



“The Field Where Cinnamon Roses Grew”

The Legend of Talleyrand

by Gladys Butler

Historical Note: Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Prince de Benevent (1754-1838), French politician, born Paris. However, there has always been some question as to the exact date and place of his birth. He obtained the abbacy of St. Denis in 1775, and five years later was appointed agent-general to the French clergy; finally Louis XVI appointed him Bishop of Autun in 1789. In the same year, the clergy of his diocese elected him to represent them in the States-general. In April, he was excommunicated by the Pope, and he gave up his clerical career. In 1792, his connection with the Revolution ended by his being placed on the list of emigres. After the fall of Robespierre, he returned to Paris 1795, joined Barras' party, and in 1797, he was made foreign minister under the Directory, serving until 1807. He was greatly instrumental in consolidating the power of Napoleon I (1802) as consul for life then (1804) as emperor....During the revolution of July 1833, he was Louis-Phillippe's chief advisor. He also served as ambassador to London, and in 1834 retired to private life.¹

The Story

Legend has it that Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the famous European statesman, was born on Mount Desert Island, Maine. I first heard the legend from Nell Thornton when, at the age of six, I visited my grandmother in Southwest Harbor. Cousin Nell said confidently: "It is said that here, at the head of the harbor, the great French statesman Talleyrand was born, in 1754." She told me the story of a French frigate seeking shelter in the Great Harbor of Mount Desert in the spring of 1753, taking on water at Man O' War Brook, and of the handsome French naval officer falling in love with a fisherman's beautiful daughter, with the resultant birth of Talleyrand in the spring.

The French officer and the girl enjoyed many happy days picking berries and climbing the hill behind the house. But the time came for the ship to return to France. Many a day, after the birth of the boy, Delphine climbed the hill scanning the horizon for a ship with a French flag. Several years later, one appeared. The man who rowed ashore said that the father of the child had died and that he had been sent to take the lad back to France. The grieving mother finally agreed to this.

Pointing to a spot at the edge of my grandmother's field, Nell concluded

her story: "A century later, long after the child had been taken to France and Governor Bernard had laid out the property boundaries in Southwest Harbor, cinnamon roses still grew there, among the rocks, where the fisherman's house used to be." The story has been handed down in reputable families of the island for more than a century and a half.

As Sir Walter Scott writes,

I cannot tell how the truth may be;
I say the tale as 'twas told to me.²

The Argument

There are other versions of the legend. Some authors are skeptical;³ others believe there is truth in the story. In 1923, William Otis Sawtelle wrote, in an article for *Sprague's Journal*, "Perhaps, in the main, it is a mere tradition, but traditions have good reasons for existing, and the story of the little lame French boy may not be out of place in a magazine devoted to the history of Maine." His conclusion is that although no direct evidence exists, "It is not improbable...that a certain French lad, born on Mount Desert Island about the year 1754, might not have been the celebrated and notorious Talleyrand."⁴

In reading the biographies of Talleyrand, one is aware that those who have written about him either loved him or hated him. Louis Madelin says: "Talleyrand has had many biographers, almost too many," and goes on to admit that he could not resist writing about him. Madelin concludes: "After long months in his dangerous company, I think that I have not succumbed to the famous fascination which that devil of a fellow exercised over all who came near him, including Napoleon. I hope in defending myself from this fascination I have not reacted too strongly against it by blackening the man."⁵

I, however, have succumbed--perhaps because I heard the legend at the age of six, but also because one finds in Talleyrand's own *Memoirs*⁶ many conflicts of evidence, as well as intriguing omissions. Many of the omissions contribute to belief in the legend. Talleyrand's first four years are surrounded with mystery. Contradictory accounts make it easy to paint a possible picture; here is one which seems to fit most available facts:

The first son of Charles Daniel Talleyrand and Alexandrine de Dames Talleyrand, whose name was Alexandre François-Jacques, was born in 1752. He died at the age of five. At the time of his death, Charles Maurice Talleyrand would have been three years old. Sir Henry Lytton Bulwar wrote in *Historical Characters* in 1858 (before Talleyrand's *Memoirs* were published) that Talleyrand was born February 2, 1754, but a footnote states: "There seems to

be some difficulty in ascertaining the date of M. de Talleyrand's birth with exactitude. I have been told, on apparently the best authority, that he was born on 7 March, 1st Sept, and 2nd Feb, 1754. The date of his birth seems to be hard to ascertain."⁷

Anna Dodd says that "the exact date of the babe being put out to nurse is a debatable point."⁸ Supposedly he was baptized the day he was born and taken immediately to live with a wet nurse on the Rue Saint Jacques. But if the legend is true, and he was born in America, then his parents in France did not see him until he was four years old. According to the legend, the family in France knew of the illegitimate child living in America who was a Talleyrand. Sending for the child might have seemed the solution to passing on the title that Charles Daniel Talleyrand had inherited from his father, Daniel Marie Talleyrand.

