

# THE PALIMPSEST

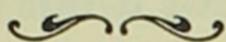
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VOL. XX

ISSUED IN JUNE 1939

No. 6

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## Father Pierre Jean De Smet

Robust, laughing, with the adventurous spirit of a buccaneer, Father Pierre Jean De Smet inherited little from his Jesuit predecessors save a love of God and Indians. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the spirit of Catholicism, as expressed by the *Muero porque no muero* of Santa Teresa, had been replaced by an enthusiastic affirmation of life; and the priests who played such an important part in the development of the western United States were strong-minded, active, practical men.

In 1821 Pierre De Smet and five other students ran away from the seminary at Mechlin, Belgium. Disguised as peasants, with borrowed money in their pockets, they persuaded the captain of a sailing vessel to smuggle them on board and bring them to America. The hard, poverty-stricken years that followed, first in the novitiate at White-marsh, Maryland, and later in the Jesuit mission at Florissant, Missouri, failed to temper the merry

spirit of Father Pierre Jean De Smet. He completed his training for priesthood and was ordained in September, 1827. There is nothing in his letters to indicate that he wooed asceticism or a glorious death. There is much evidence that he recognized the value of a busy, well-spent life.

Doubtless, as he stood on the deck of the little steamboat *Wilmington*, which was taking him up the Missouri River to the present site of Council Bluffs, he had pleasant dreams of his future work among the Potawatomi Indians. He did not yet know that the year 1838 was too late to help those natives along the Missouri River who had already been weakened by smallpox and corrupted by liquor.

The two thousand Indians who gathered at the dock on the afternoon of May 31st scarcely noticed the corpulent priest, wearing a heavy crucifix upon his breast, who disembarked, followed by his companions, Father Felix Verredyt and two lay brothers. To the Potawatomi the arrival of a steamboat meant more important things. It meant government annuities, calico, trinkets, gunpowder, and perhaps cached somewhere down the river a shipment of smuggled whisky. At St. Louis the priests had been told that five hundred Catholic natives were eagerly awaiting them. In reality, two half-breeds approached to shake hands; and

a fortnight later one Catholic Indian came to beg for a blessing.

The Indian huts on the river flats and on the clay bluffs towering above were lice-infested hovels, foul from the dung of horses stabled within them, and littered with bones and refuse cast aside for the innumerable wrangling dogs that far outnumbered their masters.

The half-breed chief, Billy Caldwell, whose wife later became a convert, offered the missionaries the use of four cabins that had been built by a detachment of soldiers the year before. Colonel S. W. Kearny gave the missionaries possession of a log blockhouse which was transformed into a church by the simple addition of a cross on the roof. Father De Smet maintained that when he climbed the ladder to put up the cross his companion, Father Felix Verreydt, saw "the devil clap his tail between his legs and take flight over the big hills." The missionaries made the best of the situation. "We have a fine little chapel," wrote Father De Smet, "and four little cabins besides made of rough logs. They are fourteen feet each way with roofs of rude rafters, which protect us from neither rain nor hail, and still less from the snows of winter." Later a small mission house was erected in honor of St. Joseph.

During that summer and the following winter

the missionaries labored, baptizing children and adults, caring for the sick, and explaining the principles of Christianity. If a girl traveled six miles to find the road to heaven, or an old woman threw away her medicine bag, Father De Smet was happy. But many times the natives called the priest for the benefit of his camphor water and popular remedies, while forbidding him to make the sign of the cross or utter a prayer over their ailing children. On such occasions Father De Smet would spread out his bottles, he would recommend his medicines strongly, and while administering the cure he would baptize the child without the knowledge of its parents.

By the spring of 1839, after a long hard winter, the Indians were destitute. The only available food was acorns and a few wild roots. The priests were without shoes. But word had arrived that they might expect a shipment of provisions and clothes on the first steamboat to ascend the river. On April 20th the boat was sighted from the bluffs. Without delay Father De Smet procured two carts for the baggage and reached the dock in time to witness a sad spectacle. The vessel had struck on a sawyer and was rapidly sinking. Although no lives were lost, goods to the amount of \$500, ornaments for the church, a tabernacle, a bell, and provisions were gone.

In a letter to Belgium, Father De Smet, with his customary good humor wrote: "Of our effects four articles were saved: a plough, a saw, a pair of boots and some wine. Providence was still favorable to us. With the help of the plough we were enabled to plant a large field of corn. We are using the saw to build a better house and enlarge our church. With my boots I can walk in the woods and prairies without fear of being bitten by the serpents which throng there. And the wine permits us to offer to God every day the most holy sacrifice of the mass. We therefore returned with courage and resignation to the acorns and roots".

Between the exhaustion of one supply of liquor and the arrival of another baptisms and conversions multiplied. But when a steamboat arrived, one night sufficed to destroy what the missionaries had labored many weeks to accomplish. During the following summer Father De Smet's diary offers a pitiful commentary on conditions in the tribe. On May 25th two Potawatomi were killed in a drunken frolic; two days later three drunken Indians were drowned in the Missouri; the following night another was poisoned while drunk.

