Cistercian, and La Trappe formed no exception to the general decay. Indeed, its geographical position in a district fiercely contested during the long war between France and England hastened its declension, for it was several times taken and pillaged, while the members of the community, at last compelled to break up and disperse, returned at the close of the war with their traditions interrupted, their discipline relaxed, and their moral tone deteriorated. Nor was this the worst. The introduction of the “commendam” system into the French Church, whereby secular ecclesiastics were empowered to hold monastic benefices without residence or conformity to the rule of the society in which they ranked as heads, wrought yet further mischief ; and, though the Trappists at first endeavoured to resist Jean du Bellay, the celebrated bishop of Paris (afterwards cardinal-bishop of Ostia), whom Francis I. nominated in 1526 as abbot commend­atory, and were upheld by the pope in continuing to elect their own abbots, yet their efforts were fruitless, and Du Bellay was succeeded by a series of titular abbots, under whose nominal rule the estates of the abbey were impov­erished, the buildings suffered to fall into nearly total ruin, and the conduct of the monks became a public scandal. In fact, the community was broken up, the dismantled monastic buildings were abandoned to a few domestics and their families, and the scattered Trappists seldom reas­sembled save for hunting parties and similar amusements. Such was the condition of things when a reformer arose in the person of one of those very abbots commendatory who had been the ruin of the institute.

Armand Jean Bouthillier de Rancé, second son of Denis Bouthillier de Rancé and Charlotte Joly his wife, was born in Paris on January 9, 1626. By his father’s side he was sprung from a patrician family of Breton origin long settled in Normandy ; by his mother’s he was con­nected with powerful members of the official hierarchy. His near kindred were wealthy, titled, and highly placed in the magistracy, the army, and the dignities of the church ; while the fact that Cardinal Richelieu was one of his sponsors and gave him his own fore-names sufficiently attests the political influence just then at their disposal. The child showed early tokens of considerable abilities, and was intrusted by his father to accomplished tutors, under whom he made rapid progress. He was originally intended to enter the order of the Knights of Malta, but the death of his elder brother in 1637, after a long illness, changed his father’s plans, and the child (who had been tonsured in 1635 by way of precaution against such a contingency) was at once put in possession of the various benefices which had been secured for his elder *; so* that, while still under eleven years of age, he was canon of Notre Dame de Paris, abbot of La Trappe, of Notre Dame du Val, and of St Symphorian of Beauvais, and prior of Boulogne, near Chambord, and of St Clementin, in Poitou. In 1642 he was sent to the Collége d’Harcourt, where he began the usual course of philosophy, but addicted himself almost at once to the then popular study of judicial astro­logy, which he soon forsook for the cognate delusion of alchemy. Nevertheless, he distinguished himself in the more accredited studies of the college, and graduated as M.A. in 1644. It was then usual for Parisian students in theology to attend the course of lectures delivered at the Sorbonne, but De Rancé preferred to return home and pursue his theological studies under private instruction. He was ordained deacon in 1648, and, being in the hey­day of youth, with high spirits and popular manners, fell readily into the dissipations of the time, leading a very irregular life, yet not so as to forfeit the goodwill of even his stricter acquaintance. He was ordained priest in 1651, but made no alteration in his habits, and yet so far kept up his studies that, when examined in 1652 for his licence as bachelor in theology, he came out at the head of the candidates, while the famous Bossuet ranked only as third. In 1653 he lost his father, who bequeathed property to him which doubled his already large income, and in 1654 he graduated as doctor of divinity, when his uncle, the archbishop of Tours, made him one of his archdeacons, hinting that this preferment would be merely the prelim­inary of a mitre. He never so much as pretended to discharge the duties of his new office, but spent his time amusing himself at his chateau of Véretz ; in despite of which his uncle nominated him as deputy from the diocese of Tours to the general assembly of the French clergy convoked by the king in 1655 to discuss the Jansenist controversy. The chief matter of interest in this connexion is that he was one of the minority of 65 doctors of the Sorbonne who refused to vote, with the majority of 127, a censure upon the Jansenist leader Arnauld, though he took part later against that school. The sudden death of the duchess of Rohan-Montbazon, with whom he was intimate, and whose relations with him were the subject of much hostile comment, is said to have been the first great shock which began the process of change in his views of life and duty. A story, which was first given currency in an anonymous account of his con­version published at Cologne in 1668, much heightens this by alleging that De Rancé arrived at the duchess’s house unaware of her death, and went direct to her apartment without being warned by the servants, only to find her head lying apart from her decapitated body, having been cut off because the coffin was too short and there was no time to procure another. The truth of this story (itself containing several improbable incidents) was promptly denied by Maupeou, the earliest of De Rancé’s biogra­phers, and has been rejected by Bayle and St Simon, though accepted by La Harpe and Voltaire. What is cer­tain is that the alteration in his habits nearly synchronizes with the death of Madame de Montbazon, and that the years 1657, 1658, and 1659 were mainly spent in solitary studies or in visits to the monasteries of which he was titular head, varied by conferences with eminent ecclesi­astics whose advice he sought, while in 1660 the death of the duke of Orleans, whose chief almoner he was, appears to have given the final direction to his thoughts, though it was not for some years that he carried out his new plans to the full. His first resolution was to sell his patrimony and resign his benefices, and in 1662 he actually sold his chateau of Véretz, made over two man­sions in Paris to the hôtel-dieu, and obtained permission to transfer all his abbeys except Boulogne and La Trappe to resident heads chosen by himself. His canonry of Notre Dame had been resigned so far back as 1653 because of some difficulty about residence. After making provision for family claims, and retaining a comparatively small sum for the repair of Boulogne and La Trappe, he distributed the remainder of his property to the poor. In 1662 he visited La Trappe, which he found in a deplorable condi­tion, and the few resident monks so indisposed to listen to his projects of reform that they threatened to murder him and throw his body into the abbey ponds. In his turn he threatened them with the king’s direct interfer­ence, and such was the terror of Louis XIV.’s name that they at once submitted, and consented to retire upon the payment of a moderate pension ; whereupon De Rancé filled their places in 1663 with monks of the strict Cistercian observance, and carefully repaired the monastic buildings there and at Boulogne. In that same year he finally decided to enter the monastic life, and began his noviciate at the Cistercian abbey of Perseigne in Maine, assuming, on his profession in 1664, the actual headship