

SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL, 1576-1660.

English nurses are longing to be at the Front in this terrible War, and those in France might realise with advantage how much their work owes to Saint Vincent de Paul. Some little time ago the nursing staff of Chelsea Royal Hospital Infirmary and their friends were privileged to hear a most delightful "Talk to Nurses," from Miss E. K. Sanders, which took the form of a résumé of the life and work of S. Vincent de Paul, dwelling more especially on those parts of the work of the priest and philanthropist which touch on sick nursing and the founding of the Society of the Sisters of Charity.

The nurses were asked to follow her in imagination to Paris—the Paris of 1626 or thereabouts—a Paris one quarter its present size, and composed of the most bewildering contrasts in architecture—for grandeur, nothing that we have in London of the present day is in any way comparable to the magnificence of some of the private dwellings, and huddled close alongside this magnificence, the filthiest and most unspeakable hovels—the thieves' quarters under the arches, where even the police dared not venture—and everywhere at night the total blackness of unlighted streets. The only sources of public charity were the monasteries and the hospitals—the latter supported by voluntary contributions to such a literal extent in some cases that the patients depended for food on that which was sent from the kitchens of the rich houses and sometimes personally distributed by the great ladies of the city.

Into this Paris came a priest—Vincent de Paul—a man of small learning, and about fifty years old, who for the past fifteen years had been tutor in a great man's house. He came to Paris with the intention of making the city his headquarters between the intervals of visiting the surrounding small villages and holding there with the assistance of other priests parochial missions.

It was the wife of a magistrate, Mme. Goussaulte who tried to persuade Vincent de Paul, much against his will, to organize, in connection with the chief hospital, the Hôtel Dieu, a band of forty or fifty *Ladies of Charity*, who it was proposed would combine exhortation and religious instruction with the giving of food. This was actually achieved, and for quite six months the charm and novelty of bed-making by princesses proved a successful draw to many society dames; but in time, counter duties prevailed, the fascination of novelty wore off, and the maids of the charitable ladies were deputed to carry on this excellent intention. As the maids, however, "didn't see it," the plan was on the verge of collapse, when Mademoiselle le Gras, being immensely impressed by Vincent de Paul, added her persuasion and went farther than either Mme. Goussaulte or her grand lady followers. Mlle. le Gras, with great tenacity of purpose (for Vincent de Paul had hitherto shown no keenness about women's work, nor any belief in women's usefulness), took a house

near his quarters, and by herself and totally unaided began a systematised visiting of the sick, having had considerable previous experience.

Meanwhile Vincent de Paul's parochial meetings were stirring up a spirit of self-sacrifice among the peasants, and when they had reached the stage of offering practical help as a result of their teacher's efforts, he was inspired to suggest to them that a very tangible form of help would be to send the women among them, farmers' daughters &c., to join Mlle. le Gras in her enterprise. They eagerly volunteered for this service, and untutored women and girls began quite unofficially that society known as the Sisters of Charity of S. Vincent de Paul. As an illustration of the universal ignorance prevalent at that time in all branches of nursing, Miss Sanders told of the periodic appointment of the maternity nurse, which was an official post and recognised by Government. When a vacancy fell due, notice of it was given out from the pulpit, and when one enquires what the parish priest could possibly know about a suitable selection of this kind one learns it was necessary to choose a candidate well grounded in the faith, as so many babies died in her care that her chief duty would probably be to baptize them!

The Sisters of Charity were not at first a religious Order, but essentially a voluntary aid detachment, and the difficulty of selection was considerable, the chief idea of some applicants being their desire to see Paris. Although there was never any question of money, some candidates, fearing destitution in their old age, tried to secure their future by enquiries of Mlle. le Gras. In her perplexity she appealed to St. Vincent de Paul, whose uncompromising verdict was that "the bare idea of making such a bargain disqualified them at once."

Country parishes quickly followed the example set by the Hôtel Dieu, and soon had their own little bands of two or three Sisters who would nurse the sick poor in their own houses. Although none of them were educated women, they were yet widely different in their upbringing, experiences, dialects, &c., and this created many difficulties when friction arose. That no sort of relaxation was permitted is seen in Mlle. le Gras' letters—the complaints against both an alarmingly fat Sister and an inclined-to-be-lazy one meeting with the same prescription—*Work*. On hearing of some mild frivolity entered upon in celebration of Twelfth Night, their leader wrote most strongly urging them to desist, cautioning the offenders against the extreme danger to their souls' welfare, of such practices, and on all occasions she would remind them of their self-dedication and the dignity attaching thereto. St. Vincent de Paul was never so hard on them. Of the hardships encountered by the Sisters there is a hint given in the statement made to an architect that their only parlour and kitchen was also used as the school and out-patient department! Any display of ambition in their profession, either educational, religious, or medical, was always severely censured

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