

WEALTHY CHILDHOODS

THE publication of a recent survey of the background of convent education gives rise to an interesting train of thought regarding those diverse generations of the Catholic circles of privilege whose daughters receive their *formation* in convents of a socially exclusive character. Mother O'Leary in her authoritative study,¹ whose scope is very much wider than that by-path which we are now considering, writes with knowledge and calm and has provided us with a most sympathetic but also objective impression. The first section of her book contains an examination of that background of convent education which had given such religious moulding as the polite world of pre-revolutionary France was willing to accept. As a preparation the author devotes some space to an account of the various *curricula* in use in the colleges, but it is manifestly impossible to touch on more than the fringe of the intricate subject of the mental background of the privileged boys of the *Ancien Régime*.

In regard to convent education Madame de Genlis has left us a description of the methods of the abbey of Origny-Sainte-Benoîte, where the abbess was ready to entertain a small proportion of the community in her private apartments, and where the social intercourse afforded to the girls trained them early to take their place in that section of French society which was accessible to mild religious ideals when presented palatably. It is worth noting, however, that Madame de Genlis' statement that *la religion était là, entre deux, adoucissant et pacifiant tout* may be read equally as a genuine tribute or as a polite recognition of the religious status of her hosts.

At Origny during the abbacy of Madame Eléonore-Marie-Anne de Rohan-Soubise the hierarchy of the ecclesiastical eighteenth century could be seen slowly fulfilling itself. The pupils had every opportunity to perceive the inevitable character of the ecclesiastico-social organization. Thus in the

¹ *Education with a Tradition*. By M. O'Leary, Ph.D., M.A. With a preface by Professor F. A. Cavanagh, M.A. (University of London Press.)

autumn of 1753 in the closing months of the life of Abbess de Rohan there were changes in this ordered movement which would be discussed in the parlours of Origny-Sainte-Benoîte. The Abbess' cousin, Madame Angélique-Eléonore de Rohan-Guémené was dying after ruling the abbey of Préaux for thirty years, and the question had arisen as to that succession. The Abbess of Préaux had succeeded her sister in that office when Madame Anne had resigned on her election as Abbess of Jouarre. But Jouarre was a great house, and its abbess had jurisdiction over all those within its territories, over the *curé* and the thirteen canons of the chapter, and the people. Jouarre had belonged by right to the Abbess of Origny's own line of Rohan-Soubise, and her sister had borne rule there in the days when their great bishop was composing the last of his *Oraisons funèbres*. In her childhood Madame Eléonore had herself known Monsieur de Meaux. But now her own branch of the family had less ecclesiastical influence, especially since the death of her brother, Cardinal Armand de Rohan, four years ago. It had been sad that her nephew, the Abbé de Luxeuil, should have died as a Canon of Strasbourg at nineteen when he was still not yet quite mature enough for serious preferment. Then there were fears for the health of her other nephew, the Cardinal de Soubise. The Abbess could remember the little Abbé de Ventadour being brought to the convent when he was quite a child, and then the royal gift of the prince-abbacy of Mirbach when he was twenty and old enough for such responsibility. It was a misfortune that he should be delicate, while still in his thirties, with the duties of the cardinalate, and the prince-bishopric of Strasbourg, and the landgraviate of Alsace, and the grand almonership of France, and the necessity for maintaining the high traditions of Saverne. The privileged children of the Abbess' circle would hear of that palace with the range of its tall windows and its façade not unworthy of Versailles.

All this would now pass away from the Soubise to the Rohan-Guémenés, for Armand was Archbishop of Reims and his brother, Louis-Constantin, coadjutor of Strasbourg. Still, in the next generation there was a pleasant, friendly

boy, Louis de Rohan, who was Abbot Commendatory of La Chaise Dieu and destined for the Strasbourg succession. As soon as he came of age he was to be Bishop of Canoplaea *in partibus infidelium* and in his turn coadjutor. It is significant that from all that murmur of preferment it is only the name of this youngest Cardinal de Rohan which is now remembered. He was the dupe in the affair of Marie Antoinette and the Diamond Necklace.

