
Childhood and youth

THE SMALL TOWN of Cognac stands on the left bank of the river Charente in the midst of a fertile and undulating countryside in western France. To most people it means only one thing, the finest brandy, but it has another claim to fame, for it was the birthplace of King Francis I, the 'knight-king' (*roi-chevalier*) and 'father of letters' (*père des lettres*). The castle in which he was born is now the warehouse of a distillery.

Francis was a scion of the house of Angoulême, a cadet branch of the royal house of Valois, which was founded by Jean, comte d'Angoulême, the second son of Louis I, duc d'Orléans, and of Valentina Visconti, daughter of the last duke of Milan of that name.

At the age of thirteen, Jean was sent as a hostage to England, where he remained for thirty-two years. In 1415 he was joined by his elder brother Charles, duc d'Orléans, the poet of the *Rondeaux*, who had been taken prisoner at Agincourt. Jean shared his brother's literary tastes, and, after his return to France in 1445, he built up a fine library in his château at Cognac. He was not, however, a rich man, having had to sell part of his estates in order to pay his ransom.¹

Jean was succeeded in April 1467 by his second son, Charles, who was only seven years old. In 1478 there was some question of his marrying Mary of Burgundy, but King Louis XI betrothed him instead to his two-year-old niece Louise, daughter of Philip, count of Bresse, a younger son of the duke of Savoy. Philip became duke in 1496, but died in the following year. Having lost her mother, Marguerite de Bourbon, when she was only seven, Louise was brought up by her aunt, Anne de Beaujeu, Louis XI's daughter, who shared the regency of France with her husband, Pierre, during Charles VIII's minority. Charles d'Angoulême tried to escape the matrimonial fate prescribed for him by Louis XI by taking part in an aristocratic revolt, called *la Guerre folle*, in 1487. He assembled an army in Saintonge, but was crushed 'like a waffle between two irons'. The price of his submission was his marriage to Louise on 16 February 1488.²

¹ *D.B.F.*, ii. 1219–21.

² *Ibid.*, ii. 1202–3.

Though Charles was twenty-eight years old in 1488 and Louise only twelve, their marriage proved, by all accounts, reasonably happy; no harsh word was ever heard to pass between them.³ Yet the count did have two mistresses, Antoinette de Polignac and Jeanne Comte. By the first he had two daughters, Jeanne and Madeleine, and by the second another daughter, Souveraine. In the fifteenth century, however, illegitimacy did not carry the stigma that it has since acquired. Louise apparently accepted her husband's infidelities with perfect equanimity. She brought up his bastards along with her own children, and took Antoinette de Polignac as her companion.

Charles had two children by Louise: Marguerite, who was born on 11 April 1492, and Francis (François), who was born two years later, on 12 September.⁴ The latter owed his Christian name to Francis of Paola, an Italian hermit, who had been called to France in 1482 to save the life of King Louis XI. Although he failed in this mission, he was persuaded to settle in France, where he soon gained the reputation of being a miracle-worker.⁵ He specialized in getting divine assistance for the production of heirs and heiresses, and male children who came into the world as a result of his intercession were usually named after him. Louise had called on the hermit at Plessis-lez-Tours soon after her marriage and had been told by him not only that she would have a son but that he would become king of France. This showed a truly prophetic insight, since in 1494 the odds were heavily weighted against Francis ever reaching the throne. He was only the cousin of the reigning monarch, Charles VIII, the next in line of succession to the throne being Louis II, duc d'Orléans. Only if both were to die without male issue would Francis become king. Females, of course, were debarred from the throne by the Salic law.

Charles d'Angoulême never became politically significant; he was an easy-going, weak person whose chief redeeming feature was a love of literature and art. In spite of his limited means, he continued to build up the library at Cognac, and his entourage included Robinet Testard, a talented illuminator of manuscripts, Jean de Saint-Gelais, the official historian of Louis XII's reign, and his brother, Octavien, the poet.

