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John E. Rybolt C.M., Ph.D.

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Saint Vincent De Paul in Fiction

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

Besides the many biographies of Saint Vincent de Paul, at least two pieces of fiction in English merit a passing notice. If nothing else, they show how the popular legends about this saint continue to exert their power over the imagination of writers and their readers.¹

Antoine de Bonneval

The first novel was a full work of 299 pages, *Antoine de Bonneval: A Tale of Paris in the Days of St. Vincent de Paul*. The author was William Henry Anderdon (1816-1890) an English convert. Anderdon was ordained a priest in the Church of England but in 1850 converted to the Roman Catholic faith. His formal act of conversion took place in Paris, followed in three years by his ordination to the priesthood. A nephew of Henry Edward Cardinal Manning, archbishop of Westminster, Anderdon worked as the cardinal's secretary from 1856 to 1872. In that year he joined the Society of Jesus. His Jesuit superiors assigned him to work in Manchester in 1875, and he lived there until 1889, nearly the end of his life.²

During his years in Manchester, Anderdon continued his prolific writing. He had begun writing religious novels in 1857. The first of these was *Bonneval, a Story of the Fronde*. Apparently it was not too

¹Notes about other fictionalized works, not in English, have appeared occasionally in Vincentian sources. One novel mentioned is Siiri Juva, *Pyhimis ja Rakkaus* [Holiness and Love, in Finnish.] (Helsinki: 1957. 292 pp.); at the date of the notice in *Annales de la Congregation de la Mission*, 123 (1958):634, it had not been translated. Two plays: P.V. Delaporte, S.J., "Les trente sous de Vincent de Paul", in one act; translated into German in 1894 (*Annales CM*, 60 [1895]:301; and Bartolomeo Becchis, C.M. [The Holy Slave of Tunis], in three acts, about 1924. Announced in *Annales CM*, 90 (1925):799, its original Italian title or conditions of publication were not mentioned. Best known is the film by Maurice Cloche; see Fernand Combaluzier. "Le Film Monsieur Vincent" (*Annales CM*, 112-13 [1947-48]:42-47). This note reprints various reviews. In addition, children's books often take great liberties with the stories, even though they are not classified as thoroughly fiction. The author would appreciate receiving information about other works of Vincentian fiction.

²*Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. Anderdon, William Henry.

successful, since all his remaining novels appeared in several editions, and some were translated into French and German. Although the line of development of *Antoine de Bonneval* from *Bonneval, a Story of the Fronde* remains unclear, it appears that Anderdon revised his first novel and added the name of Vincent de Paul. If nothing else, the addition of Vincent's name to the subtitle might have helped sales. A French translation appeared in 1860: *Antoine de Bonneval, ou Paris au temps de Saint Vincent de Paul*. It had an additional subtitle, the same as the earlier English work, *épisode du temps de la Fronde*. The American version came out in 1867, published in Baltimore by Kelly and Piet.³

Anderdon also published several controversial pieces in the spirit of the late nineteenth century, and contributed to newspapers and journals. None of these, apparently, pointed to any continuing interest in the life and work of Saint Vincent de Paul.

As a work of nineteenth-century fiction, *Antoine de Bonneval* followed the conventions of that genre, such as addresses to the reader, sentimental and melodramatic emotions, literary and historical digressions, the use of classical quotations for chapter headings and in the body of the text itself. This makes difficult reading for someone used to the conventions of more modern works. As religious fiction, moreover, it was predictable: a young man faces challenges to both good and evil, flirts with both, and is eventually saved from evil. As a work of historical fiction, this novel borrows heavily from the standard works of the time in recreating details of a nearly forgotten period in French life. The great ones of the time fill the pages: Anne of Austria, Cardinal de Retz, Cardinal Mazarin, the Prince de Condé, to name just a few.

