



Louise de Marillac, a portrait. Part II: The great accomplishment (6)

The drama of the ‘enfants trouvés’

We may well speak of drama in connection with the Enfants Trouvés—a social drama, since the civil authorities had signally failed to heal a bleeding wound in the side of the nation; a human drama, because helpless children were abandoned to wretchedness and death; a personal drama, because the state of those waifs and strays ravaged the heart of Louise with immense sorrow. It is to the glory of Monsieur Vincent and Mademoiselle that they refused to accept the situation and fought with deeds against the stubbornness of official opinion until they had created an atmosphere in which, little by little, remedies were found.

The depths of human selfishness will never be plumbed. Civil commotion, social hypocrisy and public misery all found their most defenceless victims in the children of France. Thousands, deserted in the fratricidal wars, were abandoned to public charity. Vice paid homage to virtue and exploited it, and when an infant was left at a church door the deserter salved his conscience by leaning on the generosity of charitable people. Everything, even the deeds of the good, weighed most heavily on the children.

The origins of the Enfants Trouvés are still obscure. It is known that in Paris, about the year 1600, nearly four hundred infants were abandoned each year. They were taken in either by charitable individuals or by the sergeants of the justices. In 1630 a house, vulgarly known as ‘La Couch’ (i.e. ‘the napkin’), was acquired for their accommodation. Responsibility for their care was divided between a committee representing the great religious orders and the Chapter of Notre-Dame, and it is to be feared that each of these parties relied upon the other to maintain the place. Conditions were terrible. There was not enough room, there were not enough nurses, there was not enough of anything. Babies died in great numbers and every child in the house was ill and suffering. There soon grew up a most odious traffic: the children were lured out or sold to ruffians who broke their legs to cripple them and thus excite pity and extort alms. It was no easy matter to launch a crusade against this dreadful scourge, so dishonouring to humanity and to Christian conscience. Vast resources would be required; social prejudice against doing anything for bastard children would have to be overcome; and it was to be feared that, in adopting these children, other desertions would be encouraged.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac dared the venture. From the outset they put into it their entire and only wealth and strength—human compassion and practical ability. After a careful preliminary enquiry, Louise drew up a memorandum which Monsieur Vincent amplified, revised and approved. Both decided to enlist for this work the services of the Society of Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu—at that time, like the congregation of the Daughters of Charity, in the first enthusiasm of youth. At the annual meeting in 1640, there were gathered together the most eminent women of the Parisian aristocracy and bourgeoisie, the central figures being the duchess d’Aiguillon and the princess de Conde. If this fearful emergency were to be dealt with, all Paris must be mobilised.

The project presented to the meeting by Vincent de Paul was well received. It was resolved that half-measures should be dropped, and that they should aim high: that is to say, take over the entire organisation of the Enfants Trouvés) the Ladies should deal with general administration and the Daughters of Charity provide the practical organisation and the hands for the work. Procedure was to be the same as in any great collective effort: the administration would discuss and vote, and leave the carrying out of decisions to the secretary-general; and the secretary-general was, in effect, Louise de Marillac. Upon her and upon Monsieur Vincent fell the burden and heat of the day.

When the plan was made public, enthusiasm was enormous, and Louise was much encouraged. King Louis XIII bestowed on the work a pension of 4,000 livres, a sum which Anne of Austria followed and doubled. Yet even with an assured income of this amount, it was soon obvious that a budget of 40,000 livres annually was the absolute minimum needed to keep the work going. They had been sadly wide of the mark in their calculations. The deficit would have to be made up from alms and from subscriptions from the Ladies. It was necessary to recall backsliders, to remind each of her promises and her responsibilities, to call meetings, to be very grateful for



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services and gifts in kind, to soothe susceptibilities and smooth ruffled vanity.

