

CAMILLUS DE LELLIS
THE HOSPITAL SAINT

1550-1614

By
A SISTER OF MERCY

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Chapter 1

EARLY LIFE

Though we may not, according to the Churches interpretation of the First Commandment, place our faith in dreams, still it is not unlikely that mothers of earlier and more pious generations were often permitted by an all-wise Providence to know, through dreams, something of the destiny of certain of their children previous to the birth of those children. Instances of such favors are related in the lives of many of the saints and there is no reason to doubt that a dream of extraordinary significance was thus given to the mother of St. Camillus de Lellis. She saw, say his biographers, a child with a red cross stamped upon his breast. He was followed by a multitude of other children all bearing the same sign.

Far from being consoled, the Lady Camilla, we are told, was grievously troubled by this vision. Might it not be a portent of disaster to her family, in the birth of an unworthy son? Should she, then, have the misfortune to bring into the world a child who would dishonor her name?

The wondrous tale of the Hermit, followed by his red-crossed babes, must have been known to her, yet her anxious mother-heart either failed to recall it or saw in it no cause for comfort.

One son, given her in the early days of her wedded life, had been willingly, even joyfully returned at the call of the Giver. What greater happiness could she wish for her child

than that which is the lot of little children taken before the world has had a chance to place its mark upon them? With the wisdom and the piety of a mother's far-sighted love she had freely given up this boy, and spent many years of utter loneliness, for the life of her soldier husband demanded much absence from home.

Unfortunately for the wedded happiness of Camilla Compellia, this noble Roman lady had married a man who, while inheriting an illustrious name, nobly borne by a long line of soldierly ancestors, possessed little else to recommend him. Giovanni de Lellis had acquired all the vices of a soldier's life, a fact of which his wife could not long remain in ignorance, and only his frequent absences from home rendered her fate endurable. Hence her fear lest any son born of this union might inherit the unlovely qualities of a dissolute father.

Besides, she was old now, too old to hope for the birth of another child, yet it seemed to be God's design to make her once more a mother. Nearly sixty years of age, she was gray and wrinkled. "St. Elizabeth," they called her, and spoke in hushed tones as of one chosen by God for some special mark of favor.

A few days after the dream just related, at Bacchianico in the kingdom of Naples, on the twenty-fifth day of May, 1550, there came into the world the child of predilection, the saint who was to teach what Christ meant when He said, "I was sick and you visited Me." And yet the twelve first years of the child's life, all that were given his anxious mother to watch over him, were far from consoling or reassuring.

The dream of the children of the red cross became an ever present dread, and her prayers and penances for her son's welfare were unremitting.

The little Camillus was a strange, unprepossessing child, showing little inclination for gentle or scholarly pursuits. The restless, roving, militant nature of his father seemed to be his inheritance, and from his earliest years he longed only for the time when he should fare forth with that father to embrace a soldier's life.

He was scarcely more than twelve years old when the end came for his venerable mother. Then followed a few years of training in the schools, accomplished much against the will of the impatient boy, and at last he was free to join his father.

Ah, the period that followed! It was one that angels wept to behold. An apt scholar for the vices of camp and field, he walked his dissolute way, and until he was nineteen years of age his associates were among the most lawless and recreant youths of the time. An ungovernable passion for gaming possessed him, and, with no one to restrain him, for his father was more comrade than parent, he, too, was soon a "soldier of fortune." Together this luckless pair wandered from one country to another, offering their services to friend or foe, Turk or Christian as it chanced.

At last Giovanni de Lellis was stricken with a dangerous disease and Camillus, too, became ill, though not so seriously. After a few weeks' illness they recovered sufficiently to travel and they resolved to return at once to their home in Abruzzo. Accordingly, they set out, but Camillus soon

perceived that his father was in no condition to travel—that he was, in fact, apparently dying; so he hurried him to the home of a friend which happened to be near by.

Here they were courteously received and generously cared for and Giovanni de Lellis had the happy opportunity of seeing a priest and of repairing, by a good death, the evil life he had led. The mercy shown to the good thief was once more shown to a sinner. Who shall say why?

Seeing his father brought to repentance, Camillus was deeply affected and moved to consider the state of his own soul. After attending to the last duties he could perform for his father he proceeded on his journey homeward. He had by no means recovered from his illness; moreover, what he had thought a mere scratch on his right leg was giving definite signs of infection and his condition became quite pitiable.

He tried to drag himself on to the journey's end, but the fever in his veins obliged him to rest. While at Fermo, the thoughts awakened by his father's death began to pursue him once more. They were given a more decided trend by his seeing a couple of Franciscan Fathers passing, with every mark of devout recollection.

Camillus' mind became, at once, a tumult of devout desires. He remembered suddenly, an uncle, Fra Paolo Lauretana, who, it was said, was a great and holy man and of much influence in the Franciscan Order. He would go to him and, no doubt, would obtain assistance and advice. But Fra Paolo Lauretana, while he was, as has been said, a great and holy man, was also a man of penetration, and, though he received

his nephew kindly, he perceived in him signs that made him resolve to study the boy a bit before admitting him to the Order. He therefore detained Camillus for a while and finally concluded that weak health and a very indeterminate vocation were not desirable assets for a son of St. Francis. Much as he disliked to follow this course, the commissary general was obliged to dismiss his nephew. Camillus, hurt by the dismissal, made up his mind to think no more of the religious life, notwithstanding a vow that he had made, just after his father's death, to become a Franciscan.