Youth

When the small child of four arrived from across the sea, the family would have been shocked to find that he was crippled. Some accounts blame a kettle of boiling water spilled on him; some say that he fell from a cupboard at the Rue Saint Jacques. His cousin, the Abbé Maurice, asserted years later that each generation produced a Talleyrand with a club foot."⁹ Anna Dodd found a description of the child at four or five in which he was said to have strong willful gray-blue eyes that compelled attention. His nose was "unretroussé"; he had a quick wit and was "irreverent."¹⁰ The family would not want to pass on the family title to an adopted son who could not serve in the armies of France as Charles Daniel and his father, Daniel Marie had, in the tradition of eldest sons in French families.

What should they do? Talleyrand's French mother's grandmother had recently lost her husband, Louis Charles, Prince de Chalais. She asked for the boy. Talleyrand's description in the *Memoirs* of the 300-mile trip to Chalais at the age of four, of his arrival, and of being taken into the arms of his great-grandmother is very moving. When one realizes that the description was written sixty years after the event, it becomes all the more evident how much she meant to him.

He says simply: "My appearance pleased her. She acquainted me with feelings hitherto unknown to me. She was the first member of my family who displayed any affection towards me, and also the first who taught me the sweetness of filial love. God bless her for it!...To this day, her memory is dear to me. Many a time have I bitterly understood how priceless is the sincere affection of some member of one's own family."¹¹ He goes on for page after page about the four years he spent at Chalais. What a haven it must have been, if he had just been fetched from America, leaving behind his American mother

and grandparents, and then having been turned down because he was a cripple and sent to the Rue Saint Jacques to board, until at last someone wanted him.

Talleyrand has been described as psychologically strong. Crane Brinton comments: "His lifelong mental health is so obvious that even a psychologist ought to be able to see it."¹² Talleyrand writes of going to Chalais: "The time spent at Chalais left a deep impression on my mind."¹³ J.F. Bernard observes that "it was there, at the side of Madame de Chalais, as a member of her little 'court' that he first witnessed the sweetness of friendship and that he first experienced a strong attachment to women. Both these qualities were to combine, in later years, to a tenacity of affection which enabled him to calculate the duration of his attachments, to both friends and lovers, not in months or years, but in decades and half centuries."¹⁴ His bitterness over the treatment from his French parents never left him, nor did the memory of the kindness and love given him by his great-grandmother.

Suddenly word came that he must go to school. Too soon, he was torn away from his loving great-grandmother and taken to the Collège d'Harcourt in Paris. Sixty years later, Talleyrand wrote: "On taking leave of my great-grandmother I shed tears and so did she, so great was her affection for me. I had been painfully impressed by having been so hurriedly dispatched to college without having been previously taken to my father and mother. I was eight years old, and the eyes of my parents had not yet rested on me."¹⁵

A younger brother, Archambaud Joseph, had been born on September 1, 1762. The parents now had a son and heir who could inherit the title. They seem to have tried to fulfill their obligation to the child from America by educating him for a career in the church.

While at the Collège d'Harcourt Charles Maurice got smallpox. He was again taken to the Rue Saint Jacques to be nursed. He comments in the *Memoirs*: "I was then twelve years old; during the time of my convalescence the peculiarity of my position struck me. My heart was full at the little interest aroused by my illness, the fact of my having been sent to college without having seen my parents, and other grievous recollections."¹⁶

When he was fifteen, he was sent to visit his uncle Alexandre de Talleyrand, who was archbishop of Rheims. The decision that he was to be educated to serve the church was reinforced. He entered the seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris. "My parents did not send for me before I left. I repeat this here and hope never to think of it again. I am, perhaps, the only man of distinguished birth and belonging to a numerous and esteemed family who did not, for one week in his life, enjoy the sweetness of being under his father's roof."¹⁷ Although French parents of that time (aristocratic ones, at least) paid very little attention

to their children, one cannot help but observe that his two younger brothers, Archambaud and a third son, Boson, born in 1764, were raised at home and that his friends at the college went home for vacations. He did not.