What was to be done with the children? Louise's improvisations were marked by a touch of genius. Reception centres were set up at points far apart: one of these, of course, would be a house of the Daughters of Charity, first at La Chapelle, later in the Rue Saint-Denis. These centres proved inadequate and placing in private families was tried. The Charities and the parish clergy drew up lists of families and individuals to whom the care of a child might safely be entrusted. The child then set off to one of these foster-parents, along with his bill of health. Some of these have survived, a few being in Monsieur Vincent's own hand, with the address of the fosterparents written in the margin. The bill of health had to be kept up to date by the foster-parents, and scrutinised at regular intervals by the parish priest or the nearest Charity. The Ladies, with a Daughter to assist, paid frequent visits to each home, took notes and sent in reports. Children thus cared for, growing up in wholesome and humane conditions and watched over might be said to be saved. They were not only protected but loved, and it was love that fitted them for a normal life in society. It happened frequently that enduring bonds were formed between the boys and girls and the families...

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...would have given you far more trouble and anxiety than these will do. And to what advantage? Like most other mothers, you would have loved them with a natural love. What then would have been your recompense? The recompense of nature—your own satisfaction. If these, now, were the children of noble families, you would be put to a lot of trouble—more, perhaps, than these will give you: and your recompense? Salaries—on the small side. And your positions would be those of servants. But after you have served these infants which the world abandons, what will be your recompense?—God, in eternity.

The children themselves would become their recompense. Abandoned they would have died or grown up to be rogues. Brought up by them, they would become the founders of Christian families. Their duty to these children was sacred; they must truly be mothers to them.

'Mothers have no greater consolation than to watch the little activities of their children. They love and admire everything their children do. They would expose themselves to any evil, to save their children a little pain.

'Mothers in tenderness, you will be their angels, to preserve them from evil and train them in all things good.

'You ought above all things to fear giving any scandal to these poor children, to do or say any wrong thing before them. If Mademoiselle Le Gras could have angels in her service, she would have to give them up to serve these innocents. There is a story going round that we are only sending [to Bicetre] those Daughters who are no use at other work. Quite the contrary: at Bicetre we shall want the most able and most virtuous Daughters that we have; for the children will be what their "aunts" are. If the "aunt" is good, the children will be good; if the "aunt" is bad, the children will be so, because they so easily follow example. If you lose your tempers, they will become bad-tempered. If you slip into petty faults before them, they will do the same; if you grumble, they will grumble.'

The conference ended with advice on religious training, precise and tender in its penetration.

Louise de Marillac was often at Bicetre. She worked with all her heart to make the place a success, though she was sorely tried by the inconveniences which she had foreseen. In a letter to Monsieur Vincent, she made her complaint with a slight edge of ill-humour:

'Now, as to the letter from Mme de Pollalion giving a testimonial for this man who offers his services for Bicetre. He says that he is very good at making bread, garden work, ploughing and carting. All this work has to be done out there, and it works out very dear when it has to be done by the day.

'Fifty-two children have died in Bicetre since we went there, and there are fifteen or sixteen others who are not doing very well. I hope that when all is conveniently arranged, according to the wishes of these good Ladies, the children will not leave us so quickly. Perhaps they will tell you that I have spoken of the necessity of having the Blessed Sacrament out here, not only for cases of need, but so that our Lord may take possession of the house in



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the sight of all who are in any way concerned with the work of the place: a point on which I take the liberty to tell you that it came into my mind, that not only should the Ladies be advised of the day, but it should also be given out clearly in the parish notices, so that the people may come and support our intentions. When people see this magnificent pile, and hear that it is given over to little children, and that all who are responsible for it are of high position, most of them think there must be plenty of money for all our needs—whereas the fact is, that we have to borrow to buy in the provisions for the week, in addition to all our other needs, as you well know.

'May it please you, of your charity, to remember to ask for some more girls to help us, as our need of them is very urgent, the work of the house increasing every day.'

