

THE LIFE  
OF  
LÉON PAPIN-DUPONT  
THE HOLY MAN OF TOURS

MY HEART HATH SAID TO THEE:  
MY FACE HATH SOUGHT THEE:  
THY FACE, O LORD, WILL I STILL SEEK.  
PSALM 26:8

BY  
EDWARD HEALY THOMPSON

BASED ON THE WORK OF

ABBÉ JANVIER

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To

THE MOST HOLY FACE

OF

OUR DIVINE REDEEMER,  
OUTRAGED WITH BLOWS AND SPITTLE  
IN  
HIS DOLOROUS PASSION,  
THIS LIFE  
OF  
ITS DEVOTED SERVANT AND ADORER  
IS  
PIOUSLY AND REVERENTLY DEDICATED



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## Chapter 1

**THE EARLY YEARS OF LÉON DUPONT**

Grace does not extinguish nature. This remark has been so often made that it might seem hardly worthwhile to repeat it; it is, however, forcibly suggested by the subject of the present biography, a man to whom the voice of his contemporaries has emphatically affixed the epithet of holy—"The Holy Man of Tours." To give that title authoritatively appertains to the Church alone, as we all know.

"Did his virtues," asks his biographer, the Abbé Janvier, who had been well acquainted with him for thirty-five years, "arrive at the heroic degree of sanctity? Was he truly a Thaumaturgus, as he was esteemed? Did he work the miracles attributed to him? I believe it. But it is not either for you or for me to decide this point. This decision belongs to the Church and to its Infallible Head."

This wonderful man, whose whole time was divided between untiring works of mercy and assiduous prayer, continued to live a simple secular life. He was neither Priest nor religious, nor was he bound by any vows save those which bind all Christians, the vows of baptism. He may be said to have never lost his special individuality, which was marked and striking. His genial nature, his frankness, openness, and cheerfulness both of disposition and of manner, bordering at times upon what might be styled a certain joviality, remained to the last the distinguishing characteristics of M. Dupont. He was a man of apt repartee, with a spice of humour

and eccentricity in it, which often moved his hearers to laughter, but in which malice had never any part. This exterior, however, in which nature seemed to enjoy free and unrestricted play, veiled a marvellous interior work of grace, a work, the extent of which even intimate friends imperfectly realised.

The Abbé Janvier, who was a young man when he first became acquainted with him, says that, although he could not reckon himself among the closest of his intimates, nevertheless M. Dupont always treated him as a friend and had often given him touching proofs of esteem and confidence; so that, when he received what he considered a command from superiors to write the holy man's life, he imagined that his task would not be very arduous, and that, in order accurately to portray his subject, he would have but to recall his impressions and interrogate his recollections. But he found that he was mistaken, and that the figure he had undertaken to sketch had been but half known to him.

As long as M. Dupont lived, most of his friends, in common with the Abbé Janvier, saw nothing but the exterior of his life: his great charity, his passionate love for Holy Scripture, together with that zeal for the faith and that ardent piety which many even judged to be excessive and partaking of enthusiasm; to which must be added the reputation of a wonder-worker, more or less contested by the public at large, as is ever the case where it is a question of the supernatural, but accorded to him freely by those who had the opportunity of witnessing the marvellous cures which he effected. No

more than this was patent, and it was quite enough to excite high admiration; no more was generally suspected.

But it was quite another thing when a large amount of manuscript documents was placed in the Abbé's hands, and when, in particular, he began to examine M. Dupont's private letters of various dates, numbering more than fifteen hundred, and the many fragments of writing thrown off by his pen, which helped to reveal the interior workings of his mind, or artlessly recorded some anecdote at once edifying and piquant, illustrative of his character. From these and from the study of a mass of other papers found in his room, which were all securely consigned to ecclesiastical custody, the proposed biographer began to descry hitherto unobserved features in the venerable figure; M. Dupont's personality gradually emerged, as he proceeded, luminous and distinct, and invested with a completeness and perfection of spiritual grandeur which it had never before worn in his eyes.

Evidently this holy man, like other contemplatives—for M. Dupont, in spite of his active life, was a man of exalted contemplation and closest union with God—had not allowed the public to behold his whole self. Living in the world, he had hidden himself from the world, and had succeeded in veiling from human observation half his soul, and that its most precious portion.

But here his historian detects it. "In these confidential letters," he says, "flowing from the abundance of the heart, and written *currente calamo*, sometimes twelve or thirteen a day, without his having taken time to reperuse them, and

utterly unsuspecting of the use which was later to be made of them, he pours himself forth, he reveals himself without intending to do so, he betrays himself; I see what he is before God and before his conscience.”

