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LIFE OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Frances Forbes

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Содержание

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"Blessed is he that understandeth concerning the needy and the poor: the Lord will deliver him in the evil day." – Psalm 40:2

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Wherefore he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the contrite of heart, to preach deliverance to the captives, and sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of reward." – Luke 4:18-19

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"Extend mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw His mercy from us?" – St. Vincent de Paul

"Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God. And every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God: for God is charity." – 1 John 4:7-8

Chapter 1 A PEASANT'S SON

A MONOTONOUS line of sand hills and the sea; a vast barren land stretching away in wave-like undulations far as eye can reach; marsh and heath and sand, sand and heath and marsh; here and there a stretch of scant coarse grass, a mass of waving reeds, a patch of golden-brown fern – the Landes.

It was through this desolate country in France that a little peasant boy whose name was destined to become famous in the annals of his country led his father's sheep, that they might crop the scanty pasture. Vincent was a homely little boy, but he had the soul of a knight-errant, and the grace of God shone from eyes that were never to lose their merry gleam even in extreme old age.

He was intelligent, too, so intelligent that the neighbors said that Jean de Paul was a fool to set such a boy to tend sheep when he had three other sons who would never be good for anything else. There was a family in the neighborhood, they reminded him, who had had a bright boy like Vincent, and had put him to school – with what result? Why, he had taken Orders and got a benefice, and was able to support his parents now that they were getting old, besides helping his brothers to get on in the world. It was well worthwhile pinching a little for such a result as that.

Jean de Paul listened and drank in their arguments. It would be a fine thing to have a son a priest; perhaps, with luck, even a Bishop – the family fortunes would be made forever.

With a good deal of difficulty the necessary money was scraped together, and Vincent was sent to the Franciscans' school at Dax, the nearest town. There the boy made such good use of his time that four years later, when he was only sixteen, he was engaged as tutor to the children of M. de Commet, a lawyer, who had taken a fancy to the clever, hardworking young scholar. At M. de Commet's suggestion, Vincent began to study for the priesthood, while continuing the education of his young charges to the satisfaction of everybody concerned.

Five years later he took minor Orders and, feeling the need of further theological studies, set his heart on a university training and a degree. But life at a university costs money, however thrifty one may be, and although Jean de Paul sold a yoke of oxen to start his son on his career at Toulouse, at the end of a year Vincent was in difficulties. The only chance for a poor student like himself was a tutorship during the summer vacation, and here Vincent was lucky. The nobleman who engaged him was so delighted with the results that, when the vacation was over, he insisted on the young tutor taking his pupils back with him to Toulouse. There, while they attended the college, Vincent continued to direct their studies, with such success that several other noblemen confided their sons to him, and he was soon at the head of a small school.

To carry on such an establishment and to devote oneself to study at the same time was not the easiest of tasks; but Vincent was a hard and conscientious worker, and he seems to have had,

even then, a strange gift of influencing others for good. For seven years he continued this double task with thorough success, completed his course of theology, took his degree, and was ordained priest in the opening years of that seventeenth century which was to be so full of consequences both for France and for himself.

Up to this time there had been nothing to distinguish Vincent from any other young student of his day. Those who knew him well respected him and loved him, and that was all. But with the priesthood came a change. From thenceforward he was to strike out a definite line of his own – a line that set him apart from the men of his time and faintly foreshadowed the Vincent of later days.

The first Mass of a newly ordained priest was usually celebrated with a certain amount of pomp and ceremony. If a cleric wanted to obtain a good living it was well to let people know that he was eligible for it; humility was not a fashionable virtue. People were therefore not a little astonished when Vincent, flatly refusing to allow any outsiders to be present, said his first Mass in a lonely little chapel in a wood near Bajet, beloved by him on account of its solitude and silence. There, entirely alone save for the acolyte and server required by the rubrics, and trembling at the thought of his own unworthiness, the newly made priest, celebrating the great Sacrifice for the first time, offered himself for life and death to be the faithful servant of his Lord. So high were his ideals of what the priestly life should

be that in his saintly old age he would often say that, were he not already a priest, he would never dare to become one.

