possibly live there, she begged me to take her back. Our Lord had given her to the poor, would I not send her back to them? Which much astonished the Abb6, to see such a scorn for the glories of the world, so that he made me tell the good girl to go back to the said lady; and if after four or five days she still found she was not happy, then she should return to Saint-Nicholas. What do you think of that, Mademoiselle? Are you not enraptured to see the strength of the Spirit of God in these two poor girls, and the contempt he makes them feel for the world and its glories ?'

The same thing happened when the Queen of Poland and the Queen of France asked for girls for their households. Decidedly the spirit of the company was by this time firmly founded: there were the poor, and after them—nobody.

We now come to the Vigil of Pentecost, (always a day of importance in the life of Louise de Marillac) the Vigil of Pentecost 1644. On this day, there occurred in the mother- house an event which came near to ending in catastrophe. Louise described it briefly in a letter to Sister Claude at Angers:

'Oh do all of you, my dear sisters, give hearty thanks to God for his mercy towards us in saving us from death on the Vigil of Pentecost, when the floor of our room collapsed, and we had no more warning than sufficed to step back about four paces.'

On the anniversary of that day in 1645, in a conference given in that same room, Monsieur Vincent gives a few more details:

'Do you think that this floor beneath us, which fell in a year ago, is a poor proof [of the providence of God] ? A proof it certainly is! That a great beam should give way in a place like this, and nobody be standing above or below it—that is miraculous. Mademoiselle Le Gras was there; a Sister heard the cracking and said the room was not safe. Mademoiselle made nothing of it. But a senior Sister repeated the warning. Mademoiselle deferred to her age, and left the room. She was scarcely in the next apartment—you can see for yourselves, Sisters: it is but three paces—when the beam broke and the floor fell in. Did that happen without the special providence of God ? That very afternoon, I myself ought to have been here; we were to have met in committee on some important business. In the noise that there is in a meeting, nobody would have heard the cracking of that beam. That Sister would not have been present, for the Sisters do not come to such meetings, and we should all have been crushed down there; but God caused some affair to come along which kept me away from the meeting, and which meant that none of the Ladies would be there.

'That was not a matter of mere chance, .my Daughters. We must be very careful not to believe that.'

This accident, which was happily not serious, impressed Louise de Marillac to quite an extraordinary degree. Her devotion was always particularly warm at the season of Pentecost and she was very open to the influences of the Holy Spirit. She saw in the mishap a very special sign that her congregation was under the protection of Providence. She saw it as an intimation from God to make an end of the anxieties she still held for the future of her work, which was so manifestly the work of God. Pentecost 1644 became a landmark in her life. It was as though she had reached the summit of a mountain, and below her the whole world spread out in the light of a new day.

She felt this again strongly at Nantes (for this was the year of that epoch-making journey). She felt it in both mind and body, as she regained mastery over both. This too was a providential development, for Monsieur Vincent, already absorbed in his burden of work for the Mission, was obliged to collaborate with the Queen in affairs of state, so far as they bore upon Church affairs; heavily burdened by his work for the Church, all but overwhelmed by his duties as a political adviser, he could not devote his time to Mademoiselle as he had done hitherto. We

observe that he begins to answer her letters with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’, written in the margins of the letters themselves.

Thus Louise now had to manage not only her house but herself. She was ready for both tasks. We shall see later that this date was equally significant for her interior life. From now on began in her a transformation which rapidly developed as she made strides towards sanctity. Pentecost 1644 corresponded to the unforgettable Pentecost of 1623 and the two dates became as it were the hinges of her life.