He spent his days at Saint Sulpice in the library, reading everything. "A good library affords true comfort to all the dispositions of the soul."¹⁸ He refused to give in to his despondency. "If injustice, whilst developing our faculties, has not embittered our hearts too much, we derive comfort from lofty thoughts and noble impulses and feel stronger in confronting life's trials."¹⁹ One definition of genius says it lights its own fire.

Talleyrand completed his preparation for a career in the church and was ordained in 1775 at age 21. He felt it a sacrifice of sincerity to become a priest; it was not what he wished to be. He was very depressed; his closest friend, M. Choisel, was concerned about him. No member of his family attended the ceremony of his formal entry into the consecrated ranks of the clergy on December 18, 1779.

Talleyrand's Early Career

Talleyrand's name had been passed over three times when bishoprics became available. In 1788, his father lay dying. For the first time, he sent for Charles Maurice. Bernard says, "The two talked softly and briefly," and speculates, "It may be, as some whispered, that the Count, on his deathbed had implored his son to reform his life and give up his dissolute friends. Or it may be, as others said, that he begged his son's forgiveness for the wrong he had done him in forcing him into a life for which, as had by now become all too obvious, he was in no way suited. Then, perhaps out of conviction, perhaps out of guilt, the Count de Périgord made a promise to his son, Charles Maurice Talleyrand: he would speak to the King about the Bishopric of Autun. Two days before the Count's death, King Louis XVI signed the document nominating Talleyrand to Autun."²⁰ His mother, who had been born in Autun, tried to get the King to reconsider his decision but he would not renege on his promise to a dying man. The ceremony of consecration was held on January 16, 1789. Not a single family member was in attendance.

What did the dying father and the son talk about? Bernard has speculated; so may we. Perhaps Charles Daniel told Charles Maurice the true story of his origins: that he was born in America, the illegitimate son of Captain Baillie Talleyrand, not his "parents" own child; that when Alexandre François-Jacques died, they decided to send for the child in America. The discovery, when he arrived, that he was lame and could not serve France in the military, as the eldest sons traditionally had and as their first born, Alexandre François-Jacques, would have had he lived, made them wonder what to do with Charles Maurice.

Then the invitation came to send him to Chalais. They could rationalize, with relief, that this child had a lot to learn in order to fit into their socially distinguished family.

When another son, Archambaud, was born in 1762, they realized they had a successor for the title. Or his father may have told Charles Maurice that his mother, who had grown up in Autun, opposed the appointment because of his dissolute life, which included a long-standing affair that had resulted in a son (who, in fact, was to become one of Napoleon's generals). Whatever they talked about, Charles Maurice Talleyrand became reconciled to the fact that his path in the church was inevitable.

Memoirs and Mysteries

Talleyrand had specified that his *Memoirs* were not to be published until thirty years after his death and gave his heirs the right to postpone this even longer. When the *Memoirs* finally appeared in 1891, they were read eagerly in the hope that they would shed light on the mystery of Talleyrand's early life and on other questions. The autobiography was a disappointment to those seeking answers about his personal life, especially the very early years, because of the omissions. Some of the omissions seem to say a great deal. Talleyrand opens with the simple statement: "I was born in 1754; my parents had a very small fortune."²¹ He does not say where he was born or on what date, nor does he name his parents. Readers who would like to believe the legend find here another nugget to add to the feelings of abandonment and lack of love he endured from his parents.

Talleyrand's marriage to Catherine Grand on September 10, 1802, is another omission from the *Memoirs*. Napoleon had insisted on it. The church did not allow it: Talleyrand was a priest, and priests were not allowed to marry. It was a civil service. His two younger brothers were present, but his French mother was not. On the marriage contract which Talleyrand signed, he declared himself to be "le Fils de Charles Gabriel Talleyrand de Périgord" and said that his mother was dead. Was he alluding to his American mother? Anna Dodd writes: "In my desire to clear up, if possible, the mystery of the supposed death of Mme. de Talleyrand, I wrote to one of the most distinguished descendants of the family now living in Paris to ask if any documents could be given me which would throw light on the actual facts recorded in the copy of the Talleyrand marriage register. The answer given was that there were 'no authentic documents wither to refute or sustain the statement made therein.'²² Dodd does not comment directly on his naming Charles Gabriel (rather than Charles Daniel Talleyrand) as his father on the document.

