

TO HEAVEN ON FOOT

The September of 1810 was warm and dry. It was also relatively peaceful. For the first time since the breaking of the treaty of Amiens, Napoleon's armies were disengaged. The victories at Austerlitz, Jena, Friedland and Wagram had created a sense of invincibility, the war in Spain had not yet drained the Empire of its strength, and the Russian campaign was still in the future. For the moment the treaties of Tilsit and Schönbrunn afforded an uneasy truce and the powers in Paris were content to rely on the continental blockade to reduce England by commercial pressure rather than by attempting a military invasion. The soldiers of France relaxed and, among others, the Belgian conscripts were allowed to leave.

Two of these newly commissioned, were returning across the Ardennes by the narrow road from St. Hubert to report to their regiment at Namur. The sun slanting through the fir forests gave an illusion of joy and security, the deep valleys lay still, and the prospect of a day's tramp was exhilarating. The men were fit, keen and confident. The road along through Marche and by Ciney to the Meuse was well marked, and they expected to reach Namur before dark. It was perhaps indication of their general sense of well-being, as well as of the better relations between the army and the people, that they were prepared to let a civilian walk with them. Surprisingly enough, their companion was an elderly peasant woman, a little below middle height, hardy, energetic, with a twinkling smile and a purposeful stride. Her cloak was rolled under one arm and her bundle of belongings, shapeless but serviceable, jogged at her side. All through the day she kept pace with the men, interested and half amused by their fervent devotion to the Emperor, glad to have company and protection on a road that was noted both for robbers and wolves. At nine o'clock in the evening, the three of them crossed the old bridge above the confluence of the Sambre and the Meuse at Namur; the soldiers turned at the toll-gate to climb up to their barracks in the citadel that dominated the ramparts; the woman trudged off along the quai towards the Rue des Fossés and disappeared through the gateway of the old house of the Comtes de Quarré. Julie Billiard had finished another journey. She had walked forty-five miles.

It was contrary to her expectation that walking had taken up so much of her time during the previous six years. She had never anticipated that the roads from St. Hubert and Marche to Namur and the northern routes to Gembloux, Ghent and on to St. Nicolas would become as familiar to her as the paths of her native Picardy. Indeed she had never expected to walk at all. Paralysis had crippled her from the time that she was twenty-three and careless surgery had so damaged one bone in her foot that the doctor who was asked to verify her relics when they were exhumed in 1888 hesitated to authenticate it, as he said that a person with such a malformed bone could never have walked at all. Julie knew that she walked in virtue of a miracle. In 1804 she had taken her first steps after twenty-three years of helplessness, in obedience to a command: "If you have any faith in the Sacred Heart, take a step forward." Whether the power of walking was restored by rectifying the surgeon's clumsiness or simply in spite of it, she never paused to question. It sufficed for her that God had restored her health and energy. Her one ambition was to use both for his glory.

Who was this remarkably determined woman who thought the work she was doing important enough to undertake a cross-country tramp on a lonely road with only chance companions as escort? She was a peasant, born in 1751 in a village in Picardy not far from Compiègne, and she belonged to one of those old families whose roots were deep in the soil and whose genealogies stretched back for as long as village memories could recall or parish registers keep record. Her childhood had been as uneventful as one might expect of the daughter of a villager who made ends meet by working his plot of land and running a small shop, but Julie's whole life was a paradox and it was one of its unexpected elements that from her quiet, country backwater she was to initiate a movement that would be world-wide. She who was untrained herself was to be a means, not only of restoring Christian education to France, but of developing it in countries which in 1751 had not even been explored. Yet her own schooling was meager. It is true that the family had some interest in education, as there was a school in Cuvilly run by Julie's uncle, Thibault Guibert, and this was not a private venture but a charity school properly organized for rudimentary teaching and supervised by an enlightened curé, M. Dangicourt. Even so, it offered a training that was pitifully slight by modern standards and, though Julie attended it faithfully, it could raise her scholastic achievement no higher than the ability to read, write, count, sew, recite her catechism and sing in tune. Her own half humorous description of herself as "poor ignorant Mère Julie" was a reminder to the end of her days that her schooling had had no pretensions to book learning. Her childhood walks were more often towards the fields than towards the school, for classes were only held when there was no real work—that is field work—to be done. She gathered the children around her and played at school, but it is doubtful whether any of the village elders saw in this a foreshadowing of her future apostolate.