The author carefully wove into his narrative the main points of Vincent's fame, such as his ministry to the galley slaves, the Charities and the community of the Daughters of Charity, care for foundlings, and the priests of the Mission. Louise de Marillac also figures in the narrative, though to a lesser extent than Vincent de Paul. The author names her Madame Legras, and describes her as follows:

Such a manner, so winning, so subduing to inferior natures, results perhaps in every case from the combination of high qualities, belonging at once to the natural order and to the supernatural. It was possessed in an eminent degree by Madame Legras. You could not approach her

³Alfred Milon. Review of Anderdon, *Antoine de Bonneval*. (*Annales CM*, 83 [1918]:903-04).

without feeling yourself within the sphere of a being of no ordinary mould; of one superior to the average of great ladies, or even of good ladies. There was an unconscious dignity amid all her sweetness, less, perhaps, a relic from early training and associations in the world than from present familiarity with the highest, the most ennobling contemplations. (Page 121)

The author describes Monsieur Vincent at work in his study in the next few pages:

When, therefore, we discover St. Vincent seated and writing in the roomy but scantily furnished apartment of his house of Saint Lazare, we may be sure that he is occupied very differently from the crowds of intelligent and educated beings who are breathing at that same moment the air of Paris. . . . It is to relieve a suffering, it is to gladden a distress, to enlighten an ignorance, to remove a doubtfulness, to save from a sin that Vincent is at work there. And as he bends over his writing, you may see from the expression of his features how his whole heart and soul go along with his occupation. It is an old man whom you are looking at; he sits by that little bare table, without fire or carpet in his room, and clad, notwithstanding the severity of the season, in a cassock worn thin with age. (Pages 127-28)

The subject of the tale, Antoine de Bonneval, goes to Paris on a mission for his family. Bandits ambush and capture him, and he hears from his captors of Vincent's care for the convicts and others. Antoine manages an escape and is saved on the road by Monsieur Vincent. He accompanies the young Antoine to Paris, and leaves him to his responsibilities there. Amid the glitter of the city, Antoine encounters two characters who represent the good and evil sides of his personality. Vincent de Paul, of course, is the good element. Antoine reflects, "But my two topics of consolation are strong ones nevertheless—that Vincent de Paul has his eye upon you, and that you are yourself half sickened of the world ere you have well tasted its intoxicating draught. I rest my hopes on your own better self, and that priest's ardent persevering charity." (Page 154)

The evil element is Louis de Montauban, an acquaintance of Antoine's and habitué of the salons of Paris, with their corruption and intrigues. "Young De Montauban could not yet be called a finished specimen of this semi-satanic class of being; but he had tokens of being a hopeful pupil of the school, in training for still greater lengths of energetic wickedness." (Page 155) Antoine is even lured into a sorcerer's apartment, where he experiences the power of evil through incantations. Amid this, he senses a higher call, and Vincent de Paul once

again saves him. Vincent brings Antoine to Saint Lazare in his own carriage, and helps him to spend some time on a spiritual retreat. All the while, the Fronde, the long-lasting civil war, develops outside the walls of the motherhouse.

One night, Vincent discovers a foundling. With literary license, Anderdon placed this event at the same time that the royal family chose to flee Paris—the baby and the royals are then homeless. Antoine de Bonneval visits the court in its exile, and accepts a secret mission from the queen to Paris. Despite his disguise, patrols discover and imprison him in the Bastille. Another friend of Antoine's arranges for his escape, and he returns to Saint Lazare. Once the queen has returned to Paris, she thanks Antoine for his devotion to her cause.

Five years pass, and the author then introduces the reader to Père Antoine de Bonneval, C.M. In the intervening time, the young man has found his true vocation. The novel closes with his old adversary, Louis de Montauban, coming to Saint Lazare. He had been mortally wounded in a duel and was rushed to Saint Lazare for medical help, only to discover Antoine at his bedside. Antoine exhorts him to a final confession, but to no avail. "And the spirit that had bartered itself for the phantoms of evil passion and the dream of the world, has passed—passed to stand its trial by a code that errs not, nor spares where it does not save." (Page 299)

This is not a work of high art. Nevertheless, it brought to life in the English-speaking world the figures of Vincent and Louise in a time when good English-language biographies were practically non-existent.