On an exceptionally cold winter's day in 1495 Charles left Cognac to go to court, but he was taken ill that same night at Châteauneuf. Louise called several doctors and 'attended on him day and night as tenderly and humanely as the poorest wife might nurse her husband'.⁶ Her devotion, however, proved unavailing; on 1 January 1496 the count died, leaving a

³ P. Paris, *Etudes sur François Premier* (1885), i. 28.

⁴ Michaud et Poujoulat, v. 87.

⁵ G. Roberti, *Francesco di Paola* (Rome, 1915).

⁶ Paris, i. 27

will in which he appointed Louise as the guardian of his children.⁷ But, as she was only nineteen and the minimum legal age for guardianship was twenty-five, Louis d'Orléans, the children's nearest male kinsman, claimed their guardianship for himself. Louise, however, opposed him by invoking a local custom of Angoumois, which fixed the age of guardianship at fourteen. The dispute was submitted to the Grand Conseil and a compromise reached: Louise was allowed to retain the custody of her children, while the duc d'Orléans was appointed their honorary guardian. In practice, this meant that Louise could not transact any important business without the duke's prior knowledge and approval. It was also stipulated that he would get full custody of the children and their property in the event of Louise remarrying.⁸

Charles VIII died childless on 8 April 1498 and was succeeded on the throne by Louis d'Orléans, who became Louis XII. As the new king was also childless, Francis became heir presumptive to the throne. Louis granted him an annuity of 8,000 *livres* and, in 1499, created the duchy of Valois for him out of the patrimony of the house of Orléans. He also confirmed Louise's guardianship of her children and invited her to bring them to the court at Chinon, where he entertained them with an almost paternal show of affection. One week later, however, he entrusted them to the custody of Pierre de Rohan, seigneur de Gié and marshal of France, who took them first to the château of Blois, then to that of Amboise. Gié was a middle-aged widower, second only in political importance to Georges d'Amboise, archbishop of Rouen. In 1503 he took as his second wife Charlotte d'Armagnac and assumed her late father's title of duc de Nemours. Being ambitious, he doubtless regarded his custody of the heir to the throne as a unique opportunity for self-advancement. As he had been appointed by word of mouth, his duties are not precisely known, but presumably he was expected to ensure Francis's safety. To this end, he purchased the captaincy of Amboise, establishing there a company of twenty-five archers under a lieutenant called Roland de Ploret. Gié also exercised some control over Louise's household. Thus, he dismissed Jean de Saint-Gelais and others who had served the countess and her late husband for many years, replacing them by his own creatures. Although Gié was often at court, he did visit Amboise from time to time; he would then dine at Louise's table and accompany her son to church or on outings.

Louise deeply resented any restriction of her independence. She slept in the same room as her children, and would allow only certain ladies to be

⁷ *Procédures politiques du règne de Louis XII*, ed. R. de Maulde La Clavière (1885), pp. 716–22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 723–7.

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present at her *lever* and *coucher*. No gentleman was admitted, and Ploret was only allowed as far as her chamber door when he came each morning to escort Francis to mass. One day, however, he delegated this duty to a subordinate called du Restal, who, finding the door shut, simply broke it down. Louise was understandably furious. She obtained du Restal's dismissal, but was foiled in her efforts to get rid of Gié as well. The king ordered Francis's removal from her room at night so that Gié's men might keep watch over him at all times.⁹

It seems that Louise was allowed a free hand in the education of her children and that she took her duties seriously.¹⁰ In keeping with her motto, *libris et liberis*, she commissioned books specially for them. They included a work on ancient mythology, called *Commentaire sur le livre des échecs amoureux*, and a dialogue on penance. A history book and an atlas, now at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, may have been used by Francis as a child.¹¹ He learnt Italian and Spanish from his mother and was taught biblical history and Latin by François Demoulin and François de Rochefort. Francis may also have had lessons with Christophe de Longueil, the Flemish humanist, but the 'new learning' did not play an important part in his education. Ironically enough, the future 'father of letters' was a poor Latinist.¹² Guillaume Budé wrote his *Institution du prince* in French because he knew that Francis would not read it if it were in Latin.¹³

