



THE FIRST YEARS

There was great rejoicing in a house in Rennes near the Porte Saint-Georges on the evening of February 26th, 1679. François-Claude Poullart and Jeanne Le Meneust had been married for two years and were approaching their forties. They feared that they would have no children. They had “begged God to bless their marriage with a son”¹ and on that day, the second Sunday of Lent, their prayers were heard. Their joy was unbounded; this son, so eagerly awaited, could help them to fulfil their dreams.



Born in Bréhand-Moncontour², in the diocese of St. Brieuc, François-Claude was the last representative “of a family of considerable nobility, by its alliances and through the episcopacy, by which it had received various honours”.³ History remembers Geoffrey Poullart, killed in the Combat des Trente (1351), a notable event in Breton history. In the second half of the 19th century, Guillaume Poullart had been bishop of Rennes and later of Saint Malo.⁴ But for the last two or three generations, as result of “the misunderstanding between a mother-in-law and her son-in-law”, the condition of the Poullart family was far from brilliant: “nearly all their fortune had been lost or dissipated”.⁵

François-Claude had managed to get a good legal education and was installed as a barrister in the Parliament of Brittany. But in 1668, during a reform of the Breton nobility, he was unable to find the necessary documents and was forced to renounce his claims to the title of “Squire”. From that moment, his great ambition was to produce a son and heir and get reintegrated into the ranks of the nobility. He placed his legal knowledge and general *savoir-faire* at the disposal of Ferret du Tymeur and Michau de Montaran, the two most important bankers in Rennes. He quickly became their trusted servant and friend. A few weeks before his marriage, he received a notable mark of their esteem: with the approval of Jean d’Estrades, the abbot of Saint-Melaine, he was accorded some of the income from this important Benedictine abbey.⁶



Jeanne Le Meneust came from an old family of Saint-Léonard de Fougères. Her father, Gilles Le Meneust de la Vieuxville, died prematurely, leaving her nothing apart from an excellent education.⁷ It was probably her cousin, Nicolle Lyais, the Marquise de Marbeuf, known as the “great friend” of Mme de Sévigné, who had recommended the young orphan to her sister-in-law, Louise-Gabrielle du Louët, the second wife of “the high and mighty” Claude de Marbeuf, the President of the Parliament of Brittany.⁸ Between 1665 and 1675, seven

¹ Thomas p. 228.

² Asc. et desc.

³ Thomas p.248

⁴ Guillotin de Corson: *Pouillé historique de l’archevêché de Rennes*, Vol. I, pp. 72 and 589.

⁵ Thomas p.248.

⁶ Ren. Min. Bretin, 21st March, 1677.

⁷ Asc. et desc.

⁸ Regarding M. de Marbeuf, cf. Sauliner: “*Le Parlement de Bretagne n. 848.*”

children, two girls and five boys, were born into the house of the Marbeufs. One of the girls entered the Visitation Sisters and two of the boys became members of the Knights of Malta. Another was the father of the Comte de Marbeuf, the governor of Corsica and protector of the young Napoleon Bonaparte; he got him into the military school at Brienne and he spent his holidays in his chateau de Callac.¹

Jeanne was a second mother to all these children and the Marbeuf family showed their gratitude to her in various ways. Although they counted many Countesses and Marquises amongst their friends and relations, it was Jeanne who was asked to be the godmother of their second daughter, Jeanne-Claude. After the death of Louise-Gabrielle du Louët in 1674, she took complete charge of the family. To help her in educating the older children, she asked her cousin, Fr. Pierre Cheux de la Maisoneuve, to come to her aid. Even after the re-marriage of the Comte de Marbeuf with the widow Sébastien Le Meneust du Bouédrier, up to the time of her own marriage, Jeanne continued to devote herself to the children who had become so important in her life. This partially explains the unusual length of her engagement to François-Claude. They had been close friends since 1668; in that same year, they were godfather and godmother to a niece and the regular visits of Jeanne to the chateau of Gué explain why the beautiful signature of François-Claude appears frequently in the parish registers of Servon-sur-Vilaine. It was in the church of Servon that they finally married, on May 27th, 1677. The nuptial blessing was given by Pierre Cheux, in the presence of the Comte de Marbeuf and many friends. François-Claude had two lines inserted into the marriage contract which evidently meant a lot to him: *“The said Poullart des Places declares that he will neither renounce nor take the title of Equerry, used by his ancestors, until he has recovered his claims”*.

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This was the marriage that was blessed and on February 26th, there was great rejoicing in the household at the birth of a son. François now felt that his line had been assured and that they would once more take their place amongst the nobility. Jeanne was equally happy. She now had her own child who would benefit from her long experience of bringing up other people’s children. She shared her husband’s vision of a very bright future for the family and determined to play her part in making it a reality.