By the end of that month a steamboat arrived with "fifty large cannons" loaded with "the most murderous grape shot, each containing thirty gallons of whisky, brandy, rum or alcohol." Before

the boat was out of sight the skirmishes began. "In all directions", Father De Smet wrote, "men, women and children were seen tottering and falling; the war-whoop, the merry Indian song, cries, savage roarings, formed a hideous medley. Quarrel succeeded quarrel; blow followed blow. The club, the tomahawk, spears, butcher knives, brandished together in the air. . . . A squaw offered her little boy four years old to the crew of the boat for a few bottles of whisky." The next day the Potawatomi were selling horses, blankets, and guns for liquor.

Before the first week of June had passed, six Indians had been murdered in drunken brawls and one forcibly prevented from killing his aunt. A few days later a savage returning home from a night's debauch tore his infant son from the breast of his mother and crushed him against a post of the lodge. Whisky did not last long in the tribe, and July may have been a quieter month, but more liquor was landed on August 4th and the diary continues to reveal tragedies.

Under such conditions St. Joseph's Mission could not prosper. Yet with inexhaustible physical energy and a buoyancy of spirit born from his unquestioning faith, Father De Smet continued his work. A trip up the Missouri resulted in a new peace between the Potawatomi and the Sioux — a

peace which was concluded during a feast when the Indians sat with chins upon their knees and legs drawn close to their bodies, but Father De Smet, because of his corpulency, had to sit like a tailor with his legs crossed. "If you ever build a new house," he wrote to his niece, "give the door of my chamber six inches extra width, because I don't like to be bothered in getting into a room."

Men more austere, men like Fathers Jogues and Lalemant, might have continued a fruitless struggle against the indolence of the Potawatomi, against the liquor trade and the increasing degeneracy. Father De Smet was not of that sort. With characteristic common sense, he knew the futility of working against odds so great. Consequently, when delegates from the Flathead tribe came to St. Louis in the autumn of 1839 to beg for missionaries, he was eager to try a new field. The Flatheads of the Bitter Root Valley, like other Rocky Mountain tribes, were peace-loving, mystical, and intelligent. Isolated as they were from contact with civilization, hidden in the recesses of the mountains, Father De Smet saw in them the possibility of establishing a Christian community as idyllic as that which once existed in the Jesuit missions of Paraguay.

But even there the priest was to meet with disappointment. True, within a decade the Oregon

country was dotted with missions. The nomadic tribes had become agricultural, the children were learning their prayers in Latin. But white civilization was slowly pressing westward. To Father De Smet that movement of immigrants was the one great danger, and the one force over which he had no control. Yet so fervent was his desire to keep his Indians beyond the reach of the Oregon trail, beyond the corruptions of white traders and merchants, that when he discovered gold he kept the secret in his heart. At a dinner party in St. Louis, when he announced with a twinkle in his eye that he had found a rich mine in the Black Hills, all the entreaties of merchants and business men could not prevail on him to reveal its location. He merely stated that he did not want to spoil the peace of his children.

In 1846 he was back in St. Louis. He had lost five companions in the waters of the Columbia River. He had crossed the mountains on horseback, by dog-sled and snowshoes. He had tramped over plains piled up with avalanches of snow and had walked waist-deep through icy water, so that his legs swelled and all the nails dropped off his feet. Yet he had displeased Rome. The letters that he wrote were believed to be exaggerated. The dreams of an Indian utopia seemed fantastic to his superiors. There were bickerings

about money. And so with his heart and his ambitions in the Oregon country, Father De Smet was destined to spend the last twenty-seven years of his life as Procurator of St. Louis University, fighting the cholera plague, helping the poverty-stricken emigrants along the levee, and keeping the account books of the university.

"I have been several years a wanderer in the desert," he wrote to a friend. "I was three years without receiving a letter from any quarter. I was two years in the mountains without tasting bread, salt, coffee, tea or sugar. I was for years without a bed, without a roof. I have been six months without a shirt on my back and have passed whole days and nights without a morsel of anything to eat, not even a drop of water to quench my parching thirst."

It is significant and tragic, that after his fight to save the Indian tribes from civilization, Father De Smet was henceforth to use his energies in effecting conciliations between the natives and the United States government. During his few years of active missionary labor he had become the most beloved white man in the West. He had made his word to the Indians as certain as the recurring seasons. "His tongue is not forked", they said of him. Consequently, the government asked him to attend the Great Council of 1851, to accompany

the expedition against the Mormons, and later to visit the western tribes in the hope of negotiating a peace during the Yakima War.

