

V

THE AFFAIR OF THE BARRISTER'S GOWN

In the list that Claude drew up to help him serve God more completely, he mentioned his faults but gave few details. As he did not have the explanatory key to this document, his biographer, Pierre Thomas, knew nothing about the sword wound he had inflicted on Le Huédez. At the beginning of Claude's notes, which refer to his period of legal studies, he would have read about *"The most humiliating part of my life"*, and would probably have applied these words to the whole period he spent in Nantes, rather than to the precise incident regarding Le Huédez. Having spoken of *"The honesty I must practise as a historian"*, Thomas confines himself to rather inconsistent generalities:

"Until now, young Claude had lived under rather close supervision by his parents. In person or through teachers, they gave him all the training needed for his up-bringing, but being unable to follow him to Nantes, they were forced to leave him to his own devices.

His father was widely known and probably had friends in Nantes. It is only 60 miles from Rennes. It is likely that he confided his son to the care of some of them, but friends are rarely watchful enough and do not take note of everything against which a young man should be warned. And, after all, a young man is no longer to be treated like a child. He is supposed to be able to take care of himself in public, especially when he is a law student....."

".....He lived among a great number of young men of good social standing who had also come from the provinces to study law at Nantes. Their intentions were similar to his own. At Rennes, he had had only passing contact with such people but now he had money to spend and felt he could cut a good figure in society. His eagerness to make friends and create useful relationships meant that he became more and more involved in worldly affairs. He found resistance hard and, since he lacked experience, he failed to perceive the dangers that lay in wait for him.

It takes great courage and heroic virtue to remain firm against the onslaughts of the world and the devil. In order to keep to the good resolutions he had made during his retreat, Claude should have risen above this search for esteem amongst dissolute young men. He should have despised their repartee and their banter, but he lacked the courage to do so. He should have recalled the great truths he had considered during the retreat. He should have sought the advice of wise people, practised spiritual reading and looked for chances to be alone. He should have been prudent in giving himself to the world, instead of plunging into it as he actually did".¹

This lack of precision in Thomas's account can hardly be excused by feelings of filial discretion when talking of his hero. In fact what the author is doing is using the occasion to air some of his own ideas. Writing about Claude-François's time in Caen, he said:

¹ Thomas p. 244

"It does not seem that Claude compromised his morals during the year he spent there. Whether by education or by virtue, he was quite indifferent towards the fair sex. His one preoccupation at this time was to distinguish himself It is easy to understand that in order to succeed as well as he did, he could not have wasted his time or spent it in frivolous amusements".¹

These lines are more than a little surprising, considering that Claude at this time was no more than 15 years old!

So to arrive at a balanced view of the spiritual life of Claude Poullart during his three years of legal studies, it is best to pass over the assessment of Pierre Thomas. Claude's *"enormous crime"* was not the beginning of a period of general laxity since God was using this time to *"touch"* the young man and *"pierce his heart"*. Neither was he without support at Nantes. The Jesuits were running a retreat house in the city and Claude knew the director, Fr. de Rollivaud, very well. From 1688 to 1696, he had been the assistant of Fr. Jégou. He could well have been Claude's spiritual director because we know that he did have one at the time. Most probably, he was also attracted by the Carthusians living in the Saint-Clément quarter of the city, because after he left Nantes, he wondered several times whether he should join these sons of Saint Bruno.

So we will better understand his time spent on the banks of the river Loire if we look at the period that follows - a mixture of great fervour and relative laxity.

Claude returned to Rennes in the summer of 1700, armed with a degree in law. He was 21 years old. He now had to decide what he was going to do with his life. He had said nothing more about his vocation to the priesthood over the last three years, so his parents may have got the idea that he had given it no more thought. In any case, they had certainly not abandoned their dream for him and were still taking steps regarding his future. His father *"had every reason to suppose that his son would restore the former renown of the family. This was why he wanted his son to become a councillor in the Parliament of Brittany. Because patents of nobility were required for this function, he definitely intended to press his claim to the family titles".²*

According to Charles Besnard, in his life of Grignon de Montfort, *"His (Claude's) mother had so few worries about her son's inclinations that she had already gone to the expense of making a barrister's gown for him.³ But the moment he tried it on, he felt an immediate distaste for anything to do with law. There was a large mirror in the room and while looking at himself dressed in the gown of Themis⁴, he apparently decided that the important thing*

¹ Thomas p. 244

² Thomas p. 249.

³ The minimum age for becoming a 'Counsellor' was fixed at 25. Like other candidates, Claude Poullart could have sought a dispensation from this regulation, but that was not the problem. Of all the Parliaments in the kingdom, that of Brittany was the most insistent that its members should be of the nobility; the fact that Claude's father was now so deeply involved in commerce would itself eliminate the family from entering Parliament. M. Desplace's ambition was undoubtedly to see his son become a Counsellor, and he was rich enough to follow the example of Ferret du Tymeur who entered the nobility by becoming the secretary of the King. The same man now had two of his sons in Parliament, but in 1700, this possibility did not exist.

⁴ Themis: the Greek goddess of order, law and custom.

was to carefully weigh the scales of justice and not to ascend the tribune to show off his purple, that he should not become the barrister he saw reflected in the mirror and that it was not as easy to acquire the qualities of a judge as it was to simply put on the robe of his office.

However that may be, God enlightened him with a penetrating light, which made it clear that he was not called to this state of life. He took off his gown and openly declared that he would never put it on again. At the same time, he asked his father's permission to go and study at the Sorbonne and become a priest. This announcement fell like a thunderbolt on his father, who had only one son to perpetuate his name and take over his hereditary role of Guardian of the Coinage. He used every means to dissuade him, but when Claude remained steadfast, his family offered no further objection to a vocation that was so evident".¹

If one accepts Besnard's version of events, Claude-François made this gesture, which ruined all the plans of his parents, to indicate that he could not be unfaithful to his vocation which he now knew to be certain. Pierre Thomas is far less affirmative:

"It is easy to see how much he (Claude's father) and his whole family were mortified when all their plans were shattered by the contempt their son had just shown for the legal profession. This was all the more upsetting for them because the preparations for the event had already been made and the people on whom his admittance depended had been approached. But although they suffered, his father and mother were too religious to complain. They simply asked him questions because they were unable to understand why he had reacted in this way. It is possible that he himself was not sure why.

God had his own plans which he had not yet revealed. He destined this only son, who was so tenderly loved by his parents, to a state which was much higher than the one they dreamt of. He wanted to have him entirely for his own service. He wanted to make him a model of the most heroic virtues and the father of a family of priests which would render so great a service to the Church".

This is the way that God draws us into doing a greater good, even by opposing our own plans. M. and Mme des Places were devout enough not to go against God's wishes, but prudence demanded that they test their son's aversion to their plans to see if it was not just a passing whim. They still kept hoping that he would listen to reason".²

Although less dramatic than Besnard's version, the account of Thomas is probably nearer to the truth of what happened. But the deeper motives behind the incident will only become clearer as we examine the writings of Claude-François himself.

¹ Besnard, p. 53.

² Thomas, p. 251