But Francis's education, whatever its shortcomings, was regarded by contemporaries as unusually enlightened. Florange, who was brought up with Francis, believed that no prince had been better taught,¹⁴ and even as discriminating an observer as Castiglione, author of *The Book of the Courtier* (*Il Cortegiano*), was favourably impressed by him when he visited the court of Louis XII. 'I believe', says Count Lodovico in *The Book of the Courtier*, 'that for all of us the true and principal adornment of the mind is letters; although the French, I know, recognize only the nobility of arms and think nothing of all the rest; and so they not only do not appreciate learning but detest it, regarding men of letters as basely inferior and thinking it a great insult to call anyone a scholar.' To which the Magnifico Giuliano replies: 'You are right in saying that this error has

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–cxxxii.

¹⁰ The presence of a few salacious books in her library hardly warrants Guizot's severe judgment that she gave her son 'neither principles, nor moral examples'. Paris, i. 37.

¹¹ B.N., MSS. fr. 143, 2794, 5709.

¹² Paris, i. 37; *Procédures politiques*, pp. 233–41.

¹³ C. Bontems, L. P. Raybaud, and J. P. Brancourt (eds.), *Le prince dans la France des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles* (1965), p. 7.

¹⁴ Michaud et Poujoulat, v. 7.

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prevailed among the French for a long time now; but if good fortune has it that Monseigneur d'Angoulême, as it is hoped, succeeds to the throne, then I believe that, just as the glory of arms flourishes and shines in France, so also with the greatest brilliance must that of letters. For when I was at that Court not so long ago, I set eyes on this prince . . . and among other things I was told that he greatly loved and esteemed learning and respected all men of letters, and that he condemned the French themselves for being so hostile to this profession.¹⁵

'Nobility of arms', however, was not overlooked in Francis's education. Florange's memoirs contain a vivid account of Francis and his young companions at Amboise disporting themselves in the open. They played an Italian game called *l'escaigne*, in which a large inflated ball was hit with a bat shaped like a stool with legs filled with lead. Francis excelled in archery and in hunting deer and other animals with nets. He and Florange also used to fire darts from a small gun or *serpentine* at a target fixed to a door. Another Italian game was played in pairs: Francis and Anne de Montmorency versus Florange and Philippe Chabot de Brion. A ball 'as large as a barrel and filled with air' was hit with a piece of tin lined with felt and strapped to the forearm. Being tall and strong for his age, Francis was particularly successful in this game, which required both skill and strength. He and his friends also used to besiege and defend model forts; and, as they grew up, they wore armour and took part in jousts and tournaments.¹⁶ Inevitably, there were accidents. On 25 January 1502 Francis was carried off by his mount, much to the anguish of Louise, who recorded the incident in her journal. At Fontevault, on 6 August 1508, he was struck on the forehead by a stone.¹⁷ Such accidents were to punctuate much of his life.

In January 1499 Louis XII, having divorced his first wife, Jeanne de France, married Charles VIII's widow, Anne, duchess of Brittany. This was, of course, a matter of grave concern for the house of Angoulême, for Anne, who was only twenty-two years old, could reasonably be expected to produce a son, who would inevitably displace Francis as heir to the

¹⁵ B. Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, tr. G. Bull (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 88. The passage in question may not have been disinterested, for Francis had some involvement in the creation of the *Courtier*. About late 1515 or early 1516 Castiglione interpolated in the first draft of his work the claim that Alfonso Ariosto at the behest of the king had urged him to continue working on it. This claim was dropped from a later draft, which served as the basis for the first printed text (1528). For a full discussion of this problem see C. H. Clough, 'Francis I and the Courtiers of Castiglione's *Courtier*', *E.S.R.*, viii (1978), 23–70.