A similar impression of the background of education in the next generation is provided in a singularly fresh description of the Abbaye-aux-Bois preserved in the diary of Hélène Massalska. Here a picture is given of the abbess of exalted birth and conscious of her station, never unaware of her social responsibilities towards those daughters of her own "world" who were entrusted to her. She is seen with her serious preoccupations and regal manners, sitting in the restrained magnificence of her apartments, with nuns in attendance and children in waiting, against a background of dull brocade. This period "in waiting" was as exhausting for the pupils as it was socially valuable, while the conversation revolved slowly on the axis of convention with a religious flavour, and the tired little girls looked upwards at the gilded cornices below the white plaster ceiling innocent of nymphs.

The library at the Abbaye-aux-Bois was singularly well furnished and the theatre was admirably calculated to introduce the convent pupils to such appreciation of the French Classic tradition as was decorous in the make-up of a young lady of distinction. There was certainly an amount of comparatively menial labour, but this seems to have been regarded in the light of a salutary and very transient noviciate. And the house was fortunate at this time in the choice of a mistress-general, for that key position had fallen to Madame de Rochechouart. She was fitted by tradition for such a post, since Madame Louise-Françoise de Rochechouart, Abbess of Fontèvrault, had been granted the brevet of *duchesse* by Louis XV to enable her to remain seated in the presence of his four daughters when the Mesdames de France had been entrusted to her house for education. Throughout

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her work the younger Madame de Rochechouart was determined to maintain a high standard of social conduct. The nobility of mind, so much prized in that generation, was to be the mark of her pupils. "In Madame de Rochechouart's presence," writes Mother O'Leary, "conversation always remained upon a lofty plane. For her, as for the noble girls who were her pupils, *avoir l'âme basse* was the unforgivable sin." It was from the point of view of the *Ancien Régime* not only an admirable but a necessary maxim as the girls moved out into the circles of the French Court and went forward to their great marriages. For it was a consequence of the Catholic impress upon the formal details of that civilization that the marriages, whether prudent or otherwise, were irreparable. The girls went out with their well-secured dowries to the balanced and arranged marriages which had as their end the provision of heirs for the rich appanages. In the wealthiest circles these alliances frequently possessed the superficial charm of child marriages, for the bridegrooms were sometimes only seventeen. Still, they soon lost the quality of their ingenuous beginnings, and they were often ultimately held together by a sense of dignity. It is possible to overstress the effect of the elaborated simplicity of the Petit Trianon since this atmosphere was in some respects a Germanic creation of Marie Antoinette's. The French had more poise, and the descendants of the courtiers of Louis XIV still welcomed grandeur. Tolerant of marital infidelity, calm in their constant and often unpropitious child-bearing, dignified and robbed of their enthusiasm, the children of the Abbaye-aux-Bois had need of just such a courageous and decided outlook. The old France must inevitably prize a settled grandeur of the spirit.

The Revolution swept away these conceptions, but something of their spirit still remained to haunt exclusive Continental education. Against them there is placed the driving spirit of the new societies and congregations and the deep Christian simplicity of Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat and the other founders. Yet it seems possible to perceive in the nineteenth century religious education the ghost of the *Ancien Régime* sitting crowned upon the grave thereof.

BLACKFRIARS

There was in many quarters a readiness not only to accept but to search out the *Bien Pensants*, to welcome parents sound in doctrine and inevitably so in politics, and in the last resort to exclude.

When the generation of the great founders had vanished the rather uninspired religious, who directed so much of the more expensive education in the second half of the last century, could hardly be expected to penetrate the formalism of the old Baroque monarchies whose influence was dominant in Vienna and still perceptible in Madrid. In France Legitimism tended to take on a febrile and unreal quality within the cloister. The children were admirably taught, but were also fitted for their station. The great *commerçants* had now come to reinforce the aristocracy and their daughters were trained in Christian doctrine, taught to give to the poor and to works of *bienfaisance*, and to go forward to suitable marriages in their own *milieu* with Catholic men of assured financial and social standing. It can surely be said that the acceptance of current standards was too unquestioned. The conceptions of the Throne and the Altar were often allied in a haze not always free from sentiment. There was little suggestion that the social fabric was bending under severe stresses. The very conceptions of a woman's sphere hardly permitted speculation as to the wages paid by their fathers to their employees. In the Catholic countries the second generation of the great expanding fortunes, the beneficiaries of the industrial system, were poured through the mould of convent education. It is almost cruel to ask what did they learn of social justice? But this was fifty years ago.

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