There was a second paradox that they might have noticed, however: Julie was a hard-working girl who belonged to the underprivileged section of society, and yet from quite an early age she exercised a remarkable influence on all kinds of people and was in touch with a cross section of ranks that ranged from farm workers to ladies of the court. She herself was poor and, after a robbery which despoiled her father's business, had to do harvest work with the hired farmhands to bring in something for the family. Yet the fifteen-year-old girl with a hard luck story used the midday siesta to change the lives of her fellow laborers by an apostolate of her own. It was partly her goodness, partly her urgency, partly her vivacity and her sheer joy in telling a story that captivated her listeners, but her charm was irresistible. She carried them with her as she was to carry many a one later in her life. Nor was her influence confined to the workmen. The ladies of Paris favored the countryside of Picardy for their summer homes, and at Séchelles and at Gournay Julie had unexpected friends in Mme de Pont l'Abbé, Mme de Séchelles and the family of the Comtesse Baudoin. Through them she was introduced to the world of the aristocracy, the families born to govern rather than to be governed, and it was they who brought to her great friend and co-worker, Françoise Blin de Bourdon.

It was when she was in her teens that the divine paradox of action through inactivity was brought home to Julie. An enemy of her father, making an attempt on his life, fired through the broken window of the room in which she was sitting. The shot went wide and no one was hurt, but the strain of the experience so told on her nervous system that she became disabled and eventually bedridden with paralysis. The ministrations of the local surgeon did not improve matters. In 1782, when she had been suffering for over eight years, he bled her foot so violently that the bone was damaged. Energetic though she was by nature, she took it as God's will that she would not walk again. The children had to come to her bedside to be taught. The great ladies had to bow their perruques and manage their paniers in the narrow house of the Rue de Lataule. Plans for the new hospital at Fontaine-Malade had to be drafted in her room. Even during the revolution when her fidelity to the non-juring Church and to her friends at the chateaux brought upon her the wrath of the sans-culottes, she was helpless. It was her friends who got her away to Gournay and smuggled her into Compiègne at the bottom of a cart-load of hay. It was they who passed her from house to house when danger became acute, and they too who found her a final lodging in the Hotel Blin de Bourdon, Amiens. Physically inactive and with no prospect of future activity, Julie learned in the school of pain and silence the lessons which she would one day teach with all the energy of restored health. This most energetic of foundresses was ill for more than thirty years and crippled for twenty-three of them.

When her active life began again at the age of fifty-three, she fully appreciated the paradox of the weak things of the world being used in God's providence to fashion great works. Her joy in it never diminished. With no initiative on her own side, she was given Françoise Blin de Bourdon to work with her, to understand her and to provide the material means of success. She was given a group of young people anxious to share her ideas. She was given the opportunity of a direct apostolate when the Fathers of the Faith, eager to remedy the terrible ignorance in France that became evident after the Concordat of 1801, asked her to help them by teaching the women and children during their missions at Abbeville and St. Valery. Finally, in 1804, she was given her physical strength again and that power of walking which she had not been able to use for so long.

By this time, too, she had a clear general idea of her work: the apostolate of education, which would bring instruction to the country districts reduced to ignorance by the revolution. She wanted small convents in the villages of Picardy and the Pas de Calais, peripatetic mistresses and free schooling. There was no doubt in her mind that the work would succeed. At the worst period of persecution in Compiègne she had seen mysteriously the success of the congregation that she was to found and its chief characteristic: an invincible love of the cross as source of strength and sanctity and as the symbol of the Christian teacher's message. Later she was to see further that her work was destined to reach the ends of the earth. The fact that her own paths lay in a very restricted corner of northern France and Belgium troubled her not at all. Faith made her content to sow the seed and leave the watering and harvesting to others.