Vincent's old friend and patron, M. de Commet, was eager to do a good turn to the young cleric. He had plenty of influence and succeeded in getting him named to the rectorship of the important parish of Thil, close to the town of Dax. This was a piece of good fortune which many would have envied; but it came to Vincent's ears that there was another claimant, who declared that the benefice had been promised to him in Rome. Rather than contest the matter in the law courts Vincent gave up the rectorship and went back to Toulouse, where he continued to teach and to study.

Some years later he was called suddenly to Bordeaux on business, and while there heard that an old lady of his acquaintance had left him all her property. This was welcome news, for Vincent was sadly in need of money, his journey to Bordeaux having cost more than he was able to pay.

On returning to Toulouse, however, he found that the prospect was not so bright as he had been led to expect. The chief part of his inheritance consisted of a debt of four or five hundred crowns owed to the old lady by a scoundrel who, as soon as he heard of her death, made off to Marseilles, thinking to escape without paying. He was enjoying life and congratulating himself on his cleverness when Vincent, to whom the sum was a little fortune, and who had determined to pursue his debtor, suddenly appeared on the scene. The thief was let off on the payment of three

hundred crowns, and Vincent, thinking that he had made not too bad a bargain, was preparing to return to Toulouse by road, the usual mode of traveling in those days, when a friend suggested that to go by sea was not only cheaper, but more agreeable. It was summer weather; the journey could be accomplished in one day; the sea was smooth; everything seemed favorable; the two friends set out together.

A sea voyage in the seventeenth century was by no means like a sea voyage of the present day. There were no steamers, and vessels depended on a favorable wind or on hard rowing. The Mediterranean was infested with Turkish pirates, who robbed and plundered to the very coasts of France and Italy, carrying off the crews of captured vessels to prison or slavery.

The day that the two friends had chosen for their journey was that of the great fair of Beaucaire, which was famous throughout Christendom. Ships were sailing backwards and forwards along the coast with cargoes of rich goods or the money for which they had been sold, and the Turkish pirates were on the lookout.

The boat in which Vincent was sailing was coasting along the Gulf of Lyons when the sailors became aware that they were being pursued by three Turkish brigantines. In vain they crowded on all sail; escape was impossible. After a sharp fight, in which all the men on Vincent's ship were either killed or wounded – Vincent himself receiving an arrow wound the effects of which remained with him for life – the French ship was captured.

But the Turks had not come off unscathed, and so enraged

were they at their losses that their first action on boarding the French vessel was to hack its unfortunate pilot into a thousand pieces. Having thus relieved their feelings, they put their prisoners in chains. But then, fearing lest the prisoners die of loss of blood and so cheat them of the money for which they meant to sell them, they bound up their wounds and went on their way of destruction and pillage. After four or five days of piracy on the high seas, they started, laden with plunder, for the coast of Barbary, noted throughout the world at that time as a stronghold of sea robbers and thieves.

Chapter 2 SLAVERY

THE pirates were bound for the port of Tunis, the largest city of Barbary. But the sight of the glittering white town with its background of mountains, set in the gorgeous coloring of the African landscape, brought no gleam of joy or comfort to the sad hearts of the prisoners. Before them lay a life of slavery which might be worse than death; there was small prospect that they would ever see their native land again.

To one faint hope, however, they clung desperately, as a drowning man clings to a straw. There was a French consul in Tunis whose business it was to look after the trade interests of his country, and it was just possible that he might use his influence to set them free.

The hope was short-lived. The pirates, expecting to make a good deal of money out of their prisoners, were equally aware of this fact, and their first act on landing was to post a notice that the captives they had for sale were Spaniards. Nothing was left to Vincent and his companions, who did not know a word of the language of the country, but to endure their cruel fate.

The Turks, having stripped their prisoners and clothed them in a kind of rough uniform, fastened chains round their necks and marched them through the town to the marketplace, where they were exhibited for sale much as cattle are at the present day. They were carefully inspected by the dealers, who looked

at their teeth, felt their muscles, made them run and walk – with loads and without – to satisfy themselves that they were in good condition, and finally selected their victims. Vincent was bought by a fisherman who, finding that his new slave got hopelessly ill whenever they put out to sea, repented of his bargain and sold him to an alchemist.

In the West, as well as in the East, there were still men who believed in the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life. By means of the still undiscovered Stone they hoped to change base metals into gold, while the equally undiscovered Elixir was to prolong life indefinitely, and to make old people young.