All the correspondence of Louise between 1646 and 1651 is filled with stifled complaint and heartrending appeals. She had now given herself entirely over to the work of the Enfants Trouvés, with something amounting to passion. The needs of the Chateau increased with every hour, but income lessened. Monsieur Vincent's zeal certainly did not wane, but he was overwhelmed by the widespread misery throughout the provinces. Ladies of Charity were tired of giving—and the limits of begging had been reached. Everyone began to make excuses. Political disorder was returning to the country, and the Fronde was inflaming tempers and closing hearts everywhere. And at this most anxious time, Monsieur Vincent was absent in the country.

Louise de Marillac missed her director sorely. But more important, her children were becoming more and more hungry. At last, on December 15th, 1648, Louise appealed to Mademoiselle de Lamoignon, a woman of unbounded generosity, a remarkable Christian totally unable to hate anyone, not even the devil himself, a woman who knew only love and generosity. Louise begged for counsel and support:

'I beg pardon that I have not written to Mme Siguier as you instructed me to do. I believe I have talked only too much about the extreme needs of these poor children and their nurses, even to the point of being importunate with several persons, saddening too much, perhaps, hearts which have been sympathetic and charitable. There remains nothing for me to tell you, except that I seem to see the Ladies of the Company, who are much more mothers to these little ones than their own mothers ever were, plunged into the righteous grief of the mothers of the Innocents at the massacre, because they are quite without power to do anything to help. We must, all the same, expect from the bounty of Providence some notable form of help, such as was lately provided for some little new arrivals who had just been found (may God be eternally praised for it).

'I believe, Mademoiselle, that you are shortly going to call a large meeting. Would it not be a good thing to reconsider the notices already sent out for taking collections every Saturday in Notre Dame, and on first Sundays and major feasts in the churches of every suburb and town? Perhaps the Ladies as a body would undertake this duty each in their own district. Those who undertook to be on duty could take neighbours or friends to help them, and so it would not be a very great burden. It will be said that such an effort would bring in but little; in particular places that might be so, but the total effort would bring in something. The gentlemen down at the office must be getting some advantage from it, for they are always getting up these same collections.

'I believe also, Mademoiselle, that you will speak of the great need there is of help to keep the little breakfasts going at the Hôtel-Dieu. They are more necessary than ever. Those poor people sometimes tell me that the breakfast is the only meal they get; and surely it is their only pleasure.

'Do you not recall, Mademoiselle, that when this work began, the Ladies on the administration reported on all the good, spiritual and material, that came of making visits in connection with the breakfasts? By this means, the Ladies were able to see the good results of their visits and alms. This might perhaps be done again. But I am in dread that this work may fail, and this fear drives me to take the liberty of making these suggestions. You will, if you please, pardon her who is, with all her heart, in the love of our Lord. . . .'

But Mile de Lamoignon was no longer able to give any help: her house had been a storehouse for the poor but now it was empty. Christmas was now very near, and the Hôtel-Dieu had no flour; the children would not eat even bread on the holy days. Now the most open-handed of the Ladies had left Paris and there was no one left to whom appeal could be made: he who is ashamed that he can give no more will hide himself away. And then Louise thought of the highest financial authority in the land—Pierre Seguier, the Chancellor of France—difficult of



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access, but a man of great soul. She addressed to him an appeal which is full of nobility.

'The respect which I owe to Your Highness bids me remember those occasions when I collected the charity Your Highness had promised at Saint-Germain to the poor foundlings.

'But seeing, Monseigneur, that all has failed, I take the liberty of these lines, since I am not able to do myself the honour of seeking you out myself, to represent to you that there are a hundred of these poor little children; that among all their present necessities, the one that weighs upon me most is that they have no bread against the festival; that this matter burdens my heart so heavily that I should fear, Monseigneur, being too much guilty, if any consideration should prevent me from having recourse to Your Highness, who on so many other occasions has seemed to be truly the succour of the poor.

'Permit me, then, this great boldness, and to sign myself with every kind of submission and respect, in the Love of God for whom you act. . .

One would like to believe that Seguier gave bread for the foundlings that Christmas of 1684, and that he had abundance for himself.

