

13 The Great Misery of the Fronde

From 1648 to 1653, France was torn by civil war. The revolt had been brewing in the kingdom for several years. Taxes were continually increasing to pay for the long war with Spain. The burden of these taxes aggravated the very precarious situation of the peasants. The Fronde was primarily a revolt of members of the Parlement of Paris, the nobility, and others against royal authority exercised by the first minister, Cardinal Mazarin.

The revolt began in May 1648. The crown demanded an advanced payment of four years of pledges from the royal officials. The members of Parlement refused and united against Mazarin. Despite the arrests of some of the heads of the opposition, the revolt soon reached the provinces. Parlement demanded control of the budget.



THE BAKER'S CART BY JEAN MICHELIN. OIL ON CANVAS. 1656.
NOTABLE FOR ITS DEPICTION OF THE DIFFICULT LIFE PEASANTS FACED ON THE STREETS
OF PARIS DURING LOUISE AND VINCENT'S TIME.
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, N.Y.

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On 20 August at the battle of Lens, Louis II Bourbon Prince de Condé defeated the army of Ferdinand III, the Holy Roman Emperor. Following this victory, Mazarin believed the moment had come to move against Parlement. On 26 August, he ordered the arrest of Pierre Broussel, a councilor in Parlement and a popular figure. Immediately, Paris rose in revolt and barricades were erected in the streets. Anne of Austria and the young King Louis XIV fled to Rueil.

News of the revolt in the capital spread rapidly. Louise, who was then at Liancourt, learned of it that evening, or the next morning at the latest. She wrote an anguished letter to Julienne Loret, the directress of the seminary in Paris: "I am very troubled by a rumor which went around the countryside that there was unrest and murder in the streets of Paris. In the name of God, my dear Sister, send me news as soon as you can about Monsieur Vincent, my son and our sisters."³⁴²

The following day, 28 August, having received no news, Louise wrote to Élisabeth Hellot, her secretary: "In the name of God, send me news of Monsieur Vincent, Monsieur Holden,³⁴³ Monsieur de Marillac and my son, and I urge you to keep nothing from me. I am so greatly distressed that I would return today if I had a way."³⁴⁴ Another letter from the day after that shows how much Louise was suffering from being separated from her sisters during this difficult and dangerous period: "It is a great trial to be far from one's friends when one believes them in danger."³⁴⁵

For three days, violence in Paris escalated, taking its toll of victims. Cardinal Mazarin decided to release Pierre Broussel, and a relative calm returned to the capital. But Parlement, believing itself to have the upper hand, continued its opposition to new taxes. Tensions mounted in the capital once more during December 1648. Mazarin and the court fled Paris secretly during the night of 5–6 January 1649. The cardinal's plan was to besiege the city and starve it into submission.

Vincent was distressed by these events, and he tried to bring about peace. On 14 January, he went to the palace at Saint-Germain-en-Laye to meet with Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin to plead for peace. It was a perilous journey. He was stopped by soldiers at Clichy, but luckily one of them recognized him and allowed him to pass. Vincent's mission was a failure. It also aroused the anger of the Parisians, who misunderstood his mission and considered him to be an ally of Mazarin. Under the circumstances, Vincent thought it prudent not to return to Paris. Instead, he set out to visit the houses of the Priests of the Mission and Daughters of Charity at Le Mans, Angers, and Saint-Méen.

On 22 January 1649, he wrote to Antoine Portail from Villepreux: "I left Paris on the fourteenth of this month to go to Saint-Germain with the intention of rendering some small service to God, but my sins rendered me unworthy of this. After a stay of three or four days, I came to this place, which I shall be leaving the day after tomorrow to go visit our houses. It is God's will that I be of no use now for anything else."³⁴⁶

Louise found herself in Paris in the midst of more and more difficult conditions. On 27 February, mobs attacked the Great Chamber of Parlement and ransacked the houses of the tax collectors. Civil war was on the verge of breaking out in the capital, and the royal army's siege prevented supplies from being delivered to the inhabitants. Louise was very worried about the safety of the sisters and foundlings at Bicêtre, which had been requisitioned by soldiers. She wrote them a letter filled with affection: "I beg the Blessed Virgin to be your protectress and to obtain for you from her Son the generosity you need. I also beg your guardian angels to be in accord with the angels of the gentlemen sent to you by God so that they may be helped to live in a manner which will glorify God eternally."³⁴⁷

Louise feared the possibility of violence and brutality from the soldiers and gave wise advice to Geneviève Poisson, the sister servant: "You would do well to keep our sisters together and to take great care to watch over the older girls or to keep them in the school even when they are not helping you."³⁴⁸ In her letter, Louise expressed her great confidence in her sisters who were exposed to these dangers: "I am sure that He gives all of you the courage to die rather than to offend Him and that your modesty will clearly show that you belong to the King of Kings to whom all powers are subject."³⁴⁹ Even as she was writing this letter, she was looking for a way to evacuate them to the motherhouse. She was successful. Soon afterward some of the children were received at the Treize Maisons near Saint-Lazare and some at the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity.

