

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Abbe Pelamourgues

It was a bright afternoon in the middle of April, 1839. One of the early steamboats of the season had bravely chugged up the Mississippi to the growing little town of Davenport. Looking from the steamer deck to the hubbub on the shore was a quiet but deeply interested traveler on his way to Dubuque — a foreigner he was, a Frenchman, a Catholic priest. The interest he showed sprang from the fact that this new American country west of the Father of Waters was the field he had chosen for his life's endeavors. His keen glance swept the green-tinged hills and the muddy water front. "The site of this new city is magnificent, one of the most beautiful I have yet seen on the Mississippi," wrote a fellow French missionary on another steamboat the very next day. Only one discordant note was indicated in that lovely view. "We saw again today a tribe of savages who remained more than two hours near our boat . . . immoral and drunken wretches."

Dubuque, the tiny see-city of this great new Catholic diocese carved out of the Northwest, was the French missionary's destination. But as he stood there on the steamboat at the Davenport landing, a rather lonely dark figure amid the loud and boisterous crowd of frontiersmen and immigrants, he may have had a presentiment that it was this town of Davenport and all the territory about it that was to be the real stage for his Christian zeal during the coming three decades.

The Abbé Jean Antoine Marie Pelamourgues, this thirty-two-year-old divine who stood on the threshold of his Iowa career, had been in America almost six months. During the previous fall a Philadelphia newspaper had stated: "The Rt. Rev. Dr. Loras, the Bishop of the newly formed Diocese of Dubuque, Wisconsin Territory, has arrived from France with a few Ecclesiastics, who have volunteered to devote themselves to the new missions." Born at Genevieve, France, and educated at the seminary of Rodez, the young abbé had, after his priestly ordination, been content to lead the halcyon life of a *curé* in Aveyron, near his native Genevieve. He had not met and probably he had not heard of Mathias Loras, when this bishop was searching in every nook of France for young missionaries for his new and far-flung diocese of Dubuque which stretched from the

northern State line of Missouri to the Canadian border. Another one of those who accompanied the bishop to the Iowa wilderness, Augustin Ravoux, who became a celebrated missionary among the Sioux Indians of Minnesota and Dakota, wrote later that he had been so deeply moved "by the discourse and tears" of the American bishop that he rushed forward to offer himself for the missions.

Not so, however, the Abbé Pelamourgues. He had simply made up his mind one day at Aveyron that he would be happier winning souls in far-off America than in France. The superior at the Rodez seminary wrote to Loras that he had "an excellent priest" for the foreign missions, and packed the young abbé off for Havre. There he met Bishop Loras and sailed with him immediately on the *Lion*.

Father Pelamourgues was left with an American pastor at Baltimore for a few months to study the English language and American customs, and then came west to St. Louis to join his bishop who was compelled to wait until warm weather would break the ice in the Mississippi and open the waterway to Dubuque. Of special interest to the priest were the negro slaves. As a youthful idealist he was puzzled by the contradiction between the American theories of popular liberty and the

institution of slavery; and the sight of negroes in the Catholic churches set apart by themselves as inferior beings, even when freed from servitude, contributed to his bewilderment.

From Davenport the abbé continued on his way to Dubuque a full day ahead of the bishop and two other clergymen, and was thus the first of the new group of priests from France to see the diocesan headquarters. There, while acting as secretary to Bishop Loras and missionary to several little mining settlements about Dubuque, he quietly continued his studies of the English language as well as of the strange *mores* of the frontier.

Toward the end of June he was delighted when the bishop chose him as his companion on a long steamboat voyage up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling, the most northern military outpost in the Mississippi Valley. The settlement near the fort, called St. Pierre or St. Peter, was composed of white, red, and half-breed families. The bishop and his abbé were astonished at the large number of Catholics there. On five occasions from June 28 to July 9, 1839, they administered the sacraments to the accompaniment of the musical rumble of Minnehaha Falls: fifty-six persons were baptized, thirty-three adults received communion, four couples were given the nuptial benediction.

On these occasions Father Pelamourgues saw

trappers from the far-away West and *bois brules* from the Red River, traders from Prairie du Chien, and soldiers from the army post. Farther back under the trees were Sioux and Chippewa braves, and on the last occasion the Sioux warriors alone, displaying the bleeding scalps of the Chippewas with whom in the interval they had fought. Major Taliaferro, the Indian Agent, wrote: "*Bishop Loras, & his Preest, leave on tomorrow for Dubuccque. I gave my Reports of the Chippewa and Sioux difficulties to him for Governor Lucas.*"

As there was no steamboat at the fort, the two travelers daringly decided to return by canoe. To Loras who had rowed and paddled on the Alabama streams, the experience was not entirely new; but to young Abbé Pelamourgues the expedition was one of thrilling adventure. A voyage of two and a half days brought them with blistered hands to Prairie du Chien. Again ensued a number of days of fervent spiritual ministrations, and then Abbé Pelamourgues was left alone for several weeks with his numerous French-Canadian charges at Prairie du Chien.