Yet for most of Julie's lifetime the work was slow and cramped by what seemed pointless frustrations. The first group at Amiens scattered under the impact of the White Terror. A second formed and, on October 15th, 1804, the vows of the Sisters of Notre Dame were pronounced for the first time by Julie herself, who became Soeur St. Ignace, Françoise Blin de Bourdon (Soeur St. Joseph), Victoire Leleu (Soeur Anastasie), and Justine Garson (Soeur St. Jean). The congregation was officially approved by Napoleon from his camp at Osterode in 1807 and began to develop with the Convent at the Rue Neuve, Amiens as its centre and branch houses in villages such as Montdidier, Rainneville, Bresles and Hennecourt. By 1810 St. Nicolas in Eastern Flanders, Namur in central Belgium, St. Hubert in the Ardennes, Ghent and even distant Bordeaux had groups of her sisters; and it was Julie's personal concern for each of them that led her to undertake her endless journeys by coach or cart, by donkey or most often on foot, that made her such a well-know figure on the roads of Belgium. In view of her own experience of traveling there was a special pungency in the remark she once made to a novice: "You don't get to heaven on wheels, sister, you walk!"

Had her only concern been the founding and maintenance of her convents and the proper professional training of her sisters, Julie's task would have been relatively easy, but she had to manage in addition the situations which arose from her own advanced ideas. She wanted a form of religious life which corresponded to the needs of her times but which conservative minds, and in particular that of M. l'Abbé Sambucy of Amiens, were loath to accept. The foregoing of the divine office, of the distinction between choir and lay sister, the abandonment of enclosure and the institution of central government were more than this good priest would allow the Church authorities at Amiens to approve. Julie was criticized and misjudged, forbidden entrance to her own convent and, in a situation where mis-representation played a cruel part in forcing the bishop's hand, was eventually compelled to withdraw altogether and establish her mother house at Namur in 1809. This move marked the end of the French phase of her work. Affairs at Amiens dragged on as an embarrassment to her until 1813, but the convent there separated from Namur and the village foundations were closed. Bordeaux reverted to diocesan status.

Julie concentrated on Belgium in the last years of her life Zele, Fleurus, Gembloux, Jumet and Andenne were a cluster of convents whose opening she supervised personally. But these foundations were made with the threat of war becoming daily more serious. They were maintained through the terrible summer of 1815 when the foundress's anxiety, with the French armies in disorderly retreat and the Prussians and Cossacks occupying the cities of Belgium, made fresh demands on her tremendous spirit of faith.

She had more intimate sorrows at this time, too, for her own sisters misunderstood her. Her spirit was always free and she had imparted something of that freedom to the way of life that she had worked out. The liberty of the children of God was dear to her. Some of the sisters, however, set high store by the regularity and uniformity of a rigid observance. The fact that not all convents were doing the same thing in the same way at the same time was a stumbling block to them, and their rigorist

spirit clashed with Julie's more balanced views. For a moment they seemed to prevail. Had not Julie upheld the Bishop of Ghent, Mgr. de Broglie, who was now in disgrace and exile for his opposition to Napoleon? And was she not suspect for standing by Mgr. de Pisani, the Bishop of Namur, who somehow escaped imprisonment and must therefore have capitulated to Napoleon? The fact that Mgr. Pisani was a loyal son of the Church did not exonerate the foundress, and for most of 1815 she was under a cloud in part of her own congregation. Yet the work went on and her own holiness deepened. It needed only the final purification of her last illness and death, alone in a borrowed room at the mother house, to complete her sanctification. On April 8, 1815, she died, after singing the *Magnificat*. She had prayed that, when God had no further use for her activity, he would give her back her old infirmities; her apostolate ended, as it had begun, in physical helplessness.