The Abbé Janvier could now read the enigma of a life so apparently complex and in many ways singular and strange, although so pure and irreproachable; he had his finger, as it were, on the link which united the two portions of this existence, outwardly so entirely occupied with his neighbour and with the poor, inwardly never losing sight of God and abiding habitually in His adorable presence. He could now understand the secret of the charm which accompanied his least words, the grace which seemed to have been poured upon his lips and to flow from his hands in those invocations pronounced and unctions performed by him before the venerated Picture of the Holy Face. He now felt deeply persuaded that he had before him a saintly figure of a most exceptional kind, perhaps unique in Catholic hagiology; a Christian living in the world, entirely a man of his day, a layman of the nineteenth century, and at the same time a devoted servant of God, worthy, by the childlike confidence and fervour of his faith and love, of the primitive ages of the Church; in short, he felt that he had made a discovery, which the instinct of the common people had made long before, for full often had he heard some of those simple folk exclaim, when speaking of M. Dupont, “Either that is a saint, or there is no such thing as a saint at all.”

That he died in the odour of sanctity is attested by the title “holy” which the Abbé affixed to his work; but the

expression had already been used by higher authority, that of the Archbishop of Tours, in the decree which transformed into a public chapel the private oratory of the venerated man; in employing which title it is scarcely necessary to add that there was no intention to forestall any future decision of the Holy See.

Léon Papin-Dupont was descended from a race of Breton gentlemen. His family seems in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to have emigrated to the Antilles in company with others from the same part of France, and claimed to be of noble extraction. Nicolas Léon Papin-Dupont, father of the subject of this biography, was settled in Guadaloupe, where he was born, but he had married a rich Creole of the island of Martinique. Mademoiselle Marie-Louise Gaigneron de Marolles, sprung also from an ancient and noble French family.

The West Indian colonies of France suffered fearfully from the effects of the Revolution of 1793, and in order to escape from the sanguinary tyranny of the Convention, M. Papin-Dupont and many other settlers in Guadaloupe took the wise course of removing to Martinique, which had fallen into the possession of the English, under whose rule the island enjoyed peace and prosperity until the year 1802, when it was restored to France by the terms of the Treaty of Amiens.

It was during the English domination that Léon was born. His parents were then living on their ample estate, which consisted of large sugar plantations adjoining the *bourg* of Lamentin, situated in the finest part of the island, and it was here that, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, 1797, this child of

benediction first saw the light of day. He was named Léon after his father, and received simple baptism on the day of his birth, the ceremonies being deferred until the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, when they were performed in the parish church of St. Laurent.

His young mother, who is spoken of by those who knew her as having been possessed, not only of much personal grace and amiability, but also of the more solid qualities of heart and mind, was a good Christian, and early instilled into her son a love of the things of God. He lost his father when he was barely six years old, so that he and his brother Theobald, who was four years his junior, were left to the exclusive care of their widowed mother.

A little anecdote has been recorded of those early days which, as it exemplifies the child's truthful character, must not be omitted. He used to attend a neighbouring school with other little boys of his age. They were one day romping in the absence of the master, when they were nearly caught in the fact by his sudden return, and had but just time to compose their faces and resume their seats when he entered the room. He had, however, heard the noise, and immediately began questioning them as to who had been the culprits. None would confess to having had any share in the disorderly proceeding, when little Léon Dupont stepped forward and frankly owned that he had been playing instead of attending to his lessons. The master made no reply, but, when recreation hour came, he bade the boys keep their places and said very gravely to Léon, "My little fellow, you do not deserve to remain here with these well conducted



boys, so go off to the playground.” The rest were kept at their books, and received a sharp reprimand. Relating this incident gaily in his old age, Léon would greatly commend sincerity, in which, he said, he had moreover always found his account.

When he was older, his mother sent him to prosecute his studies in the United States, the disturbed condition of the Continent making her reluctant to let him go to France; whither, however, he was transferred two years later and placed at the College of Pontlevoy. Here he enjoyed the advantage of being near the Chateau of Chissay, which belonged to his maternal uncle, the Comte Gaigneron de Marolles.

The College of Pontlevoy, once so flourishing, had been ruined by the Revolution, and, although now striving to raise its head again, was as yet in a most unsatisfactory state. It would seem almost incredible, but for M. Dupont’s express testimony to the fact, that a priest who had doubly disgraced himself by taking the constitutional oath and marrying was its director.

The faith and innocence of the young Creole do not, however, appear to have suffered notably from the disorder prevalent in the college during the three years of his sojourn there. For his preservation from evil influences he was, doubtless, partly indebted to the good Christian training of his childhood, but there is reason to believe that his greatest safeguard was the fervour with which he made his first communion at twelve years of age, for he was heard in after life to rejoice at the recollection of the grace he then

received. At that time, he said, I knew nothing about divine consolations, but I do know that I shed floods of tears, and that my heart was inundated with joy. It was the spiritual strength which he received in this first Eucharistic banquet, which we may well believe fortified this young boy, deprived as he was of parental guardianship, against the temptations which surrounded him.