Peace, transitory and insecure, returned to France. Monsieur Vincent and the Ladies came back to Paris. Louise had a breathing-space, but the Enfants Trouves had fallen very low and means were lacking to carry the work forward. The fortunes of the Ladies, which consisted for the most part of land, were ruined and would be so for years to come, for the war had laid waste the country around Paris. Louise, absorbed in her poor and her foundlings, was perhaps not able to appreciate the extent of the catastrophe and was at times unjust in her complaints. Monsieur Vincent saw the whole picture more clearly and declared that he was most reluctant to appeal again, for fear of becoming a nuisance.

In October 1649, the distress at the Enfants Trouves reached its peak. Louise, at the end of her strength, began to say she would have to let everything go. She wrote to Monsieur Vincent:

'I am very importunate, but we have reached the point where we must have help without delay, or give up everything. Yesterday, we had to deal out all the housekeeping money, fifteen to twenty livres, and then borrow more, to buy wheat for the children at Bicetre and we cannot depend upon receiving anything whatever in a month's time. There are now a dozen or thirteen babies here and not a scrap of linen to change them. It is essential, if you please, that at the meeting of the Ladies something should be done, and preferably that they put into effect that resolution about collecting in the parishes every Sunday, setting up little money-boxes in the churches in prominent places, and seeing that the clergy and preachers draw attention to them, and taking up collections outside the church as well, as was proposed. I believe that if somebody went to see the Princess about these extreme needs, she would give something. May it please your charity to let us know if they are sending us tickets for the meeting, and if you think it would be well to invite to it Mme de Schomberg and Mme de Verthamont. For the rest of what I had to tell you, it would take too long; it will be more quickly done in a few words tomorrow, if I have the honour of seeing you. I stand in very great need of the particular assistance of God at this time, for wherever I turn, and whatever I put my hand to, I see nothing but misery and affliction. God be praised! It is enough that I tell you the great need I have of your charity, as it has pleased Providence that I should be '

If we are to be in full sympathy with the tone of this letter, we must bear in mind that civil affairs were at this time in a state of total collapse.

In the midst of the commotion and confusion left behind by the retreating armies of 1648, others were preoccupied with their own immediate worries, and Louise de Marillac stood practically alone to deal with the administrative details of every day. It was she who must discover that the bread had run out, she who found that there was no linen to change the babies; she who took in the new mouths, brought ever) day and left with her.

All this excuses her growing impatience and in the end her resignation of her post.

'I am extremely vexed to have to be so importunate with you, but the sheer impossibility of taking in any more of



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these children is too heavy a burden. We have at present seven babies who will no longer take the feeding-bottle, and I have no double who could nurse them; we have no more reserves of baby linen at all, no sheets, and not a hope of borrowing any more. Do us the charity, my much honoured Father, to advise us whether we can in conscience expose them to death, for the Ladies are no longer exerting themselves to get us help, and I declare I believe they think we are doing everything here at their expense, which is very far from the truth. I know of only one way to relieve all those who are suffering under this work: in the name of our Company, we must present a petition to the First-President, that we be exempted from taking in any more of these children. But the consent of the Ladies will have to be gained for this request, so that there be no scandal; without such exemption, it seems to me we shall all be in constant mortal sin.

‘Four babies were brought here yesterday, and in addition to seven at the breast, there are three weaned babies newly found, and we shall have to put them out to nurse again, if we can; if I could carry this burden without making you share it, I would do so very willingly but our helpless condition will not allow it. The good Ladies are not doing what they could; not one of them has sent anything, nor do we receive anything from those of the Company. I begin to fear that all this wretchedness comes on my account, who am such as I am, my much honoured Father, your very obliged and very obedient Daughter.’

Her cry was heard. Monsieur Vincent called the full meeting of the Ladies. He described to them the state of distress at the Enfants Trouvés and, like Louise, he spoke of throwing up the work. He gave an account of the prevailing misery; but he also indicated to the assembled Ladies one last means by which everything could be saved: their curios and trinkets, those expensive trifles for which they really cared nothing, and their jewels, would bring in some money. The Queen had given him a necklace and a royal example they could surely follow. He ended this conference with the celebrated words now known to all the world. We reproduce them here, in pages consecrated to Louise de Marillac, because these words sprang from the heart of the mother of the Foundlings, just as much as from the heart of their father, Vincent de Paul; and because of the honour they confer upon all that is Christian and humane in France.