Julie left the beginnings of a great work, for hers was the initiative which fired the first generation of the Sisters of Notre Dame. She laid down the congregation's principles, established its spirit, trained its teachers, opened its schools and gave it an approach to education which would be handed down as a characteristic philosophy to those who followed her. Unconsciously, she sealed the work with her own personality. No matter how careful she was to do God's will in God's way without laying personal claim to it, she was bound to act according to her own gifts and temperament and, as in the case of any work of God performed by human agents. The formation of Notre Dame was in terms of what she was as well as in terms of the divine initiative. The orders in the Church are as different in their human characteristics as the books of the bible, and for the same reason: God respects his agents.

In Julie he chose a born leader, whose boundless energy derived from her deep inner repose. The conventional portrait of her, dear to the piety of the nineteenth century, is that of a peacefully smiling person, suggesting that she was a woman of unruffled calm and of gently yielding disposition. But this gives only one aspect of her personality, and it is misleading at that. Her letters, instructions, conferences and the reminiscences of her contemporaries make a very different impression. Here Julie is vigorous and dynamic, a woman with remarkable gifts of mind and heart, a shrewd observer of human nature and a person with a vivacious French temperament.

Her letters and notes are full of intense activity and of complete dedication to her work but without haste or agitation. "Plenty of energy but no fuss" was one of her watchwords. "You can be very active and yet go gently." As she thought nothing of distance and little of time in her trudging from convent to convent, she had to snatch odd minutes here and there to send the letters on which the work depended, but she never rushed them and would rewrite any that she thought illegible. A page would be begun at Ghent and finished at Liège. She would write from Roulers at well after midnight when a coach was late or from Namur at three thirty in the morning when she had to be up early. There would be a word from a country inn when she was breathless with battling against the wind on an icy road or when she was trying to write with a cross-cut quill in which the ink had dried: "A real public inn pen—you know the kind." One day she was in Zele, the next in Jumet. There was a flood at Andenne, an overcrowded school at Gembloux, an excited lady mayoress at St. Hubert, a possible

foundation at Breda. To each emergency Julie would respond, setting off again with her nondescript cloak over her shoulders and her bundle under her arm.

Her temperament made relations with her easy. She was quick and lively, brisk in manner and ready of wit, with a Gallic pungency that was never far from the surface. She was both amused and exasperated by the placidity of the Flemish way of life. “These good Flemings! They take all day to make up their minds” she wrote on one occasion when she had come in *trempeée comme une soupe* after “beating the city of Ghent to find a house.” “They reflect so maturely before doing anything ... it doesn’t seem to occur to them that I have no time to wait for their deliberations.” Her energy was obvious on her journeys. She would laugh at the *pas de géant* that outdistanced sisters much younger than herself, and would hold out her stick to a youngster following her to help her balance on a slippery road. She would lend a hand with anything: the weekly wash at Ghent, the teaching at St. Hubert, the kitchen at Jumet, the marketing at Namur, and would be up to see the sisters individually at four o’clock in the morning so as not to take time from the work of the day. The marketing especially appealed to her, as she had all the French peasant’s love of a good bargain and enjoyed the preliminary skirmish with the stallholders to fix a price. She would be down at the market in front of the cathedral at Namur as early as possible to get vegetables while they were fresh and before the prices rose; then she would go to Mass on her way back, not at all discomfited by her laden basket or by the fact that on one occasion two piglets that she had bought followed her into church. All the evidence indicates that there was a buoyancy and sense of humor in Julie that made her thoroughly good to live with, and a fire that kindled enthusiasm. Her charm was infectious. “She made us so happy at Namur,” wrote one of the first sisters. “She was so lively and yet so interested in each one ... I remember her kindness and her laughter ... she was gay and liked to see us gay too, so she used to make us laugh.” Certainly her expressions were graphic, “You must never wait for an invitation (to the Namur retreat),” she said to one hesitant soul. “Come straight like a letter ‘I.’” And later when the same sister could not come to a decision: “Make up your own mind this time, my dear, better mistakes than paralysis.” At Ghent she was “up to the neck in workmen;” at Gembloux the sisters were hard at work “like ducks—*le bec dans l’eau*.” She warned a sister who did not prepare her meditation that it was no use kneeling “open-mouthed in chapel waiting for larks to fall from heaven ready cooked!” and to a whole community at Christmas she sent her good wishes: “My love to you all, and I hug you all—like pincers.” Apparently she was everywhere at once: “You never knew where you might meet Mère Julie. She would come along when she was least expected ... always brisk and smiling, and you felt better somehow for having seen her.” Her vital interest covered everything, from the way that the sisters read and wrote and spelled, to the way that the beds were made or the butter was salted, or to the “great beam and thirteen bars” which she put on the main school gate when the Cossacks were in Namur after Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.