¹⁶ Michaud et Poujoulat, v. 6–7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 88.

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throne. Her first child by Louis, however, was a daughter, Claude, born at Romorantin on 13 October 1499, who was for eleven years the only child in the royal nursery and the pivot of Louis XII's matrimonial diplomacy. Though plain in looks, she was a desirable match because her dowry comprised the Orléans patrimony, the duchy of Brittany and the French claims to Asti, Milan, Genoa and Naples. If the kingdom were to remain united, it was essential that she should marry the heir to the throne. Consequently, in April 1500, her father made a secret declaration nullifying in advance any other match.¹⁸ In the following year, however, the Archduke Philip the Fair, son of the Emperor Maximilian, requested Claude's hand for his infant son, Charles of Luxemburg, and Louis granted his request in the hope that Maximilian would, in return, give him the investiture of Milan. Anne of Brittany welcomed the marriage as a means of preserving her duchy's independence of France. A marriage treaty was accordingly signed on 10 August, and soon afterwards the archduke and his wife came to Blois to see their prospective daughter-in-law. It was on this occasion that Francis made his first official appearance as heir to the throne.¹⁹

In September 1504 Francis celebrated his tenth birthday, and his mother had a medal struck for the occasion. This shows, on one side, the boy's head in profile, wearing a bonnet, and, on the other, a salamander in the midst of flames with the motto *Notrisco al buono, stingo el reo*. Every visitor to the châteaux of the Loire knows Francis I's salamander, which adorns so many fireplaces, chimney-stacks and other architectural features; fewer, one may safely assume, are familiar with the origin of the emblem or its significance. The fallacy that a salamander can go through fire unscathed, extinguishing it at the same time, can be traced back to the works of Aristotle and other scholars of antiquity. Contrary to popular belief, Francis was not the first to use the salamander in the midst of flames as an emblem; it had already been used by his father and paternal grandfather. The significance of the half-Latin, half-Italian motto *Nutrisco et extinguo* has given rise to much discussion. In its complete form (as on the medal of 1504) it can be translated as: 'I feed upon the good (fire) and put out the evil one' (i.e. 'I am burning with lawful zeal, faith, a desire for peace and love, and I put out guilty zeal, harmful and destructive passions, unjust war and lust'). The salamander, which was often amusingly represented in the ceremonial entries of Francis I, was seen either swallowing fire or spitting water. Its

¹⁸ *Procédures politiques*, p. 135.

¹⁹ J. S. C. Bridge, *History of France from the Death of Louis XI* (Oxford, 1921–36), iii. 208–14.



1 The salamander amidst flames. Reverse of a medal of Francis of Angoulême as duc de Valois (1504).

third attribute – that of being able to live through fire – made it also a symbol of endurance.²⁰

Louis XII fell seriously ill in 1504, and in the absence of his chief minister, the cardinal of Amboise, who had gone to Rome, the government passed into the hands of Marshal Gié, Francis's governor, whose views on Breton independence were in direct opposition to the queen's. He feared that, if the king died, Anne would return to her duchy, as she had done after the death of her first husband; only this time she would take her daughter Claude with her so as to frustrate any chance of the latter marrying Francis. Whether or not Gié actually tried to prevent such an eventuality is uncertain; what is clear is that, after Louis had recovered his health, Gié was accused by Pierre de Pontbriant, a servant of Louise of Savoy, of having attempted a *coup d'état* during the king's illness. Somewhat reluctantly, the king ordered an enquiry during which Louise

²⁰ A.-M. Lecoq, 'La salamandre royale dans les entrées de François 1^{er}', in *Les fêtes de la Renaissance*, iii, ed. J. Jacquot, and E. Konigson, (1975), pp. 93–104.