No sooner had the young missionary returned to Dubuque in late August than he was appointed to the parish which he held continuously thenceforth — Davenport. Thither at the end of the

same month he repaired. The gifted Italian Dominican, Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, had for several years ministered in Davenport where he organized the Catholic congregation, and in the spring of 1838 had commenced building the brick St. Anthony's Church which Father Pelamourgues had doubtless seen from the deck of the steamboat in the previous April.

This was a two-story structure. On the lower floor the abbé found schoolrooms as well as quarters for the resident priest. The school was soon filled with children and the priest at first took up the duties of the schoolmaster with enthusiasm. This work, however, was presently entrusted to lay teachers and in later years to the nuns who developed the Immaculate Conception Academy.

But Davenport was not the only recipient of the abbé's ministrations; it was merely his headquarters. The paucity of missionaries often compelled him to make arduous trips to Muscatine, Burlington, DeWitt, Lyons, and other places. In the early forties he cared for the infant Iowa City parish, driving his horse and buggy every fortnight over the fifty-two-mile road to the capital.

Antoine Pelamourgues (for, of his Christian names, it was by Antoine alone that he was known) could do almost nothing with the few Indians that remained in the general vicinity. At

Agency, near the present Ottumwa, he once prepared an old Fox Indian for death, and as he had hastily crossed the agency line without permission to reach the dying man, he was arrested and held under guard for two days until the return of Indian Agent Joseph Street.

From the time of his arrival in Davenport in 1839, the success of Father Pelamourgues's spiritual and material ventures was assured because of his faculty of making warm friendships. He immediately attracted the cordial affection of Antoine Le Claire, Colonel George Davenport, and Judge G. C. R. Mitchell. Generous to all churches in the rapidly growing town, Le Claire and his wife, Marguerite, were extremely liberal to the Catholic cause. Antoine Le Claire and Antoine Pelamourgues found mutual interest in the welfare of *l'église de St. Antoine*. And when, sixteen years later, St. Marguerite's church was erected, it was only natural that Marguerite Le Claire, whose kindly munificence toward the project had been almost queenly, should be complimented by having the structure dedicated to her patron saint. As for the others, it may be mentioned that Judge Mitchell was the parish's legal adviser, and he and George L. Davenport, the colonel's son, donated the land needed for the erection of the academy.

The choir which the Abbé Pelamourgues organized at St. Anthony's from the very first weeks of his arrival became for a number of years the most celebrated musical group in Davenport. There was no organ, but flute, clarinet, cello, and violin sustained their voices. The choir boasted of one especially trained and captivating voice, that of Colonel Davenport's niece, Rose, and when the abbé's baton led the combination of instruments and song, "the best music in the State was made" — so wrote a contemporary musical critic.

In 1852 Father Pelamourgues returned for a visit to his native France. The son of Louis Napoleon was then in the ascendancy, and his democratic slogans so appealed to the abbé's own idealism that for a while he was tempted to remain in this new and free France; but a speedy disillusionment and his aged father's death brought him back to Iowa.

When Joseph Cretin, the Bishop of St. Paul, who had come to America in 1838 with Father Pelamourgues, died in 1857, who was designated as his successor but the doughty abbé of Davenport. The modest Father Pelamourgues was shocked. Deeming himself utterly unworthy of the honor, he jokingly remarked: "If the Holy Father could but see me with my big head of un-

kempt hair, he would take back his bulls." Finally he decided to go to Rome and offer his declination to the Pope in person. Contrary to all expectations, the refusal was accepted by Pope Pius IX, and the abbé returned joyfully to St. Anthony's with the papal blessing for every one in Davenport.

For almost thirty years, the warm-hearted missionary labored selflessly in Iowa. One of his last public functions was the laying of the cornerstone of St. Mary's church in Iowa City late in 1867, and on this occasion John P. Irish paid a splendid tribute in his newspaper columns to "The Very Rev. J. A. M. Pelamourgues, Vicar General of the Church of Iowa."

During the following year he again visited France. His letters from Aveyron indicated his plans for a speedy return to America when he was struck down by disease. The illness proved obstinate and he "died an exile, strange to say, in his native country," finally passing away at Genevieve in 1875.

Not strange at all is it that his name is still known to the descendants of many of the old families of the State. The work begun in Davenport and Iowa in 1839 by this cultured son of France still bears fruit in 1939.

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