‘Now, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children. You have been their mothers according to grace, because their mothers in nature have deserted them. Now, see if you also will abandon them? Cease for a little while to be their mothers, and become for a moment their judges; life and death for them is in your hands; I am about to take your votes and sentences; it is time to pronounce judgment on them, and to find out whether you no longer wish to have mercy on them. If you continue your charitable care they will live; on the other hand, if you abandon them, without fail they will die and perish: of that, experience leaves you no room for doubt.’

There was no resisting such an appeal. Yet again the work of the Enfants Trouvés was saved by the sacrifices of the Ladies.

Yet danger had not entirely disappeared. Disorder, and a new famine, came back with the Second Fronde. This time, the children and the Sisters were in bodily danger: fighting took place in the neighbourhood of Bicêtre. Yet there was more fear than danger. We still find in letters from Louise an occasional appeal and a few complaints; after that, there is little more talk of the Enfants Trouvés. The situation at Bicêtre was stabilised and in course of time the work was taken over again by the General Hospital.

For twenty years this vast undertaking had been Louise’s great preoccupation and anxiety. One would have said that the work had worn out her heart, except that her heart was enriched and strengthened by all she did. After 1650, the tone of her voice changes, becomes more concentrated, less passionate; but this is not age or spiritual fatigue. A new kind of greatness was taking shape in her.

This chapter concerned with the enterprise of the Enfants Trouvés should not be closed without a few words on two similar works of mercy, in which Louise had been invited to help: the Almshouse of the Name of Jesus, and the General Hospital. We shall not even sketch their history, but just draw attention to certain marks left upon these institutions by the strong, discreet character of Mademoiselle.

About 1650, a wealthy citizen of Paris anonymously gave to Monsieur Vincent the sum of 100,000 livres, for the



establishment of a permanent work of mercy of his own choice. Monsieur Vincent bought a piece of ground and a house, which he converted for use as a hospital; he bestowed on Saint-Lazare an income sufficient to maintain forty old people, twenty men and twenty women, chosen from workers whom old age or feebleness had rendered incapable of earning their own living. This was the Almshouse of the Name of Jesus. The founder's aim, apart from the obvious charitable one, was to set up a model almshouse and so to prove that it was possible to break with the inhumane routine of the older almshouses. At The Name of Jesus, the residents were clad in neat and suitable clothes and had each his own bed. There were a well-lighted chapel and refectory and the food was carefully prepared. The residents could not go out, but they could amuse themselves by following some occupation with which they were familiar and the profit from this would allow them to buy some little extra luxury, such as wine. All these simple details were innovations. Responsibility for the management of this almshouse devolved upon the Mission and it was natural that Monsieur Vincent should turn to Louise and her Daughters, to put the almshouse on a sound footing.

In a short note, Louise described to Monsieur Vincent the methodical way in which she set to work:

'The little family was assembled punctually, except for one man and one of the women, who had not yet arrived. But I believe, Monsieur, that it will be necessary for your charity to take the trouble to settle them down tomorrow morning with some devotional exercise, such as Adoration of the Holy Cross, and an exhortation of some sort on the Passion. It is bold of me to make such a suggestion. If it please your charity to give instructions, either this evening or early tomorrow morning, the clothes which have been got ready for them should be distributed.'

The chronicle of the house, the individual condition of each resident, the bookkeeping—all these details are recorded in a register, on the most modern lines.

Monsieur Vincent had a special affection for this almshouse, so well ordered and wisely governed. He paid the old people regular visits. A summary has been preserved of a discourse which he gave them on the sign of the Cross: 'This is how we make it'; and he made it, each gesture separately. 'Now I shall ask you to make it. If you do not know how, do not be ashamed. How many great lords there are about the Court, and perhaps even Presidents, who can do it no better than you. You will learn how to make it, and will learn, too, all the other things necessary to your salvation according to the desire of your benefactor, who has lodged you so comfortably in this house.'