God had, however, provided a second father for him in his uncle, the Comte Gaigneron de Marolles, an excellent man, who treated him like one of his own children. Léon, accompanied by his brother Theobald, who had been sent over to join him, spent his vacations at the Chateau of Chissay, with his cousins and the occasional addition of other young relatives and friends. Among these was a young Creole girl from Martinique, who, like himself, was receiving her education in France, and who was afterwards to become his wife. He was a favourite with the whole party. His gaiety, his good-nature, and desire, not so much to please, as to see everyone else pleased, endeared him to all. Foremost in every sport, he was always ready, not only to make fun, but even to be made fun of, and play the fool in his own amusing way. His vivacity was accompanied with a certain tenaciousness of purpose, which at times was startling. When he was determined upon anything it was impossible to bend him.

One day, when he had climbed the great iron gate at the entrance of the approach to the Chateau, his cousin, Alfred de Marolles, who had mounted on the other unclosed side and was swinging himself backwards and forwards,

observing that Léon had placed his thumb just where the gate would fall, called out to him several times, "Léon, take your thumb away, or you will see I shall crush it." Whether or no it did not please the high-spirited youth to be dictated to by his companion, or from that species of bravado to which an exuberance of courage is apt to impel the young, Léon replied, "Just as you please, I shall not take it away." A moment after, the gate closed upon the hand of the obstinate boy, inflicting such serious damage to his thumb as to give it a deformed appearance for the rest of his life. Had not grace taken possession of his soul and moulded his character, directing all his natural faculties and dispositions to good and holy ends, we may imagine that Léon Dupont might have been as conspicuous for boldness and pertinacity in evil as he was to become for dauntless Christian courage and heroic perseverance in holy undertakings.

His college studies were finished in 1815, the year when peace was definitively concluded, and the Island of Martinique, which had once more been occupied by the English, was finally restored to France. He and his brother now returned home for a short time on a visit to their mother. Left a widow at the age of twenty-two, with large estates to manage, she had thought it advisable to remarry. Her second husband's name was Arnaud; he had property in her neighbourhood, and was a man of some position in the colony. The boys soon returned to France to complete their education and to prepare for their future professional career.

Léon, who was destined for the magistracy, repaired to Paris for the purpose of pursuing his law studies, and took rooms

at the Hotel d'Angleterre in the Rue Colombier, now the Rue Jacob, which was kept by a good and pious woman, to whom M. Dupont's biographer was indebted for many particulars relating to this early period of his life. He had an ample yearly allowance of ten thousand francs (£400), from his family, which enabled him, while pursuing his studies, to mix in good society and join in gay worldly amusements, to which his lively disposition rendered him far from averse. His birth, advantageous personal appearance, distinguished manners, and brilliant wit, all qualified him to move in the first circles, while the monarchical views which he had inherited served him as an additional passport to aristocratic houses.

To a youth of twenty-one, living in thorough independence of all family control or influence, the great French capital must have been not without its perils; and, indeed, there can be no doubt but that his early piety suffered an eclipse at this time, and that, although he did not actually renounce the practice of his religious duties, the affairs of his soul occupied but a slender portion of his attention. It could not well be otherwise, engrossed as he was by worldly frivolities, and engaged in a round of dissipating amusement. He lived to the full extent of his income, as may readily be conceived when we find that he must needs have his cabriolet and horse, all in the best style, in order that he might display himself and them in the Bois de Boulogne, and that he was an assiduous ball-goer, particularly fond of dancing, all which implied corresponding good dressing and many other expenses which his numerous invitations were sure to entail

upon him. Add to this, Léon was always open-handed, and young men are seldom remarkable for economy.

Nevertheless he always retained an unsullied reputation, and his life, though worldly, was not corrupt. Moreover, his society was by no means limited to his gay acquaintance of the Parisian *beau monde*; he cultivated friendships of a more profitable character with men as remarkable for their talents as for their sound Christian principles; and, in particular, he had the happiness of meeting again in Paris one of his old school-fellows, now a priest, the Abbé Frayssinous. By his eminent qualities of heart and intellect, this gifted young priest exercised the most salutary influence over his former companion, an influence which, along with other providential circumstances, was soon to bear good fruit; for though, drawn away by his love of pleasure, Léon had become remiss in his attention to his religious duties, he was still secretly attracted to a better way, and the voice of conscience often inwardly upbraided him for his vain and frivolous existence. True, it was to form but a brief episode in his life, yet he bitterly deplored it for the remainder of his days.

How his conversion was brought about we have now to relate. The possession of the cabriolet and horse rendered it necessary that he should also have what in those days was called a "jockey" by the French, who have now adopted the more accurate appellation of "groom" for a servant of that kind. A little Savoyard engaged in street sweeping was selected by the concierge of his hotel as likely to answer in this capacity. He was an intelligent and well looking boy, so

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