confirmed all Pontbriant's allegations. Gié, she claimed, had planned to carry her son off to the castle at Angers, he had talked of the need to collect boats on the Loire, had pressed her to allow his son to sleep in the same room as Francis, and had recommended some of his servants to him. Eventually, Gié was sent for trial on more than a hundred charges. He admitted that he had always wanted the marriage of Claude and Francis, but denied all the other charges. Pontbriant's allegations, he claimed, were lies inspired by Louise, who wanted to be avenged for certain measures he had taken by order of the king. In February 1506, Gié was acquitted of high treason but found guilty of 'certain excesses and faults'. He was suspended as marshal of France, fined and banished from court.²¹ He was also replaced as Francis's governor by Artus Gouffier, seigneur de Boisy, whose younger brother Guillaume, seigneur de Bonnavet, now joined Francis's circle of friends.²²

In April 1505 Louis XII again fell ill and, on 31 May, made his will. He ordered Claude and Francis to be married as soon as possible, notwithstanding his obligations to Philip the Fair; appointed a council of regency, which included the queen and Louise of Savoy; and bequeathed to Claude the Orléans patrimony, including Blois, Genoa and Milan. He also forbade her to leave the kingdom on any pretext whatever. Queen Anne showed her disapproval of these arrangements by retiring to her duchy after the king's recovery. Louis, in the meantime, visited Amboise and took Francis with him to Plessis-lez-Tours. His council took steps to ensure that his will would be properly executed. Thus, the captains of the *gendarmerie* had to promise in writing that they would serve Francis and Claude 'without excepting anyone here or outside the kingdom'. On 8 October the cardinal of Amboise was entrusted with the 'total administration' of Francis, duc de Valois, until his majority.²³

Before Francis and Claude could be married, however, it was necessary to repudiate the treaty of Blois, in which she had been promised to Charles of Luxemburg. This Louis did not mind doing, since he had now been given the investiture of Milan. But, under the treaty, Burgundy, Milan and Asti were to be forfeited to Charles if his marriage to Claude were broken off by Louis, Anne or Claude herself. The king overcame this difficulty by shifting the responsibility for his breach of faith on to his subjects. In April 1506 an assembly of notables, including representatives of the 'good towns' and universities, was summoned to Tours. The deputies were received by the king on 14 May and their spokesman, Thomas Bricot, made a speech. He began by acclaiming Louis as 'Father

²¹ *Procédures politiques*, passim.

²² Paris, i. 36; Barrillon, i. 5.

²³ C. Terrasse, *François I^{er}: le roi et le règne* (1945–70), i. 39–40.

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of the people' on account of the stable peace and sound justice which he had given them. Then, as the deputies fell upon their knees, Bricot came to the point. 'Sire', he said, 'we are come here to proffer a request for the general welfare of your kingdom. Your humble subjects beg that it may please you to give your only daughter in marriage to my Lord Francis here present, who is France's son (*tout français*).'²⁴ The king, apparently much moved by these words, promised to give them careful consideration. Five days later the delegates were told that he had granted their request. They were asked to swear in return that they would see the marriage carried out when the children came of age, and to recognize Francis as their sovereign lord should Louis die without male issue. Before returning home they witnessed the betrothal of the royal children.²⁴ This was performed by the cardinal of Amboise on 21 May in the great hall of the château of Plessis-lez-Tours, the marriage contract being signed on the following day.²⁵