And so it would seem as if the soft glow of light just dawning in Camillus' soul was destined to fade without showing him the path to tread. He was crushed and embittered, and having no one of whom to seek counsel, he turned once more to his former companions, and surrendered himself to his old habit of gaming.

A sorry spectacle he presented, a soldier with a bandaged leg! If it were a wound received in battle he might glory in it, but alas, it was a sore produced by a slight scratch. The infection was obstinate, and the bad result seemed destined to be permanent. He became extremely sensitive to his infirmity and went about from place to place to escape recognition.

Finally he drifted to Rome. Having heard that there were skillful surgeons at the hospital of San Giacomo, Camillus determined to seek admittance, offering himself as a servant and hoping thus to procure the treatment needed for his wound.

He was not disappointed in this, for he was given a trial, and for a while labored industriously, but the old temptation assailed him before long. Those among the servants who knew nothing of gambling, he taught, and soon a general neglect of duty set in. It was not long before the instigator of the mischief was discovered, and a much thumbed pack of cards, found under his pillow, speedily put an end to Camillus' services at San Giacomo.

Discharged, with his wound half healed, homeless again and knowing not where to turn, he was in a sorry plight, this aspirant to the religious life, this son of soldiers and scholars, this child of saintly destiny.

There was nothing for it but to return to the life of his first choice, so a soldier of fortune he became once more. In the Venetian army he served in some posts of distinction, but his glory was usually short-lived, for he could not resist the temptation to join in every wild soldier's orgy that was set afoot. He encountered all sorts of perils, and his recklessness brought him more than once to death's door.

On such occasions, a spirit of compunction would seize him and he would vow to renounce his lawless way of living. But what reliance could be placed upon the vows of this impetuous youth? The vow that he had made to become a Franciscan had been renewed or forgotten with every wind of good or ill fortune that had befallen him since his father's death. At one time he seemed to feel the impulse of God's grace calling him to the Capuchin Order, at another, though destitute of clothing, he would not accept a piece of cloth, a

gift from a Capuchin friar, lest it might end in being made into a Capuchin habit which he should be forced to wear.

Among his companions was one for whom he had a strange affection and whose influence over him was so great that he would do nothing unsanctioned by this friend and counselor. A pair of ne'er-do-wells, they wandered about, generally half starved, ill clothed, and often forced to beg from passers-by.

On one occasion they were begging near the door of a church, when they were accosted by a man who was passing. He was a man of noble birth who gave much of his wealth to works of charity. Just then he was inspecting a new building which he was having erected for a Capuchin monastery near by. Something about Camillus attracted him, and he spoke to the youth, whose face flushed with shame at being addressed, while in such plight, by one of the class to which he himself properly belonged.

Did he need employment? Surely he did; sadly needed it. Would he join the laborers upon the Capuchin building? Ah, that was different; he must consult his precious comrade; get his consent and his company, if possible.

Promising to return shortly, he went in search of his companion, who had just left him. Very little persuasion on the part of this worthy was needed to induce Camillus to abandon the idea of becoming a laborer, and he failed to return to the friend whom God had sent to his rescue. The life of vagabondage, though it entailed hardships beyond those of warfare, held him because of the companionship it afforded of so many others who were victims of the passion

that had thus far ruined all his undertakings—the passion of gambling.

But at last grace triumphed. Suddenly, as they journeyed on, Camillus felt the sting of remorse. Actuated by a strong impulse to return to the spot where he felt sure God had already spoken to him in the guise of a stranger, a would-be benefactor, he tried at first to induce his companion to return with him, but finding this impossible, he finally dashed aside the barrier of human respect and set out alone. So fearful was he of being lured again by the tempter to sure destruction, that he covered the entire distance of twelve miles almost without resting, and running the greater part of the way. Without much difficulty he found his benefactor, and was soon safely housed and fed, an accepted laborer.

The trials and temptations that beset this poor weakling, in the first days of his return to right living, were such as Satan uses to repair his losses. It was a humiliating life, to say the least, this driving the beast to carry stone, lime, and other materials needed by the builders. Camillus, at his best, was no lover of work, and this occupation was especially repugnant to his finer instincts, which rebelled with force and persistence.

But this was not his worst difficulty. One day, who should appear in the midst of the laborers but his whilom friend, Tiberio, stuccoed with whitewash, apparently minded to be an artisan and nothing else.

Camillus was not to be deceived this time, however; he recognized the tempter and carefully avoided his wily friend, than whom none was apparently more industrious.

A few days of such strenuous application and good behavior proved quite enough for Tiberio, and seeing that Camillus meant to persevere he departed as unostentatiously as he had come.

It was another triumph of grace for Camillus, But the end of his trial was not yet. The suffering caused by the wound in his leg was incessant, but it was tolerable compared to what he suffered in his mind from the humiliations that God permitted him to endure.

He was destined for great sanctity, and only great humiliations fit the soul for this higher state. The wound in his leg was to cost him dear, but it was destined to repay him in the coin of the Kingdom.

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