For the moment her earthly home lay in ruins and had to be repaired. Here her practical genius worked wonders. She knew the price of materials, knew what it cost, for example, to weave an ell of serge for a Sister’s habit and how much cheaper it was to get it made in the country. She knew the wage of a mason’s labourer and what food she would have to provide if she offered to board him. She was not unaware that prices had risen since her youth and that (as though by law) in Paris prices double every fifty years. The magnificent project laid before her by her architect did not, therefore, take her unawares, and with a very firm courtesy she cut his plans by half:

‘Monsieur,

‘The perfect confidence that I have, that you will have the goodness to take notice of the request I made to you about our little plans, makes me recall to your memory that it is absolutely necessary that the house should be such as to please my country girls, and that it should be as far as possible from looking magnificent. I know that you will not be able to bring yourself down to this level without some difficulty, because of your habit of designing everything large and high, but after you have reflected upon what I have said to you on the subject, and on the need of the Company to appear in all things poor and humble if it is to endure, you will clearly see, Monsieur, that it is a work for our Lord, and it may be that you will be very pleased to contribute to the solidity of the house by means of the gifts that God has given to you, telling you also that all that part which at St Laurent we call the parlour and the kitchen, is also all the room we have for our school and also for bandaging and bleeding the poor.’

The practical good sense of the foundress was, as always, in accord with the principles of Christian perfection and with the spirit of the community. I might have ventured the remark that this harmony was to be found in all her dealings throughout her life, were it not that such an assertion smacks a little of hagiography. It seems to me that in Louise de Marillac, harmony was sometimes shattered by a too professional attitude to her work.

Mademoiselle’s attitude to life was that of a sick-nurse. She was always preoccupied with the care of the sick and was forever in quest of new remedies—remedies that would cure. She was very much in agreement on this point with Madame Fouquet, who had even compiled a book on home nursing and popular medicine. She was still more in accord with Monsieur Vincent, who likewise appears to have been at times an enthusiast for strange cures. Their letters to one another on the subject arc most revealing. Here we have two active temperaments entirely absorbed in what they are doing and each of them constantly held back by ill-health— Monsieur Vincent by fevers and ague, and Mademoiselle by disorders of the stomach. As their medicines never cured them, they were always in quest of new ones and both lent a ready ear to those vendors of patent medicines so numerous in every age. Mademoiselle declared that Monsieur Vincent was not taking due care; the priest said that Louise was neglecting her health and overtiring her strength. There is in this correspondence something like an obsession with illness, with a vast amount of detail on remedies and their physiological effects, which reminds us of Molierc’s Le Malade

Imaginaire. It borders on the absurd when Mademoiselle, prescribing for Monsieur Vincent’s leg wound, orders a course of purges and blood-letting, or a syrup of peach flowers which is said to work wonders. There is enough material in this body of letters to provide a substantial treatise on the official and popular medicine of the day. Both had their laughable side and occasionally, like the quacks of today, they could claim a cure. Despite the not infrequent setbacks, Mademoiselle believed firmly in her own methods —so firmly that she can perhaps be charged with superstition in matters medical. Yet it may well be that a certain appeal to superstition was in those days necessary to keep up the morale of the sick—and that too was an aspect of charity.

There is one domain, brimfull with sadness, in which despite all her efforts Louise never achieved serenity and

equilibrium. She was, if possible, more completely a mother than other mothers and Monsieur Vincent says of her that her maternal feelings over-flowed the measure but were ever shot through with fear and impatience. Her son Michel was backward and unstable from birth. He developed slowly under his mother's anxious eye. When the boy was thirteen years old and his mother began to travel, she placed him as a boarder in the seminary for young clerics conducted by M. Bourdoise at Saint-Nicholas-du-Chardonnet. Life as an intern in this little suburban school was very hard for the moody boy even though Monsieur Vincent, almost his neighbour at the College dcs Bons Enfants, gave him a home in his holidays. The break in the school routine only gave the fond mother an opportunity to coddle the lad with bloodlettings and purges in an effort to improve his condition.

Louise de Marillac had dreamed and made up her mind that her son should be a priest. He was therefore clad in the soutane at the earliest possible age, removed from the college at Saint-Nicolas and entered at the College de Clermont, where he was to continue his studies by reading theology with the Jesuits. In the letters which passed between his mother and Monsieur Vincent we follow the history of Michel's health, his studies, his whims, his dislikes, his good resolutions, liis purges and bleedings, his tempers and repentances. He was a child like other children, sometimes delightful, not knowing what lie wanted to do and as often as not content to do nothing. His mother supposed that all he needed was a spur and so she gave him incentives in plenty, especially when the time came for him to decide whether to take minor orders. At this point we share in a drama of passion, of conflicting desires. Monsieur Vincent endeavoured to soothe both mother and son and from his letters we get an idea of the strong feeling on both sides:

To Louise De Marillac.