Some hope for peace appeared in March. Negotiations took place between Mazarin and Parlement. These talks resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Rueil on 11 March. Louise wrote to Vincent:

We are most anxious to know your whereabouts and the condition in which you are. I beg God in His goodness that your health and your Community business will allow you to come home soon. You are sorely needed for the works of charity in Paris. Madame de Lamoignon, the President's wife,

especially begs you to return soon.

I shall let other persons tell you the news of the peace, since all I know is that it causes us to join the people in praising God for it.³⁵⁰

Thinking that Vincent was at Angers, Louise wrote that same day to the Abbé de Vaux trying to get some accurate news: "I have the honor of writing to you to ask you to give us any news of Monsieur Vincent that you might know. We are extremely worried because we have not heard anything since March 14 when he was in Le Mans. I know that he was also in Angers, but since then we have heard nothing of any sort. The last news we did receive came neither from him nor from anyone close to him. Please, Monsieur, make an effort to let us know what you know about this."³⁵¹ Did Louise know that while on his way to Angers, Vincent had fallen from his horse into a small river? He was rescued just in time by the priest who was accompanying him.

While Louise anticipated Vincent's return, she remained active. Many poor persons were in the capital, and there was no bread. The Ladies of Charity and the sisters organized assistance, and in April, Louise shared some news from the motherhouse with Jeanne Lepintre, the sister servant of Nantes: "During these times of affliction.... our sisters are safe and... they never stopped serving the sick poor. In Paris you would not believe the amount of alms given to the poor who had no bread. I believe that this has drawn down God's mercy upon us so that we might have peace."³⁵²

Obtaining supplies was difficult, and wheat was very expensive. Since there were many sisters to feed, as well as the children and the poor, Louise urged the sisters to watch their resources carefully: "I hope that our sister gardeners are hard at work while God is giving us beautiful weather."³⁵³ She wrote in another letter, "I beg you not to let the pigs out together so much. Especially do not let them go into the garden so that we may see it growing. I hope you are making sure that the cow and the other animals are not overfed."³⁵⁴ The milk, eggs, and vegetables went a long way toward feeding the starving poor.

Finally, Vincent returned to Paris on 13 June 1649. Louise rejoiced to see him after these long months of absence. There were so many things to do together, so much business to be attended to: "I deeply sympathize with your troubles, but because Monsieur Vincent has just arrived and is weighed down by more business and difficulty that you can imagine, he has not yet been able to turn his attention to this matter. As soon as time and business allow him, he will give you instructions."³⁵⁵

Normal life seemed to be resuming. The Parliamentary Fronde ended. On 18 August 1649, Anne of Austria and the young Louis XIV, age eleven, returned to Paris amid great popular rejoicing. Mazarin and Condé, the commander of the royal forces, accompanied them. If the political situation had improved, the economic situation was still disastrous. Seeds had not been sown in time for the season. Soldiers had pillaged everything as they passed through the countryside.

In November 1649, Louise was alarmed; there was no more money for the foundlings. The Ladies were no longer giving donations. There were no more linens. There were no resources to buy wheat. The wet nurses returned their babies because they had not been paid in several months. Louise wrote: "I am too insistent, but we have absolutely reached the point where we must get help without delay or abandon everything. Yesterday we had to use all the money in reserve here—nearly fifteen to twenty livres—to buy wheat for the children at Bicêtre, and we had to borrow some to have at least four setiers. Furthermore, no income is in sight for the next month."³⁵⁶

Some days later, Louise shared her sorrow as a mother responsible for her many hungry children: "Do us the charity, Most Honored Father, of telling us whether, in conscience, we can watch them being put in a situation in which they will die, for the Ladies attach no importance to giving us any relief."³⁵⁷ Louise spoke to anyone who would listen. She begged Vincent to appeal to the Ladies of Charity, whom she judged severely in this period of crisis: "It is shameful that the Ladies are going to so little trouble. They must think we have more than enough to live on, or else they want to force us to abandon everything. For these reasons I think they have made up their minds to do nothing at all."³⁵⁸ These were very harsh words coming from Louise de Marillac, but she could not accept the suffering of these children, who were so loved by God. She then suggested that influential figures such as the Princess de Condé and the first president be approached for assistance. She wrote to Chancellor Séguier, asking him to come to the aid of the one hundred little children who were in danger of spending Christmas without any bread.³⁵⁹

Vincent, who was also moved by the distress of the children, convened an assembly of the Ladies of Charity. Louise quickly prepared a memorandum on the situation of the foundlings: "Enclosed also is a short report I have done. If you see fit, you might take the trouble to talk about it at the meeting."³⁶⁰ Vincent used this memorandum in preparing his presentation for the assembly. In it, he noted that a child could be killed in two ways: either through a violent

death or through refusing it food. Now the foundlings were in great need because there was only enough food to last for six weeks.