Vincent's master was an enthusiast in his profession and kept ten or fifteen furnaces always burning in which to conduct his experiments. His slave, whose business it was to keep them alight, was kindly treated; the old man soon grew very fond of him and would harangue him by the hour on the subject of metals and essences. His great desire was that Vincent should become a Mohammedan like himself, a desire which, needless to say, remained unfulfilled, in spite of the large sums of money he promised if his slave would only oblige him in this matter.

The old alchemist, however, had a certain reputation in his own country. Having been sent for one day to the Sultan's Court, he died on the way, leaving his slave to his nephew, who lost no time in getting rid of him.

Vincent's next master was a Frenchman who had apostatized and was living as a Mohammedan on his farm in the mountains.

This man had three wives, who were very kind to the poor captive – especially one of them, who, although herself a Mohammedan, was to be the cause of her husband's conversion and Vincent's release. She would go out to the fields where the Christian slave was working and bid him tell her about his country and his religion. His answers seemed to impress her greatly, and one day she asked him to sing her one of the hymns they sang in France in praise of their God.

The request brought tears to Vincent's eyes. He thought of the Israelites captive in Babylon, and of their answer to a similar demand. With an aching heart he intoned the psalm, "By the waters of Babylon," while the woman, strangely impressed by the plaintive chant, listened attentively and, when he had ended, begged for more.

The *Salve Regina* followed, and other songs of praise, after which she went home silent and thoughtful. That night she spoke to her husband. "I cannot understand," she said, "why you have given up a religion which is so good and holy. Your Christian slave has been telling me of your Faith and of your God, and has sung songs in His praise. My heart was so full of joy while he sang that I do not believe I shall be so happy even in the paradise of my fathers." Her husband, whose conscience was not quite dead within him, listened silent and abashed. "Ah," she continued, "there is something wonderful in that religion!"

The woman's words bore fruit. All day long, as her husband went about his business, the remembrance of his lost Faith was

tugging at his heartstrings. Catching sight of Vincent digging in the fields, he went to him and bade him take courage. "At the first opportunity," he said, "I will escape with you to France."

It was nine long months before that opportunity came, for the Frenchman was in the Sultan's service and was not able to leave the country. At last, however, the two men, escaping together in a small boat, succeeded in reaching Avignon, and Vincent was free once more.

Cardinal Montorio, the Pope's legate, was deeply interested in the two fugitives, and a few days later reconciled the apostate, now deeply repentant, to the Church. The Cardinal, who shortly afterwards returned to Rome, took Vincent with him, showing him great kindness and introducing him to several people of importance. The opinion they formed of him is shown by the fact that he was chosen not long after to go on a secret mission to the court of Henry IV, King of France.

An interview – or rather several interviews – with a reigning monarch would have been considered in those days as a first-rate chance for anyone who had a spark of ambition. Nothing would have been easier than to put in a plea for a benefice or a bishopric; but Vincent, who was both humble and unselfish, had no thought of his own advancement. His only desire was to get his business over and to leave the Court as quickly as possible.

The question of how he was to live remaining still unanswered, he took a room in a house near one of the largest hospitals in Paris and devoted himself to the service of the sick and dying. But even

the rent of the little room was more than he could afford to pay, and he was glad to share it with a companion. This was a judge from his own part of the country who was in Paris on account of a lawsuit and who, not being overburdened with money, offered to share the lodging and the rent.

It was at this time that Vincent met Father – afterwards Cardinal – de Bérulle, one of the most holy and learned priests of his time, who was occupied at that moment in founding the French Congregation of the Oratory, destined to do such good work for the clergy of France. De Bérulle was quick to recognize holiness and merit, and he and Vincent soon became fast friends.

But it did not seem to be God's will that our hero should prosper in Paris; he fell ill, and one day while he was lying in bed waiting for some medicine which had been ordered, his companion went out, leaving the cupboard in which he kept his money unlocked. The chemist's assistant, arriving shortly afterwards with the medicine and opening the cupboard to get a glass for the patient, caught sight of the purse, slipped it into his pocket, and made off.