The Galley Slave

The second work is *The Galley Slave. An Incident in the Life of St. Vincent of Paul* (1893), a translation of *Le Rameur de Galère* (1865) by the prolific French novelist, Marie Saffray (Madame Chervet), who wrote first under the pseudonym of Marie David, and later as Raoul de Navéry.⁴ This novel is shorter, 183 pages in translation, but in some ways more interesting than *Antoine de Bonneval* since it weaves its narrative around more familiar issues. Despite the work's lack of continuity, it is much easier to read than Anderdon's tale, since the

⁴London: St. Anselm's Society, 1893; translator unnamed.

writing is chaste and direct, without fanciful allusions or learned references.⁵

Marie Saffray was born in 1831 in a strict family. Her mother placed her for her education with the Ladies of the Sacred Heart at Vannes, where she received encouragement toward her literary development. Upon leaving the convent school at age sixteen, she married a Doctor Chervet. Her husband died within four years, and she never remarried, concentrating instead on her writing. Her first efforts, under the pseudonym of Marie David, were, in the judgment of at least one source, mediocre.⁶

Beginning in 1860, she turned from her earlier poetry and biblical dramas to longer novels. For these, she employed the more elaborate male pseudonym, Raoul de Navéry. Most of these many novels--she published more than sixty--abound in remarkable historical coincidences and trite expressions. Nevertheless, they sold well. Several were translated into English and Italian since Madame Chervet knew how to tell a good story with strong effect. After her death, 17 May 1885, the work of translation into English increased. Notable translated works were *Idols*, (1882); *The Monk's Pardon* (1883); *Captain Roscoff, a story of the French Revolution* (1899); *The Queen's Confession or The Martyrdom of St. John Nepomucene* (1900); *Father Fitzroy. A tale of the Irish famine* (n.d.) Some of her French works continued in reprint in France and Canada as late as the 1920s.

As in Anderdon's *Antoine de Bonneval*, so in *The Galley Slave*, Chervet joins incidents separated in the saint's lifetime to develop the following story for dramatic effect.

Jean Rameau, a moderately prosperous businessman, loses his wife in childbirth. He banishes the child, Honoré, from his affections. His rejected son's place is later taken by Rémy, son of a poor widow. The woman's husband had died at sea to save the father of Andoche, another character in this complex tale. Honoré spends his youth in

⁵A note in *Annales CM*, 75 (1910):529-30 refers to "Saint Vincent dans les fers. Drame en 3 actes. Paris, autographie de Saint Lazare, 95, rue de Sèvres." No information exists about the origin of this item, which is found in the Vincentian motherhouse library or archives in Paris. The same note also refers to *Vincent de Paule* (sic) *ou l'illustre galérien. Mélodrame historique en trois actes par M. Lemaire*. This was first presented on stage, 7 October 1815, in Paris. The author, H. Lemaire, was a writer of romances, dramas, and moral pieces. He also wrote a life of Saint Vincent for youth (1825.) It appears that the Lemaire piece was the origin of the later autograph, "Dans les fers." This latter was altered to provide for all male actors, probably for young students. It does not seem, on the basis of the identities of the characters in the drama, to have been the origin of Madame Chervet's work.

⁶"Navéry (Marie Saffray, dite Raoul de)." In *Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises: Le Dix-Neuvième Siècle* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1972), 197.

wild pursuits. His gambling debts lead him to steal from his father. He implicates his rival Rémy, who receives a ten-year sentence to the galleys. As Rémy's mother and handicapped brother see him off, an unidentified "poor captive returning from Tunis" comforts them in their sorrow.

In one of a series of confusing flashbacks, Madame Chervet recounts Vincent's Tunisian captivity. She obligingly fills in the names of all those persons unnamed in the story related by Vincent himself: Gourmi, his first owner; Ali-Moia, the alchemist who blows himself up in an experiment; Ahmed, the renegade (originally Bernard), and his wife, Aika, who becomes entranced by Vincent's singing Christian hymns. Aika is so interested, that she arranges for Vincent to celebrate mass secretly for her and her Nubian maidens. A few lines will help to get a flavor of the narrative.