Saturday morning.

'I received your letter this morning, and write at once in reply to tell you what your son has been saying to M. de la Salle. He says he is only entering into this state because such is your desire; that his desire is to be dead[1] therefore, but that to please you he would take minor orders. Now, is that avocation? I think he would prefer to die himself than that you should do so. However that may be, and whether it springs from [human] nature or from the devil, his will is not at present free, lie is not able to reach his own decision, and that in a matter of the greatest importance. You would surely not desire that? Not long ago, there was a good lad in this town who took the sub-diaconatc in just the same circumstances, and then could not pass to the higher orders. Would you wish to expose your son to a danger like that? Leave him to the guidance of God who is much more his Father than you arc his mother, and loves him more than you can do. Let God have the guidance of your son. He will know how to call him at another time, if he so desires, or to give him some occupation suitable to his health. I recall a certain priest who used to be here in this house, who came to his priesthood in just such trouble of mind—and God knows what has become of him now. . .

V.D.

I request you to make your meditation on the mother of Zebedee's children: to whom, when she was over-eager for the position of her sons, our Saviour said: 'You know not what you ask'. (*vide* Matt, xx, 20.)

To Louise de Marillac.

'I have received two letters from you, or, more correctly, one letter in two parts, and have since seen and spoken to your son, without letting him know that I had any knowledge of what passed yesterday; now, he tells me in a very recollected and tranquil way that he has seen you and that you had a little difference of opinion. Then I spoke to him of his vocation, and asked if he was going to persevere in it. Then he told me with much good will that he would, and that he was going to the Sorbonne with this intention, determined to do well. This makes me think that there was no need for me to speak to him and that we need not disturb him in that matter about which you are anxious. I therefore beg you to be at peace; and what is more, if the things you dread should happen, it would still be needful to adore the Providence of God concerning him, and to believe that travel, or a change of condition, would be good for his health, and perhaps contribute to a greater degree of perfection. Alas, Mademoiselle, if all those who had put a distance between themselves and their parents had put their souls in danger, where should I be ? Well, remember that all things serve the predestined to bring them to their goal, and that I am, Mademoiselle,

in the love of our Saviour, your very humble servant,

Vincent depaul.'

A boy who desires the death of his mother, and of himself; a mother and son who engage in argument, and say things so hard that the mother loses her gift of understanding—here is a situation which throws some light on the soul of Louise and the emotions that control it. She smothered her emotions: necessity had long ago taught her how to; but sometimes nature gained the upper hand. She reproached herself for giving way to natural feeling and made scruples of her faults. She endeavoured to detach herself from Michel and for the future to look on him only as a child of God.

These events were taking place at a time (1644) when a new political climate began to be noticeable in France, infecting to some extent the revived spiritual life of the nation. But the ground lost was quickly regained. Paul de Gondi was appointed coadjutor to the Archbishop of Paris, and it was remembered that Vincent de Paul had a point of contact with the Gondi family. The support of Paul de Gondi was therefore solicited with a view to obtaining for the young cleric a post in the household of the future Cardinal-Bishop. Louise made 110 direct approach but was willing that overtures should be made on her behalf. Then she reproached herself for the liveliness of her own hopes and passed through torments as the affair made its slow progress. In the end the plan fell through and Michel renounced his intention to enter the Church.

He escaped from seminary discipline and for some time lived as do other young men, without very much in the way of grave fault. His mother made too much of his misdemeanours, grieved over them—and persuaded herself that he was 110 longer her responsibility. Monsieur Vincent appointed him a bailiff at Saint-Lazarc and there was some talk of getting him married. Maternal feeling at once revived in the bosom of Louise and her heart was plunged into tumult over her son's marriage.

The marriage contract was a difficult matter. Michel was without fortune and his post as bailiff at Saint-Lazare carried *[... pages missing]*