No sooner had the judge returned than he went to the cupboard and discovered the theft. Turning furiously on the sick man, he accused him of having stolen his property and overwhelmed him with insults and abuse. Vincent, unmoved by his threats, only answered gently that he had seen nothing of the money and did not know what had become of it; but his companion, refusing to listen to reason, rushed out and accused

him to the police. This led to nothing, as neither witness nor proof could be brought forward by the judge, who, furious at the failure of his accusation, went about Paris denouncing Vincent as a thief. So determined was he to ruin the poor priest whose room he had shared that he obtained an introduction to Father de Bérulle for the express purpose of making Vincent's guilt known to him. As for the latter, he bore the affront in silence, making no attempt to justify himself beyond his first declaration that he was innocent. "God knows the truth," he would reply to all accusations.

The true thief was only discovered six months later. The chemist's assistant had fallen ill and was lying at the point of death at a hospital, when, repenting of his crime, he sent to implore forgiveness of the man he had robbed. The judge, stricken with remorse, wrote at once to Vincent, offering to come and ask his pardon on his knees for the wrong he had done him.

Vincent was then living at the Oratory with Father de Bérulle, who had never doubted his innocence. He hastened to assure his old roommate that he desired no such apology and begged him to say no more about the matter. Such was his treatment of the man who had done him so grievous an injury.

It was during these years that Vincent de Paul had another strange experience in which he showed heroic courage and steadfastness. He made the acquaintance of a learned doctor of the Sorbonne who was so tormented with doubts against the Faith that his reason was in danger. This man confided his distress to

Vincent, who explained to him that a temptation to doubt does not constitute unbelief, and that as long as his will remained firm he was safe. It happens, however, that such temptations often cloud the reason, and Vincent's labors to restore the man's peace of mind were in vain.

The priest, deeply moved at the sight of a soul in such danger, besought God for help, offering himself to bear the temptation in the doctor's place. It was the inspiration of a saint, and the prayer was granted. The man was instantly delivered from his doubts, which took possession of Vincent himself. The trial was long and painful. For several years this humble and fervent soul endured the agony of an incessant temptation to unbelief. But Vincent knew how to resist this most subtle snare of the Evil One, and, although the anguish was continual, his will never wavered.

Copying out the *Credo* on a small sheet of parchment, he placed it over his heart, and his only answer to the fearful doubts that harassed him was to lay his hand upon it as he made his act of Faith. To prevent himself from dwelling on such thoughts, he devoted himself more than ever to works of charity, spending himself in the service of the sick and poor and comforting others when he himself was often in greater need of comfort.

One day when the temptation was almost more than he could bear and he felt himself on the point of yielding, he made a vow to consecrate himself to Jesus Christ in the person of His poor. As he made the promise the temptation vanished, and forever. His faith henceforward was a faith that had been tried and had

conquered; strong and firm as such a faith must be, it held him ready for all that God might send.

Chapter 3 A GREAT HOUSEHOLD

VINCENT remained two years in the house of Father de Bérulle, in the hope of obtaining permanent work. The administration of a poor country parish was, he maintained, the only thing he was fit for, but de Bérulle thought otherwise. "This humble priest," he predicted one day to a friend, "will render great service to the Church and will work much for God's glory."

St. Francis de Sales, who made Vincent's acquaintance while he was with de Bérulle, was of the same opinion. "He will be the holiest priest of his time," he said one day as he watched him. As for Vincent, he was completely won by the gentle serenity of St. Francis and took him as model in his relations with others. "I am by nature a country clod," he would say in after years, "and if I had not met the Bishop of Geneva, I should have remained a bundle of thorns all my life."

At last Vincent's desire seemed about to be fulfilled. A friend of de Bérulle's, curé of the country parish of Clichy, near Paris, announced his intention of entering the Oratory, and at de Bérulle's request chose Vincent de Paul as his successor. Here, amidst his beloved poor, Vincent was completely happy. In him the sick and the infirm found a friend such as they had never dreamed of and any son of poor parents who showed a vocation for the priesthood was taken into the presbytery and taught by Vincent himself. The parish church, which was in great disrepair,

was rebuilt; old, standing quarrels were made up; men who had not been to the Sacraments for years came back to God. Such was the influence of the Curé of Clichy that priests from the neighboring parishes came to learn the secret of his success and to ask his advice.