The almshouse of The Name of Jesus was something of a wonder to the curious who came to see the place, but it caused a twinge of jealousy in some of the Ladies since they had had no share in founding or running the place, and the Daughters who worked there were removed from their jurisdiction.

The Ladies were cherishing a great project, which would far exceed in scope all those other works to which they had so generously contributed. The scheme was not of Vincentian inspiration, yet it was in a sense an extension of his activity, a consequence of that renewed impulse to charitable work which Vincent de Paul had set in motion and which had now been working fruitfully in the Christian conscience for thirty years.

The project sought to unify those more secular and sporadic efforts, made from time to time by the Parlement, by royalty, by the police, in the attempt to put down begging by housing the mendicants in institutions. This was an old problem, frequently attacked and as frequently defying all attempts at a solution. This time it was to be taken seriously. The Fronde had collapsed, the war was drawing to an end. Those works of charitable enterprise already launched now seemed to be in a fair way to succeed. They were all to be surpassed by this new venture. Money was being put into it: the duchesse d'Aiguillon promised 100,000 livres, and the Ladies, though not so grandly, imitated her example. Monsieur Vincent kept his thoughts to himself and was silent. Louise de Marillac, having been approached by the Ladies, meditated, pen in hand. In substance, what she wrote was as follows: It may well be that the moment has come for our women to come out of the houses, to undertake a more public work for which they may shoulder the entire responsibility. Why should they not found the General Hospital? Assuredly, they would have to take counsel of competent and influential men, and they must be assured by the Superior of the Mission that he would take all responsibility on the spiritual side. It is evident that Monsieur Vincent saw this letter. If not entirely convinced, he was sufficiently won over to allow the matter to take its course. He exerted himself to obtain from the Queen the buildings of the Salpetrière. With great enthusiasm, the work of restoration and adaptation was begun. The Ladies were jubilant.



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Then, suddenly, the building stopped. The royal authorities expressed the opinion that an undertaking on this scale could not be allowed to remain entirely in the hands of a charitable society. A request was made that the Ladies should proceed no further. Their disappointment was bitter, but the Ladies had the heroism of devotion. The General Hospital became a municipal establishment in which their generosity played its part. Begging was suppressed by royal decree in 1657 and beggars were invited to let themselves be shut up in the General Hospital.

There were 40,000 mendicants in Paris alone, many among them blind or maimed. Upon publication of the decree by sudden miracle they found themselves cured and ready to look for work. Three-quarters of them left Paris for the country. For the moment the problem was solved. But it was to spring up again in each succeeding generation, as though the profession of begging were part of the nature of things.

The decree which established the General Hospital appointed the Mission to its spiritual direction and made the Daughters of Charity responsible for the care of the sick in the place. Monsieur Vincent declined to release for this work any of his own workers on the Mission, who were always in demand for his work elsewhere. Mademoiselle could only spare two or three of her Daughters to organise the care of the sick. At bottom, though he admired the royal generosity, Monsieur Vincent's heart was not in the scheme. The Parlement and the police were only concerned with public order which was their duty. Vincent de Paul considered that the poor man had his dignity and the beggar his freedom; he was an enemy of all constraint. Both Monsieur Vincent and Louise de Marillac preferred to rely upon persuasion: poor men, incapable of earning their own living, should be induced to shut themselves up voluntarily. Their almshouse of The Name of Jesus was a striking proof of the efficacy of their method, but the history of charitable organisation is full of the debate between order and liberty. Monsieur Vincent, otherwise so clear-sighted and practical, perhaps expected rather too much of human nature and the mystique of poverty. My own impression is that Louise de Marillac had not followed him very far along this road, and that she would have preferred to sacrifice liberty to order, in her desire to reduce suffering.