In *The Lives of Talleyrand* Brinton says: "The Talleyrands were poor in

1754 and poor partly, at any rate, because they were none too clever." On the next page Brinton adds, "What genes may have combined themselves into Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord neither we, nor anyone else, can ever know."²³ Louise Dickinson Rich makes a similar reference when she asks, "Is it possible to credit the wiliness for which he is particularly famous to his mother's down-to-earth, crafty peasant stock?"²⁴

No account of Talleyrand's life seems to question that he was indeed a Talleyrand. In an article in *Frazier's Magazine*, which was read at the Bangor Historical Society in 1887 and based on information obtained from the Hon. Edward Robbins, speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and commissioner of the Land Office, and M. Colmache, Talleyrand's secretary, it is stated: "We may conclude that Talleyrand was the natural son of Captain Baillie Talleyrand, not the son of the elder brother, the Count, and that he was born at Mount Desert in America."²⁵ If one accepts the legend that his mother was the beautiful Delphine, the fisherman's daughter and not a member of the inbred French aristocracy, her genes could have played a part in producing such an exceptional genius. Geneticists recognize that there will be a much greater difference between the genes of unrelated individuals than between the genes of closely related individuals. Thus in such a marriage there may be a better chance for hybrid vigor!²⁶

After the French Revolution, Talleyrand sought refuge in England and then emigrated to the United States. On May 19, 1794, he signed an oath of allegiance to the United States and to Pennsylvania. Sawtelle tells of his search for this document. He finally found the U.S. Government copy, with authentic signatures of M. Clarkson, mayor of Philadelphia, and Charles Maurice Talleyrand, among the Pickering papers in the Massachusetts Historical Society. A photostatic copy of the document, shown at a meeting of the Bangor Historical Society on April 29, 1924, and appearing in Sawtelle's article, begins: "I, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Perigord, son of Joseph Daniel de Talleyrand."²⁷ Yet all the biographies and the footnotes in the *Memoirs* state that he was the son of Charles Daniel Talleyrand. Sawtelle never mentioned this discrepancy. Could he have failed to notice it?

What was his father's name? Charles Maurice himself wrote it as "Joseph Daniel" on his pledge of allegiance to the United States and as "Charles Gabriel" on his marriage license; historians call him the son of Charles Daniel. His French mother's father was Joseph de Damas. As we have already noted, Talleyrand's secretary, M. Colmache, concluded that he was born in America and that Baillie Talleyrand was his father.

When Talleyrand arrived in Philadelphia, he hoped that, with Alexander Hamilton's help, he could arrange a meeting with President Washington. He

was refused, because Joseph Fauchet, who was the minister plenipotentiary of France in the United States, declared that as an emigré Talleyrand must be refused an audience.²⁸ He decided to “take his chances in America not on the turn of a card, but on the availability of vast tracts of virgin land and the willingness of Europeans, especially Frenchmen, to invest in that land.”²⁹ Talleyrand wrote Madame de Staël, a good friend in France, “If you know people who have any desire to invest in the purchase of farms here, I would willingly attend to their affairs.”³⁰

He and Beaumetz, a fellow emigré, had, in the meantime, made an effort to purchase some undeveloped land in the state of Maine from Henry Knox. This involved going to Boston to see the Hon. Edward Robbins, speaker of the House of Representatives in Massachusetts and Commissioner of the Land Office, who also had charge of the land in Maine. Talleyrand intended to divide the acreage into smaller lots to provide land at low cost for indigent emigrés and for his friends. On his next trip to Maine, Mr. Robbins was surprised to encounter Talleyrand, who was obviously not pleased to be seen and recognized, on Mount Desert Island. An old fisherman told Robbins that something about the silent, moody crippled traveler brought to mind the little lame French boy who had lived among them.³¹

There is a sense of yearning in one entry in the *Memoirs*: “I must be pardoned for dwelling at some length on America. I was so lonely when there, that many reflections, which would otherwise have found their vent in conversation, now come rushing to my pen.”³² Were also memories of a four year old stirring? Was he perhaps recalling the uncomplicated life of a child growing up on our Maine island?

Talleyrand's Influence

For half a century, Talleyrand was the leading statesman in Europe. In his introduction to the English translation of the *Memoirs*, the Hon. Whitelaw Reid wrote, “His career was--and remains--unparalleled in modern Europe for length and variety of distinguished service.” He served eight masters of France and was a dominant figure in the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and 1815, diplomatically winning peace terms for France. He died on May 17, 1838, “with his king at his bedside and the blessing of the Cardinal of Paris,”³³ even though he had been excommunicated from the church in 1791 after being forced to resign as bishop of Autun. He had been an emigré; in spite of that, after his return he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs on July 18, 1797.