The baby was baptised Claude-François the following day in the parish church of Saint-Pierre-en-Saint Georges. These were the names of his godparents: Count Claude de Marbeuf and Françoise Truillot, the wife of Ferret du Tymeur and a close friend of Mme de Sévigné, who talks about her in her correspondence.² It would be difficult to find grander godparents than that in the city of Rennes! But his parents sought an even higher protection for their son by consecrating the baby to the Virgin Mary and promising to dress him in white until he reached the age of seven.³

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So M. Poullart des Places now had a son, but to make his dreams a reality, he had to build up his own personal fortune. He did this over the next twenty years by dint of incredibly hard work in many different areas, but never descending to dishonest means.

¹ Fr. Saulnier: “Notes on the families of the Parliament of Brittany”. (Ms. In the Rennes library).

² *Lettres...* Edit. Des *Grands Écrivains*, Tome VIII, pp 96 & 99.

³ Thomas p. 228.

In 1685, he bought the office of Guardian of the Coinage. This meant that he spent most of his time at the Mint. The post was not particularly lucrative in itself but it had one great advantage: he was now exempt from paying all taxes.

To the revenue he already received from Saint-Melaine, he now added that of the Abbey of Saint Sauveur of Redon, the priories of Sainte-Croix de Châteaugiron, Saint Nicolas de Montfort, Pléchâtel and, above all, the Diocese of Rennes. In virtue of these positions, Poullart des Places collected tithes, rented the farms of the monks to tenant farmers and looked after the upkeep of the buildings. Being already a specialist in the collection of ecclesiastical rents, he now took on the gathering of some civil taxes. As was the practise of the time, he would buy the right to collect indirect taxes in various parts of Brittany, especially those paid on wine, cider and alcohol.

To work on so many fronts at once demanded an economic use of time, a secretariat, trustworthy assistants and, above all, a great deal of experience. But Poullart des Places was no novice so his business prospered. Nearly every year, he acquired the ownership of one or several houses in Rennes and other surrounding towns. He bought up lands which have today become part of the city of Rennes.

In the archives of lawyers in Rennes, one can still follow, week by week, the extraordinary activity of this man in business, in and around the city. There are many surprises amongst them. For example, on June 16th, 1689, there is a lease which contains the signatures of Maître Claude Le Barbier, François-Claude Poullart and Pierre Caris, a tailor. Who could have foreseen that the sons of these men would be intimately associated in the birth of a great spiritual family: Claude-François Poullart would be the founder, Michel-Vincent Le Barbier, son of Maître Claude, one of his first collaborators and Pierre Caris, the son of the tailor, his dearest and most faithful supporter.

While her husband multiplied his business interests, Jeanne Le Meneust was still the teacher she had always been since her early years. On August 20th, when Claude was 18 months old, she presented him with a little sister. Jeanne-Claude was held over the baptismal font by Claude de Marbeuf, the son of the Count, who would become the restorer of the Abbey of Langonnet,¹ subsequently the property of the Spiritans. The role played by the Marbeuf family in the baptisms of the children of Jeanne and François is worth noting. It shows that their close friendship with Jeanne Le Meneust continued. For the first seven years of their marriage, M. and Mme. Poullart lived very near to the residence of the Count de Marbeuf, and there are several indications to show that Jeanne continued to look after the orphans of Louise-Gabrielle Louët.

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When Claude was six years old, in 1685, the family moved from Porte Saint-Georges to the parish of Saint Germain, very close to the House of Parliament and the convent of the Cordeliers. *“His parents took great care with his religious education from a tender age... As is the case with many great saints, his childhood diversions foresaw the state for which God had destined him and the services which, for the good of the Church, he wanted to obtain from him. He passed the time building chapels and erecting small altars. He used the money he received to buy what he saw as necessary ornamentation for them. His great pleasure*

¹ Cf the certificates of baptism and death in Le Floch, page 486

*was to imitate the ceremonies he had seen performed in church. Sometimes, his parents' patience was tried by it, but if he desisted for a while out of obedience to them, he was soon back at his favourite way of playing a little later".*¹

On July 14th, 1686, "a young nobleman, Claude-François Poullart des Places" was godfather at the baptism of Claude Floh, the son of an employee of M. des Places. For the first time, his signature appears in a parish register. It is a very fine signature, but there is no need to be an expert graphologist to see that the hand of this 'young nobleman' was guided by that of Jean Le Gall, the rector of Saint-Germain.

There was a school in Rennes whose reputation had spread far beyond the boundaries of the province. Because of the number of students (about 3,000) and the quality of its teachers, the Collège Saint Thomas was one of the most renowned of the Jesuit schools in the kingdom. Claude was a very intelligent boy, but as his health seemed to be delicate, his parents avoided trying to make him into a child prodigy. They confided him to a private tutor for his early years. When he reached the age of 11 in 1690, he entered the Jesuit school in the fourth grade. His teacher was Fr. Gilbert Petit,² who continued to accompany the same group of students each year up to the second grade.

¹ Thomas, p. 229.

² Rennes was the first appointment of this young Jesuit. Later, he was sent to the Jesuit missions in the East Indies and finally returned to France to take over the direction of their schools at Moulins and Nevers.