Vincent was looking forward to a life spent in earnest work among his people when a summons from Father de Bérulle recalled him suddenly to Paris. Nothing less than the resignation of his beloved Clichy was now asked of him by this friend to whom he owed so much. One of the greatest noblemen of France, Messire de Gondi, Count of Joigny and General of the King's Galleys, was in need of a tutor for his children and had commissioned Father de Bérulle to find him what he wanted. De Bérulle decided at once that Vincent de Paul was the man for the position and that, as he was evidently destined to do great work for God, it would be to his advantage to have powerful and influential friends.

Although the prospect of such a post filled the humble parish priest with consternation, he owed too much to de Bérulle to refuse. Setting out from Clichy with his worldly goods on a hand-barrow, he arrived at the Oratory, from whence he was to proceed to his new abode.

The house of Messire de Gondi was one of the most magnificent in Paris. The Count, one of the bravest and handsomest men of his day, was in high favor at Court; while his wife, at a time when the lives of most of the great ladies of the

Court were anything but edifying, was remarkable for her fervor and piety. The de Gondi children, unfortunately, did not take after their parents, and the two boys whose education Vincent was to undertake and whose character he was to form were described by their aunt as "regular little demons." The youngest of the family, the famous, or rather infamous, Cardinal de Retz, was not yet born, but Vincent's hands were sufficiently full without him. "I should like my children to be saints rather than great noblemen," said Madame de Gondi when she presented the boys to their tutor, but the prospect seemed remote enough. The violent temper and obstinacy of his charges were a great trial to Vincent, who used to say in later life that they had taught him, cross-grained as he was by nature, how to be gentle and patient.

The position of a man of low birth as tutor in that princely household was not without its difficulties. Vincent was a dependent; but there was a quiet dignity about him which forbade liberties. With the servants, and there were many of every grade, he was always cordial and polite, losing no chance of winning their confidence, that he might influence them for good. His duties over, he would retire to his own room, refusing, unless especially sent for, to mix with the great people who frequented the house.

Madame de Gondi, with a woman's intuition, was the first to realize the sanctity of her sons' tutor and resolved to put herself under his direction. Knowing enough of his humility to be certain that he would refuse such a request, she applied to Father de

Bérulle to use his influence in the matter, and thus obtained her desire. At Vincent's suggestion she soon afterwards undertook certain works of charity, which were destined to be the seed of a great enterprise.

The Count, too, began to feel the effects of Vincent's presence in his household. It was the age of dueling, and hundreds of lives were lost in this barbarous practice. De Gondi was a famous swordsman, and although the life he led was a great deal better than that of the majority of his contemporaries, the possibility of refusing to fight when challenged, or of refraining from challenging another when his honor was at stake, had never occurred to him.

Vincent had been some time at the de Gondis' when it came to his ears that the Count intended to fight a duel on a certain day, and he resolved, if possible, to prevent it. De Gondi was present at Mass in the morning and remained on afterwards in the chapel, praying, probably, that he might prevail over his enemy.

Vincent waited till everyone had gone out, and then approached him softly. "Monsieur," he said, "I know that you intend to fight a duel; and I tell you, as a message from my Saviour, before whom you kneel, that if you do not renounce this intention His judgment will fall on you and yours." The Count, after a moment's silence, promised to give up his project, and faithfully kept his word. It was the greatest sacrifice that could have been asked of a man in de Gondi's position, and it was a thing unheard of at the time for a priest to lay down the law to a

great nobleman. But the influence of sanctity is strong, and the Count was noble; for him it was the beginning of a better life.

The de Gondis usually spent part of the year at their country house in Picardy, where they had large estates. Here the love of the poor which Vincent had fostered in Madame de Gondi was in its element, and she delighted in visiting her tenants, tending the sick with her own hands, and seconding all M. Vincent's plans for their welfare.

It happened one day that Vincent was sent to the bedside of a dying peasant who had always borne a good character and was considered an excellent Christian. The man was conscious, and Vincent – moved, no doubt, by the direct inspiration of God – urged him to make a General Confession. There was much need, for he had been concealing for long years several mortal sins which he was ashamed to confess, profaning the Sacraments and deceiving all who knew him. Moved with contrition by M. Vincent's words, he confessed his crimes, acknowledging his guilt also to Madame de Gondi, who came to visit him after Vincent had departed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.