On 3 August 1508 Francis left his mother to settle permanently at court.²⁶ He was nearly fourteen years old, the age at which in France a youth was traditionally deemed capable of assuming the full responsibility of kingship. But he could not yet be certain of reaching the throne. In April 1510 Queen Anne became pregnant for the seventh time. The king prayed for a son, but on 25 October he was given a second daughter, called Renée.²⁷ In 1512 Anne did produce a son, but he died almost immediately. Louise, who set great store by the unimpeded advancement of her son, expressed her relief in her diary. 'Anne, queen of France', she wrote, 'gave birth to a son on 21 January, the feast of St Agnes; but he was unable to prevent the exaltation of my Caesar, for he was still-born.' The king now abandoned hope of perpetuating his line, and Francis became popularly known as 'Monsieur le Dauphin'. He was admitted to the king's council and appointed captain of a hundred *lances*.²⁸ In September 1512 he was given command of the army of Guyenne, but being too young and inexperienced to be left in charge of operations, he was accompanied by Odet de Foix, seigneur de Lautrec, who bore the title of *lieutenant-général*. The task facing the army was the reconquest of the small kingdom of Navarre, which Ferdinand of Aragon had overrun recently. But the ensuing campaign was a fiasco. The French, after trying

²⁴ J. Russell Major, *Representative Institutions in Renaissance France, 1421–1559* (Madison, 1960), pp. 122–4.

²⁵ J. d'Auton, *Chronique de Louis XII*, ed. R. de Maulde La Clavière (1889–95), iv. 44ff; *Procédures politiques*, pp. 221–2.

²⁶ Michaud et Poujoulat, v. 88.

²⁷ In 1528 she married Ercole d'Este, who became duke of Ferrara in 1534. She became a patron of the Reformation. See C. J. Blaisdell, in *A.R.*, lxiii (1972), 196–226.

²⁸ *Procédures politiques*, p. 314.

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unsuccessfully to prevent the duke of Alba from retreating to Pamplona, laid siege to the town as winter closed in upon them. Francis was only marginally involved in these operations, his responsibility being to cover Bayonne. Nor did he see the campaign through to the end: early in November, after leading an unsuccessful diversionary attack on San Sebastian, he disbanded his troops and returned to court. Later that month, the French raised the siege of Pamplona and retreated northwards, leaving behind their sick and wounded and even their precious artillery. Francis's first experience of real warfare had been anything but glorious, but the following year had worse in store.²⁹

In June 1513 the French in north Italy suffered a crushing defeat at Novara at the hands of the Swiss. In September, after they had been driven out of the peninsula, the Swiss swept into Burgundy as far as the walls of Dijon. The local commander, La Trémoille, had to sign a humiliating treaty, which Louis XII subsequently refused to implement. Meanwhile, the king of England, Henry VIII, and his ally, the Emperor Maximilian, invaded Picardy and laid siege to Thérouanne. A force of French cavalry was routed at Guinegatte as it tried to bring supplies to the beleaguered garrison. The action became known as the 'Battle of the Spurs' because the French fled from the field so fast. Louis XII, who was at Amiens at the time, sent out another force under Francis and the duc de Bourbon, but it could not save Thérouanne, which capitulated on 23 August. A month later the much more important town of Tournai also fell into English hands.

On 9 January 1514 Anne of Brittany died, leaving the way to the throne clear for Francis.³⁰ It was still possible, of course, for the king to remarry, but Francis was fairly confident on this score. 'Even if the king should commit the folly of marrying again', he said, 'he will not live for long: any son he may have would be a child. This would necessitate a regency and in accordance with the constitution the regent would be me.'³¹

Although Francis was not yet allowed any share in policy-making, he acquired political significance as people began to regard him as Louis XII's likely successor. Foreign ambassadors, in particular, tried to win his friendship. On 13 March he signed a truce with Ferdinand of Aragon at Louis's request.³² Ferdinand was anxious to follow this up with a marriage between his grandson and Princess Renée, hoping that her dowry would include Milan and Naples. This was acceptable to Louis, but not to Pope Leo X, who did not wish to see Ferdinand more powerful in Italy. His envoy in France decided to enlist Francis's help. 'I have spent a long

²⁹ P. Boissonnade, *Histoire de la réunion de la Navarre à la Castille* (1893), pp. 379ff.

³⁰ Florange, i. 146–9; *Procédures politiques*, pp. 338–40.

³¹ *Procédures politiques*, pp. 353–4.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 342.