

The Red Cross Saint

S. M. P. '41

With the cry "God wills it", on their lips and the Red Cross emblazoned on their armour, the Crusaders of old went forth to relieve the Christians from the tyranny of the infidels and deliver the holy places of Palestine from their desecrating hands. Today new Crusaders are engaged in the mighty task of bringing relief to all manner of suffering, and they wear the same Red Cross—a fitting symbol of Him who "healed divers diseases" and "went about doing good". (Acts X-38).

The magnificent work of the International Red Cross Society, magnified to astounding proportions in these distressful times of war, stands as a glorious monument to the memory of Henri Dunant, the great Swiss philanthropist. For it was his book, describing the horrible sufferings of the soldiers in the battle of Solferino, in 1859, that led to the formation of the international organization now known everywhere by its sign of mercy and charity.

Even before Dunant's time, however, organized care of the sick and dying, in peace as well as in war, had been undertaken under the standard of the Red Cross, and the initiator of that noble work, Saint Camillus de Lellis, merits an honoured place in the history of the Red Cross.

The early years of Camillus de Lellis, who was born in northern Italy, in 1550, were far from edifying. He was a soldier, and, though he fought valiantly enough, his chief delight was gambling. Once he even gave his shirt in order to gratify his passion. Several sporadic attempts to reform ended in miserable failure and he fell deeper than ever. On one of these occasions he was inspired by the example of two Franciscan friars to make a vow to change his ways and enter the Franciscan Order, but he was refused admission and resumed his old habits. On another occasion he entered St. Giacomo Hospital in Rome, for treatment of a "slight scratch" which he had received on a military expedition in 1569, and which had developed into a festering wound. Unable to pay for the treatment, Camillus offered his services in the hospital, and resolved to give up gambling, but again he failed and was sent away.

At the age of twenty-four, after a terrific struggle, he finally did renounce his evil habits and began a new life. The memory of his vow revived and he sought and gained admission to a monastery. But the wound in his leg broke out afresh and he was dismissed.

The holy year of 1575, saw Camillus again in Rome at the hospital of St. Giacomo. He was given another trial working in the hospital, and this time there were no complaints. Twice more he tried to become a monk, and twice he was compelled to give up his ambition because of the re-opening of his sore leg. Each time he returned to his position in the hospital.

By this time Camillus was thirty years of age, and only then he began to discover his real life-work. Already he had learned that constant attention to work helped him to avoid temptations, and he soon realized that, in his hospital duties, the more he devoted himself to making others happy, the happier he became himself. With the realization of the benefits of nursing accompanied by love, Camillus became ever more aware of the need for hospital reform.

In the middle ages the hospitals of Europe had reached a high state of efficiency, but in the period following they fell away from their former flourishing state until, by the latter half of the sixteenth century, they were centres of the utmost physical and moral degradation. The destruction of the religious orders which had long been devoted to hospital work and the substitution of hired workers in the hospitals contributed greatly to the downfall of these institutions. Besides, with the Renaissance there revived a great emphasis on physical beauty and perfection and a consequent horror of the sick and ugly. The ill and dying were so shunned for fear of contagion and the hospitals were so filthy that often prisoners had to be taken from the jails and compelled to wait on the sick. It is no wonder, then, that Camillus grieved so intensely when he saw how negligently the sick were attended, no wonder that he longed to find a remedy.

One evening in August, 1582, as he stood in the hospital of St. Giacomo, the thought occurred to him, that, if he founded a congregation of pious men who would work for the love of God rather than for wages, then he might have hopes of seeing the sick cared for as he thought they should be. Before long Camillus gathered about him a small group of co-workers whom he inspired with ideals similar to his own, and there in the hospital he made the humble

beginning of the congregation which later came to be known as the Ministers of the Sick. Camillus and his faithful followers soon found that, if their work was to be successful, they needed a home of their own, and they accordingly left the hospital and established themselves in a residence in Rome.

Gradually the results of their efforts appeared in the hospitals they visited all over Rome. Little by little the obstacles to the success of the congregation were overcome. Camillus and his companions studied and were ordained priests in order to be able to minister properly to the spiritual needs of the patients, but they continued also the arduous work of personal, tender nursing of the sick.

As Camillus became aware of other needs, he extended his work to an ever broadening field; first, the nursing of the sick in private homes; next, the care of the plague-stricken, whom he saw were too often abandoned to die in their misery; then, the assistance and comfort of the dying.

So great was the progress of the congregation that Camillus determined to seek the approbation of it from the Sovereign Pontiff, and in 1586 this favor was granted. Pope Sixtus V approved and confirmed the congregation, and Camillus was named its first superior. Later in the same year Camillus himself visited the Holy Father, and requested that the members of his congregation be permitted to wear on their cassocks, as the distinctive badge of their work, a cross of red cloth. The size and shape of the Red Cross so familiar to all of us are exactly similar to those of the cross designed by Camillus as the badge of his society. The Pope gladly acceded to his request, and the first Red Cross workers went forth in the "Crusade of the Sick".

The immense benefits which resulted from the indefatigable zeal and ardent charity of the followers of Camillus could not long be confined to the city of Rome. Other cities asked for their services, and new foundations were made in various parts of Italy. No longer were the sick of those places left in squalor and dirt. Nothing was too repulsive to these devoted nurses. They searched out the most abandoned and most deplorable cases, and, while they cared for their bodies, they gave them spiritual comfort and consolation, raising them up even from the depths of moral abasement, and leading them to Christian resignation and serene peace in their sufferings.

In the year 1595 a body of Italian troops was sent on a military expedition into Hungary, and the Pope asked that some of the members of Camillus's congregation accompany them to care for the sick and dying soldiers. In this way began the military nursing work that was the forerunner of our Field Ambulances and Red Cross Hospitals. Camillus laid down minute rules to guide his followers in establishing hospitals and refuges for the wounded, in arranging their ambulance service, and in providing medical supplies. Splendid work was accomplished on this expedition, and the fame of the order of Ministers of the Sick in military nursing spread far and wide, so that this new activity became a regular part of their work.

Before the death of St. Camillus, which occurred in 1614, his order had spread over southern Europe, and since his death it has extended its humane service to thirteen different countries of Europe and America. Wherever appeared the Red Cross of the Ministers of the Sick, there the afflicted, the plague-stricken, and the dying were assured of a care as tenderly sympathetic as it was efficient. Inspired with the ideals of Him Whose cross they wore on their habits, they labored not for gold nor earthly reward but with a lively faith that what they did for the "least of these" brought joy to Him in Whose service they were engaged.

Just as

"A pebble in the streamlet scant

Has changed the course of many a river",

so the "slight scratch" which Camillus received in 1569, was the beginning of a course of events that changed Camillus from a gambling trooper to a model of sanctity and charity. It was this wound that forced him to give up his army life; it was this wound that led him to St. Giacomo's hospital and a realization of its sad state; it was this wound that obliged him to abandon his four-fold attempt to become a Franciscan and forced him to seek another way of serving God. It was in the care of the sick and dying that he found his vocation, and he insured the success of that work by the establishment of the Congregation of the Ministers of the Sick, whose members, enrolled under the emblem of the Red Cross, rightly claim for their founder the title, "The Red Cross Saint".