All her work bore the impress of her gifts of mind and heart. Her intelligence was keen and lucid, with an ability to grasp situations and to appreciate their implications. She could see the principles involved and give a sure, practical judgment. Time and again problems were referred to her for solution, and time and again the answer came:

sane, detached and balanced. When she used to remark, as she often did, that she was an ignorant woman, she meant no more than that she had never had a formal academic training. The omission did not disturb her. “St. Peter hadn’t one either,” she said, “and in his first sermon he converted three thousand people.” She would not allow Françoise Blin de Bourdon to correct her spelling mistakes in a letter to one of the bishops because she thought that his lordship had better know what kind of an ignoramus he was dealing with. “Was there ever an institute so ignorant in its foundress and its subjects!” she remarked. “With all our fine show of grammar and geography and penmanship, we have a lot of high sounding subjects and not much learning.” But Julie’s mental caliber was not the kind that depended on book-knowledge. Learning was not hers; intelligence was. The very quality of her thinking reflected it. It took an original mind to conceive, as she did, a form of religious life that was revolutionary in its break with the conventional patterns and norms. It took a balanced and courageous mind to hold to right principles undisturbed by events or people, in a world in the throes of revolution. On at least four occasions in her life—at Cuvilly, Bettencourt, Gézaincourt and Namur— she had to deal with schism, and each time her judgment was sound in spite of cross-currents of popular opinion. She could be firm, “something of a dragon” as she remarked herself, but she was never obstinate. Her mind was open, adaptable both as to the scope of her work and the manner of its development. She had originally envisaged small groups of sisters serving rural areas, but the experience of the missions at St. Valery and Abbeville in 1804 quickly convinced her that greater good could be done in the towns. She intended her schools only for the poor, but when this Bishop of Namur appealed to her on behalf of the middle class, she opened schools for them too. Her mind was humble. She had no intention of leaving her personal impression on Notre Dame in such a way that the congregation’s educational pattern was forever unchangeable. Rather, she deliberately left the way open for future development and, to one correspondent who asked her what the sisters were to teach, she replied, not by sending a syllabus by return of courier as was probably expected, but with the simple remark: “Teach them whatever is necessary to equip them for life.”

Julie had the sheer intelligence which is of more value than accumulations of facts and its quality was appreciated by many who worked with her. The bishops of Ghent and Namur met it in the combination of wide principle and care for detail with which she arranged her foundations with them. The innkeepers of Flanders knew it well and would invite her free of charge to the *table d’hôte* on her journeys, just for the sparkle of humor in her conversation. The sisters trusted it, because from long experience they knew that her mind was not only quick and shrewd but simple too, and of great integrity. She would remark that “others may put on velvet gloves to deal with people, but not I” and there was only frank good sense even in her most incisive comments. When she advised: “Be satisfied with X’s goodwill; you may drive her mad but you’ll never make her straightforward,” she spoke without malice and caused no rancor. She seemed to take her intellectual power for granted, never referring to it. The evidence of it appeared when her thought and educational practice were found by later generations to rest on sure and intelligent premises.

It was otherwise with her gifts of heart, particularly with her talent for friendship, which she used warmly and generously all her life. Julie knew the value of personal interest and individual contact, and her letters abounded in affectionate inquiries after one or other of the sisters or the children. This was the secret of much of her success, as her interest was wholly spontaneous and genuine. Often a letter would contain a litany of greetings with a special mention for each sister in a community. Sometimes she would send little notes to individuals as a postscript. When a sister was in difficulties, Julie would follow her with affectionate care, doing everything possible to encourage, guide or distract her. There was real joy when she succeeded. When she failed, she showed neither resentment nor bitterness, but only a great sorrow. When Firmine X. who probably gave her more trouble than anyone else went her own way in the end, Julie wasted no time in reproaches but began the long years of faithful prayer for her that ended only with her death.

