

WELFARE WORK IN FRANCE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.*

By EUPHEMIA TORRY.

As the widow of a mere gentleman and not one of the nobility, Louise le Gras, née de Marillac, was not entitled to be called Madame, and as she reverted to the use of her maiden name we hear of her indiscriminately as Mlle. Le Gras, or as Louise de Marillac, or, worse still, we do not hear of her at all, and the whole credit for the organisations which owed so much of their usefulness to her practical common sense and organising ability is given to her spiritual director, Saint Vincent de Paul.

For it was Vincent who perceived that charity must be organised, and who possessed the persuasive eloquence to draw funds for the purpose from the great ladies of France. But it was the semi-invalid widow, Mlle. Le Gras, who, when the part-time work of the great ladies failed, first trained whole-time helpers, planned their "rule" of life and organised even the minutest details of hospital and welfare work.

All the biographers of Louise de Marillac have been inspired by her devotion, her unselfishness, her beautiful spiritual life. All these are now public property and have earned her the official recognition of her Church in the title of "Venerable." But those responsible for health and welfare might well read her letters in order to cull from them sound advice equally applicable to-day, for they cannot fail to be struck by the recurrence of her problems.

Take the case of the foundlings. The Government had provided a refuge for these poor creatures, but it was disgracefully managed, and Vincent persuaded the "Ladies of Charity" to make themselves responsible for a home staffed by the "Sisters of Charity"—that is, by Louise's trained women. When a larger house was needed, the Ladies, in order to avoid the expense of buying one, secured from the Government the use of an old fort. Louise objected to it as inconvenient, unhealthy, in a bad quarter, difficult of access, difficult to provision and requiring too large a staff to run it. But she was over-ruled by the holders of the purse-strings and soon wrote: "It was not without cause that I apprehended the establishment at Bicêtre. These ladies wish to get an amount of work out of our Sisters which they are incapable of getting through, and the poor souls dare not complain."

After a few years the enthusiasm of the Ladies waned, subscriptions fell off, and both Sisters and infants were literally starving. "We have reached such a point," wrote Louise to Vincent, "that unless succour is given us everything will have to be given up. It was necessary yesterday to pay up every penny we had got to get flour for the children . . . there are twelve or thirteen infants and no linen to give them even a change of garments . . . there are seven who will not drink out of a bottle and we have only two nurses and not a penny to pay for them being put out to nurse . . . and die they must, for the Ladies make no effort to come to our assistance. I have even been told that they consider we are enriching ourselves at their expense." And, a general meeting of the Ladies being called, she sends to Vincent a list of the points he is to put before them and suggests that some of the Ladies might be kept from attending if the mistake were made of proposing that they should bring their purses with them!

One of the Sisters, Geneviève Poisson, was noted for being a persistent and persuasive beggar, so, when the Queen's grant was, as usual, in arrears, she was sent to the Procurator-General and secured 5,000 of the 8,000 livres due.

* As described in a "Life of the Venerable Louise de Marillac." By Alice Lady Lovat. Simpkin Marshall, Stationers' Hall Court, E.C. 6s. net.

There is another reference to her in a letter of Vincent to Louise: "I have answered (Soeur Geneviève) that we are doing all we possibly can and that they (the wet-nurses) must have patience a little longer . . . but as this was not hard cash I fear our good Sister was not entirely satisfied." We should like to know more of Sister Geneviève!

Vincent was given a sum of money to found an asylum for the indigent, and asked Louise to prepare a memorandum on the subject. She proposed to select men and women of probity, not professional beggars, and to cause them to be taught trades by skilled workmen who would live awhile in the hospital. She recommends useful trades so that the goods should find a ready market, cloth-making, spinning, shoemaking, cobbling, button-making, lace-making, pin manufacture, etc. Her plan was accepted and soon she is communicating with a Sister at Brienne on the purchase of five hundred pounds of flax. She kept a strict account of the work and notes are preserved in her own handwriting: "The good of this institution from both the spiritual and temporal point of view is that it is aimed against a life of idleness." She made a rough calculation of the cost of the inmates, the expenses of each workman, the price of their handiwork, the sum total of the salaries, that of raw material and the tariff of prices. Each inmate received a fourth-part of the price paid for his work, the wine he or she had drunk being deducted from it. "Jean Guesnet," she wrote, "consumed 7 livres and 10 sols worth of wine in the month. Jean Ollier spent more than he gained, Maître Gilles, weaver, has half his earnings deducted for the same cause . . . the women who spin flax are more thrifty."

This hospital of the Holy Name was so successful that it was suggested applying the scheme on a large scale to all the beggars of Paris (there were estimated to be 80,000 of them). The Ladies of Charity considered attacking the problem and asked advice from Louise. This is her reply: "If the work is to be considered from the political point of view it appears to me it would be better to leave it to men to undertake. But if it is to be taken up as a work of charity, women should be able to attempt it as they have done many other great and trying enterprises which God has been pleased to bless." She also suggests a committee where "some men of piety should be associated with the Ladies, not only for the service they would give, but for the greater knowledge of procedures and laws of justice which it will be necessary to be acquainted with to keep this kind of people to their duty."

We get some glimpses of provincial hospitals when Louise visits them and reorganises them with a staff of her own Sisters. Angers was the first provincial hospital to be thus dealt with, and the contract between Louise and the town still exists. It begins: "The Daughters of Charity have come to Angers to honour our Saviour . . . and to assist the poor patients in the Hôtel Dieu corporally and spiritually." Then follow detailed directions: "The Sisters shall rise at four o'clock, at six they shall go and attend to the patients, make their beds, give them their medicines, prepare their food." They are enjoined to give vigilance and undivided attention to the patients all day and be careful to give medicines at the proper hours, regularity of meals is insisted on and the relief of thirst. Such as require Christian doctrine are to be taught, but "with great gentleness so as not to weary them." . . . At 7 p.m. patients are to be put to bed with provision of a little wine or water or what they may require for the night. Before the Sisters leave the ward they should recite the litanies with the patients. At eight the Sisters, with the exception of the one left in charge for the night, shall withdraw . . . the Sister on duty may engage in prayer but she must be ever ready to interrupt her prayer for the service of the sick, for to serve them is to pray.

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