Reviewing through the history of the work of the foundlings, Vincent encouraged the Ladies to continue the work that they had begun. The following famous text comes from this conference:

Well then, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children; you have been their mothers according to grace since the time their mothers according to nature abandoned them. See now whether you, too, want to abandon them. Stop being their mothers to be their judges at present; their life and death are in your hands. I'm going to take the vote; it's time to pass sentence on them and to find out whether you are no longer willing to have pity on them. If you continue to take charitable care of them, they will live; if, on the contrary, you abandon them, they will most certainly perish and die; experience does not allow you to doubt that.³⁶¹

The women were very moved and each gave Vincent a little purse, a ring, a necklace, or a gold coin. The children would not die.

In 1650, however, political events led to new civic strife. The Prince de Condé had saved royal authority, and he had counted on an appropriate reward by being recognized as the young king's guardian. He had great scorn for Mazarin, whom he insulted publicly. At the beginning of 1650, Mazarin had Condé arrested.

This time it was the nobles and princes who revolted and carried the provinces along with them. Confusion reigned throughout the country. The marshal of Turenne, who at one time had allied himself with the Spanish, now found himself at the head of the royal forces. Condé, the onetime enemy of the Fronde, now joined the enemies of France. Louis XIV's cousin the Great Mademoiselle supported Condé, who wanted to defeat Mazarin once and for all.

In December 1650, fighting devastated the Ardennes region. After the battle at Rethel, 1,500 dead soldiers remained unburied, exposed to vultures. Vincent sent some missionaries to bury the dead. Two Daughters of Charity, Jeanne and Guillemine Chesneau, went to take care of the sick, the starving, and the homeless. Louise encouraged them in their hard work: "All our

sisters ask to be remembered to you, and they praise God for the courage His goodness gives you to serve these poor afflicted people. Oh what a grace, my dear Sister, to have been chosen for this holy employment! It is true that it is extremely difficult, but it is because of this that the grace of God acting in you is more evident. You have every reason to trust in God and to abandon yourself to his Divine Providence. God will never fail to let you know how agreeable this manner of acting is to Him.”³⁶² In a letter Vincent wrote to the Daughters performing this work, which would have included the Chesneau sisters, the same recommendations appear. The sisters were advised to draw the strength they needed for their difficult service from prayer.³⁶³

The so-called Fronde of the Princes grew, and Mazarin became so unpopular that he was obliged to flee. In Germany, where he took refuge, he raised an army and led it against France. The Civil War raged everywhere. Everywhere there was misery, revolt, and confusion.

At the beginning of 1652, Louise fell dangerously ill with “double tertian fever.” For weeks, she remained feverish and tired. On 20 April, she wrote, “I am struggling to regain my strength, and I am always having little relapses.”³⁶⁴ In spite of her very poor health, she remained attentive to the sisters who were in the midst of difficult situations.

In February 1652, the armies ravaged the region around Angers. More than 200,000 poor from the countryside took refuge in the city and had to be housed and fed. Louise shared her sisters’ suffering and helped them to understand the events from the perspective of their faith: “Your account of all the afflictions and losses that have occurred at Angers is a source of great sorrow to me because the poor will suffer as a result. I beg the divine goodness to comfort and assist them in their needs. My very dear Sisters, you have indeed suffered great trials. However, have you stopped to consider that it is only right that the servants of the poor should suffer with their masters?”³⁶⁵