Her love of children was proverbial, and her frequent inquiries about them showed her interest and affection. "Do they have good bread to eat? Are they able to get out into the garden?" She often ended a letter to the sisters with the remark: "Give my love to the little ones." The children on their side knew that they were loved. They would flock round her whenever she visited the school and the sisters were always delighted when she took over the religion lesson because she could win such rapt attention.

With her shrewd, logical, kindly French mind and warm heart, Julie could not help but be an interested observer of human nature. Her thumb-nail sketches were unconsciously vivid, yet there was no doubt of her affection for those whom she described. She had a special concern for the little community of three at St. Hubert: Soeur St. Jean, a very young and inexperienced superior, who had to learn her duties as she went along and who turned to Julie in what, for her, seemed a long series of daily crises; Sister T. who was portress, cook and junior teacher, and Sister P. who filled all the other charges. Unfortunately Sister P. was 'spiritual.' She was so spiritual that she was lost in recollection when she ought to have been a third at community recreation. Soeur St. Jean wrote to Julie: should she allow Sister P. to make extra holy hours? "Not at all," came the reply. "She does not get enough exercise and she seems to have been born half asleep. Send her for walks on Sundays." At Jumet there was a similar situation, where a sister was too pious to do her class-work properly. Julie wrote to Soeur Anastasie: "Yes, I know that she preaches with great eloquence but does she *teach* anything? You have to make sure that the children are taught. How do they answer your questions on *her* course?"

With a soul of her own caliber, Julie was capable of forming that deep and saintly kind of friendship which is the privilege of those who are close to God. Françoise Blin de Bourdon differed from her in temperament and tastes, in birth, in wealth, in experience, in appearance. Theirs was a complement of opposites, but each had the idealism of the apostle and the pure fervor necessary for pioneer work. They shared the same hopes and desires, were consumed with the same love of God. In Françoise, Julie found someone to whom she could confide her thoughts and feelings, and her letters to this

great friend were more free and intimate than those to any other of her correspondents. Here was the fullest expression of her heart with its power of loving that would “be faithful now and through a blessed eternity.”

Julie remained remarkably fresh in her writings. Her letters in particular were completely unself-conscious, abounding in exclamation marks, questions and rows of dots. She was far too occupied ever to pose for a portrait or to write a formal treatise but, from the very ingenuousness of what she did write, the impression she left gained in authenticity. She stood out: quick, friendly, strong, intelligent, understanding, wholly occupied with her Father’s business and ever ready with her smiling, “Isn’t God good!”

The tramp to Namur in the September of 1810 was therefore all of a piece with Julie’s work and character. The little elderly peasant trudging along beside the soldiers of Napoleon personified the divine paradox of strength in infirmity, for she was committed to a task which would endure when Napoleon’s empire had crumbled. She was striving to build anew the culture which the armies had helped to destroy; and she was reaching, in the education of the poor, the deepest roots of the social problems which the revolution and Napoleon between them had created. Restricted though her own experience was, her faith and educational vision went beyond her own narrow limits to embrace the world. The material achievement seemed small and the way sometimes uncertain, just as the road from St. Hubert was narrow and winding and lost itself at times in the blue shadows of the valley, but Julie had at least God’s will for the here and now as she had the stretch of road immediately ahead. She had companions, unexpected ones perhaps, but chosen by providence for her. She had strength and a direct drive to her goal, and not for nothing had the people of Courtrai called her “the walking love of God.” Unsparing of herself in her desire to spend and to be spent for Christ, she probably felt only a deep satisfaction beneath the physical weariness when she put down her bundle in the portress’s room at Namur that night. “There was only one road trodden by the saints.... You don’t get to heaven on wheels, sister. You walk!”