The heavens were studded with stars; it was one of the most beautiful of Eastern nights. About an hour before dawn, a gentle knock was heard at Aika's door. She rose, and, followed by her maids, crossed the silent corridors, the lonely garden, and was soon in the open country. . . .

An altar had been raised of earth and sods, like those of old in earliest times, as memorials of some sacred oath. From the palm-trees fell the light tent of rich drapery sent by Aika; their scaly trunks were the pillars of the improvised temple. Behind the altar, to complete the rustic Biblical picture, were two camels lying on the sand, and some oxen roused by the bright glare of the lamps. (Page 55)

By chance her renegade husband discovers Vincent celebrating the Eucharist. "A cry of rage and indignation from behind forced them to rise. Ahmed, with bloodshot eyes, a knife in his hand, in a state of frenzy, had just seized Aika by the veil, and was holding her down on the ground. Vincent turned from the altar, and, raising the sacred chalice, said to his master in a voice of priestly authority—"Behold the blood of the God whom thou has sold! Behold the body of the Lamb whom thou hast slain!" (Page 56)

Overcome with remorse, Ahmed determines to return with Vincent to Europe. Aika becomes a Christian and she and her maids leave for the monastery in Bethlehem.

Returning to the main narrative, Chervet places Rémy's mother and brother in Marseilles as they try to get a glimpse of him. Meanwhile, Andoche, introduced earlier, tells his tale in a flashback. He had seen Honoré Rameau steal his own father's money and had blackmailed Honoré to get ahead in business. He also forced Honoré to sign

a confession, should he, Andoche, need it some day. Andoche also relates the tale of his father's shipwreck and comes to realize that Rémy's father had died saving his own father's life. The irony of this situation prompts Andoche to determine to save Rémy from further punishment as a galley slave.

The operation of grace and reconciliation moves forward with the arrival of a priest (Vincent de Paul) at the home where Rémy's mother and brother are lodging. Vincent sends Madame (*sic*) le Gras and one of her sisters to care for Andoche's father, now near death. Vincent had been on his way, incognito, in his capacity as Chaplain General to visit the galleys in Marseilles. He meets Rémy, who has just received a letter from Andoche informing him of his true status. The galley slave easily persuades Vincent, whom he knows only as a kindly visitor, to take his place for five days as Number 2918 to enable him to recover Honoré's written confession.

Rémy thought himself in a dream. He wept, he kissed the stranger's hands; his joy was beginning to be extravagant—it stifled him. The visitor gave an expressive look and smile, more divine than human. A hard dull sound, and Rémy's limbs were unshackled. He looked for his benefactor, that he might bid him a grateful farewell. He started—stunned and horrified, hardly able to believe his senses. The stranger had calmly placed his foot on a step, while Thermute [the overseer] riveted the bolt of the chains that Rémy had just put off! (Page 127)

As Rémy leaves the ship, Honoré spies him, follows him, and manages to recover his incriminating confession on his own. He takes it home, but in his anxiety loses his mind. Rémy, after visiting his bedridden mother, returns to the ship just as King Louis XIII is visiting the same galley. The king notices Vincent, Number 2918, at the oars, and hears the tale from him. His Chaplain General's courage so impresses the king that he asks Vincent to assist him on his deathbed. Rémy makes himself known, and Louis pardons him along with many others. Shouts fill the air: "Long live the King! Long live Vincent of Paul!"

Back at Honoré's home, a doctor has helped him to recover his mental health. One day, Honoré admits his guilt to his father, who drops dead of apoplexy at the news, a cruel irony. At the funeral, Vincent happens to enter with Rémy, his mother, and his brother, whereupon Honoré confesses publicly and all are reconciled.

The difficulty of absorbing this material lies in its complexity, and in the way it strains the educated reader's imagination. Nevertheless,

the issue in these two novels is not their historical accuracy, but how well they convey the religious sentiment of their age. In other words, they tell us more about the devotion of nineteenth-century Catholicism to Saint Vincent de Paul than they do about the sixteenth century. As a result, these two curious novels achieve their purposes well.