On 22 May, Vincent described the situation in Paris to one of his confreres: “We have more troubles here than ever. Paris is swarming with poor persons because the armies have forced the poor country folk to seek refuge here. Meetings are held daily to see how they can be helped.”³⁶⁶ On 21 June, he described to another confrere the role the Daughters of Charity were taking in the assistance of refugees and of poor persons: “The poor Daughters of Charity are more involved than we in the corporal assistance of the poor. They prepare and distribute the soup daily for thirteen hundred bashful poor at the home of Mademoiselle Le Gras, and for eight hundred refugees in the faubourg Saint-Denis. In Saint-Paul parish alone four or five Sisters make the distribution to five thousand poor persons, in addition to the sixty to eighty patients they have

on their hands. Other Sisters are doing the same elsewhere.”³⁶⁷

Barbe Angiboust, who was at Brienne in devastated Champagne, expressed her distress at not being able to come to the aid of all the poor persons she encountered. Louise sympathized with her pain: “In fact, you will see a great amount of misery that you cannot relieve. God sees it as well and does not want to give those who suffer greater abundance. Share their trials with them; do all you can to provide them with a little assistance and remain at peace. Perhaps you share in this need; in that is your consolation because, if you had plenty, your hearts would be troubled to use it while seeing our lords and masters suffering so.”³⁶⁸

Everywhere the sisters were themselves sharing the suffering of the poor. As servants, they were sharing the insecurity and privation with their masters. The Étampes region had been occupied by enemy troops for two months. After the lifting of the siege of the city on 23 June, a picture of desolation met the eye. The fields were ravaged, the villages were pillaged, and many peasants were killed. Starving children wandered about looking for food and shelter.

The sisters of Valpuseaux, a little village close to Étampes, had followed the inhabitants into exile. Having returned to their post, they were comforted by a long letter from Vincent: “It must be acknowledged, Sisters, that you have really had a hard time but, consequently, you will be amply rewarded for this. Not only will your reward be great because of what you have suffered, but also because of the good you have done by serving the sick and the wounded in the hospital, and for the good example you have given there. I ask God to be His own praise and thanks for all this.”³⁶⁹

Vincent and Louise wanted to send other sisters to assist in the care and education of the many orphans, but the roads were still dangerous. Brigands were robbing travelers, and wild animals wandered throughout the countryside, attracted by the many corpses. Three women had been devoured by wolves in the Étampes region. The sisters’ departure was delayed. Their wait was even longer than had been foreseen because troops were again marching toward Paris. On 1 July, Condé’s army, made up of Spaniards, was near the Saint-Denis gate. During the night, looters entered Saint-Lazare, threatened Monsieur René Alméras, and pillaged all they found.³⁷⁰

It was feared that soldiers would also attack the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity across the street. Louise was worried and wondered how they should conduct themselves: “Most of the people are leaving this faubourg and stripping their homes; should we not follow their example? This, however, would be a major undertaking for us. If there were something to fear for our young Sisters, we could send them here or there to various parishes and, if we

could, send them some food. As for me, I feel as if I am awaiting death and cannot prevent my heart from jumping every time there is a call to arms.”³⁷¹

On the advice of Vincent and the older sisters, Louise, who was not fully recovered from her recent illness, agreed to take refuge in Paris with the youngest sisters. The others remained at the motherhouse with the wet nurses and the children. The Priests of the Mission remained at Saint-Lazare. On 2 July, the royal troops won the battle at the faubourg Saint-Antoine. Soldiers were everywhere, making demands on the population. Gradually, calm returned. Everyone was weary of war. On 24 August, Louise echoed public opinion, writing, “I am truly astonished that you have gone so long without receiving our letters. It must be the war which prevented them from reaching you because I have been faithful in writing to you very often. May God be blessed! His goodness leads us to hope for calm in the belief that He will soon give us peace.”³⁷²

Louis XIV, who had come of age, entered Paris on 21 October 1652. He was received to great acclaim. France recovered slowly from its devastation. Vincent appealed to public charity to come to the aid of the most needy: the peasants of Champagne and Picardy who had to rebuild everything, the wounded soldiers at Châlons, the many orphans in Étampes, the beggars of Angers and Paris. Daughters of Charity were at work everywhere. Louise continued to accompany and support them. She wrote to Jeanne-Françoise, who was responsible for the orphanage of Étampes, “I am also certain that you will find great pleasure in teaching, as best you can, these little creatures, redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, so that they may praise and glorify Him forever.”³⁷³

Through Anne Hardemont, Louise sent this message to the sisters who were working in the various villages of Champagne: “The sisters must often renew their purity of intention which causes them to perform all their actions for the love of God. This will enable them to preserve the spirit which true Daughters of Charity must possess.”³⁷⁴ She told the sisters over and over again that whatever work they accomplished, whichever persons they might meet, their service was and should always be “putting love to work.”

The war with Spain would continue for another ten years. Vincent and Louise had seen the great distress of the wounded soldiers who were abandoned and without nursing care. They did not hesitate to send Daughters of Charity to the battlefields. Two of them, Françoise Manceau and Marguerite Ménage, died at Calais in 1658 as victims of their devotion. Many sisters offered to replace them. In every instance, the Daughters of Charity served their most disadvantaged brothers and sisters.



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