Father De Smet accepted such duties without recompense, because he believed that in this way he could best serve his Indians, so hard-pressed by the encroachment of the whites, so embittered by broken promises. On such journeys across the plains, he saw the country lately uninhabited now converted into cultivated fields and villages and cattle lands. He must have realized with deep sorrow, and long before it happened, that the little tribe of Flatheads, still clinging doggedly to their belief in peace and in Catholicism, were doomed to the fate that had overtaken the eastern tribes.

By 1867 the railroads were in use as far west as Omaha. In that year the Secretary of the Interior asked Father De Smet to be envoy extraordinary to the hostile Sioux tribes of the upper Missouri. The priest took a train from St. Louis to Chicago, and from Chicago for Omaha. Arriving at Boonsboro, Iowa, he learned that melting snows had carried away the bridges. After a delay of three days he obtained a train which took him to Denison. Beyond Denison the tracks were washed out. It was necessary to hire a wagon which carried him to Sioux City, where he took a steamboat for the Yankton Reservation.

Father De Smet was now an aging man, sixty-six years old, and in poor health. The peace council exhausted him and he returned to St. Louis ill with the midsummer heat. Yet in the following year he repeated his efforts to make peace between the government and the natives. With Generals Sherman, Harney, Sanborn, Terry, and Sheridan he traveled by train to Cheyenne and thence to Fort Rice. At that point the Indian chiefs told him if he approached the Sioux he would not return alive. "Before an image of the Blessed Virgin, Mother and Protector of all nations, six lamps are burning day and night during my absence, and before these lamps more than a thousand children implore heaven's protection for me. I intrust myself with all my fears to the hands of the Lord."

Accompanied by an old Indian trader, his wife, a Sioux, and several Indian chiefs, Father De Smet set out across the plains in search of the Sioux. For a week they hunted in vain. Finally four scouts were sent out to look for the camp of the enemy, each of them taking a small charge of tobacco. Six days later the scouts returned. The tobacco had been favorably received, indicating that the Sioux were willing to talk with him. They sent word, however, that no other white man would escape with his scalp.

Father De Smet with his Indian guides started

at once for the rendezvous. Not far from the mouth of Powder River a band of five hundred warriors came to meet them. The priest had his standard of peace hoisted with the name of Jesus on one side and the image of Mary on the other. The Indians mistook it for the United States flag. The cavalcade halted, seemed to enter into consultation. Then four chiefs came forward at full speed and rode around the banner. Finally they came forward and shook hands with Father De Smet. The air resounded with shouts of joy. In Sitting Bull's camp five thousand warriors received the priest. By the penal code in force among the savages every native who had lost a member of his family at the hands of the whites was obliged to avenge himself on the first white man he met. Yet no hand was raised against the Jesuit. On July 2nd a great council was held, at which fifty thousand Indians were represented, a treaty was signed, and Father De Smet returned to St. Louis believing that peace was assured.

Two years later the United States had forgotten the debt it owed to this quiet, unassuming missionary from St. Louis. In 1870 the government determined to divide the various Indian agencies among the different religious denominations, but no attention was paid to the preference of the natives. Eight thousand Catholic Indians were pro-

vided with Protestant preachers. Father De Smet protested to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs who owed his success to De Smet's work among the Sioux, but the Commissioner failed to answer the letter. Then he wrote the Secretary of the Interior, but received no reply.

Meanwhile, Father De Smet's health was failing. As early as 1869 he had written to a friend: "Please pray much for me. I am fast going down the ladder. My right leg or foot is no longer able, when in bed, to scratch his companion. My right arm is benumbed. My teeth are no longer able to perform their masticating duties. My appetite is gone. My sight is going. In my slumber at night I can hardly catch a deep snooze, and then nightmares pay me their visits, and when I walk my underlimbs are shaking and staggering." Yet in almost every letter he still looked forward to new trips to the Indians. In 1872 he was having frequent hemorrhages, internal pains, and was unable to take any food but tea. His left eye became paralyzed and he lost the sight of it.

In the spring of 1873 cold rains and hail swept across the Mississippi Valley. Father De Smet was bedridden. On May 12th he wrote his last letter, and the following day his most intimate friend, Captain Joseph LaBarge, begged him to come and bless a new steamboat he had named *De*

*Smet* in the priest's honor. Scarcely able to walk he left his bed, took a carriage, and performed this last service to a friend. On May 23, 1873, he died. Although all his life he prayed to die and be buried among his natives in the Rocky Mountains, his body lies in the little graveyard of the Jesuit seminary at Florissant, Missouri.

Men and women in the East may ask, "Pierre Jean De Smet? And who was he?" In the West they remember only that a South Dakota town bears that name. But the many articles he wrote still rest neglected on dusty library shelves, and thirty-three bound volumes of manuscript letters lie hidden in the archives of St. Louis University. Many great men have lived and been forgotten, leaving no record behind them. Because Father De Smet did leave a rich and beautiful record of his life, perhaps some day he will be rediscovered and his tremendous importance in the development of the West will be recognized.

HELENE MAGARET