It was Talleyrand who, in 1803, offered the Louisiana Purchase to Robert Livingston, the American Minister in Paris, for \$15,000,000. This added 875,000

square miles to the United States and protected the outlet of the Mississippi.³⁴ Talleyrand admired the vast expanses of land in America but thought Americans were not making sufficient use of it. "It is agriculture that clearly points out to us the indispensable correlation existing between the duties and rights of men," he said, "by binding the tiller of the soil to his field, it binds men to their country."³⁵ Talleyrand believed that, "A new nation,...without going through the slow process of civilization,...stands in need of the teachings of the grand school of nature, for agriculture is the basis on which all states are founded."³⁶

Whatever the truth of Talleyrand's birth, his years in America and friendships with Americans were an important part of his life. The legend of Talleyrand's birth on Mount Desert is told again by Dorothy Simpson. It finishes "with a poetic touch; the visit paid by the great French statesman--perhaps the year he came over with Colonel Swann--to Southwest Harbor, now a Yankee town, to kneel at his mother's overgrown grave."³⁷

I like to think Talleyrand felt the pull, the yearning to return to Mount Desert that we all feel, when we are away too long. I like to think he heard the fisherman say "he puts me in mind of the little lame French boy." At low tide, a cold drink from the bubbling Jesuit Spring never fails to awaken in me the romance of the legend of Talleyrand. It is part of our history, as are the tales of the coming of the Norsemen, Champlain's discovery, the Wreck of the Grand Design, and the Jesuit settlement at Fernald Point.

As historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has written, "The function of the historian is to make coherent a multitude of past acts and events, and this coherence alone defines historical truth."³⁸

Notes

¹ *Funk & Wagnall Encyclopedia*, 1958. Chosen for its conciseness.

² Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, *Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville* (Auburn, Maine: Merrill & Webber, 1938), 327-334.

³ Such as Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Story of Mount Desert Island* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 28, and Richard Waldren Hale, *The Story of Bar Harbor* (New York: Washburn, Inc., 1949), 67-68.

⁴ William Otis Sawtelle, "The Island of Mount Desert," *Sprague's Journal* 11, no. 3 (1923): 131-2.

⁵ Louis Madelin, *Talleyrand: A Vivid Biography of the Amoral, Unscrupulous and Fascinating French Statesman*, trans. Rosalie Feltenstein (New York: Roy Publishers, 1948).

⁶ Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, *Memoirs of the Prince de Talleyrand*, ed. the Duc de Broglie, trans. Raphaël Ledos de Beaufort, vol. 1 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1891.)

⁷ Sir Henry Lytton Bulwar, *Historical Characters* (Macmillan, 1900), 5. Written in 1869.

- ⁸ Anna Dodd, *The Training of a Statesman* (New York: Putnam, 1927), 5.
- ⁹ J.F. Bernard, *Talleyrand* (New York: Putnam, 1973), 19. Bernard says he fell off a chest and dislocated his foot at age 4. "Even this, however, is somewhat uncertain."
- ¹⁰ Dodd, 7.
- ¹¹ Talleyrand, 5,6.
- ¹² Crane Brinton, *The Lives of Talleyrand* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936), 36.
- ¹³ Talleyrand, 6.
- ¹⁴ Bernard, 24.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15, 16.
- ²⁰ Bernard, 58, 59.
- ²¹ Talleyrand, 1.
- ²² Dodd, 429.
- ²³ Brinton, 34
- ²⁴ Louise Dickinson Rich, *State of Maine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 95.
- ²⁵ Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *Frazier's Magazine* (1854; reprint, Magazine of Bangor Historical Society, 3, no. 11, July 1887). Material obtained by Griswold in an interview with the Hon. Edward Robbins, Speaker of Mass. House of Representatives, 1793-1802, and Commissioner of the Land Office. The article was also reprinted by Benjamin De Costa in 1871 and by Joseph Williamson in 1887.
- ²⁶ Earl Green, interview by Gladys Butler. Green was an administrator of Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor for many years.
- ²⁷ William Otis Sawtelle, "Talleyrand's Oath of Allegiance," *Sprague's Journal* 12, no. 3 (1924), 147.
- ²⁸ Bernard, 152.
- ²⁹ Bernard, 155.
- ³⁰ Bernard, 156.
- ³¹ Griswold.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 181.
- ³³ Hon. Whitelaw Reid., introduction to *Memoirs of the Prince de Talleyrand*, by Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, vol. 1 (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1891), viii, xi.
- ³⁴ *World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, 4618.
- ³⁵ Talleyrand, 178.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Dorothy Simpson, "The Maine Islands," in *Story and Legend* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1960), 195.
- ³⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Supposing History is a Woman?" in *American Scholar* 53, no. 4 (1984), 498.