

OUT OF THE MUD

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THE HEAD of the world's most prosaic and uninteresting things stands *mud*. Yet, uninteresting and prosaic though it may be, it is not entirely useless. Our western plains are only a century removed from the time when mud was indispensable in the construction of pioneer homes. Well-placed clods of dampened earth warded off the ferocious attacks of the biting winter wind and helped keep the cabin a trifle warmer. Certainly, to children, mud offers the means of unparalleled enjoyment. Batters of soft, oozy mud can be readily whipped into amorphous, but wholly inedible, pies. Then, too, mud has had its share in making history. A conveniently placed mud-puddle gained the adventurous, and gallant, Sir Walter Raleigh Queen Elizabeth's recognition, though it cost him a perfectly good cloak. The theory of evolution had its foundation in mud. Perhaps that is the reason it has never passed, nor ever shall pass, beyond the theory stage. Mud is an extremely uncertain thing on which to build.

Mud is like a huge cornucopia, overflowing with possibilities. Among these potentialities lies one of destiny-shaping, or of character-building. At least, mud shared indirectly in shaping the destiny and building the character of an erring Peter Gonzalez. It turned him from the low road of self-indulgence to the steep and rugged path of sanctity.

In the year 1180, a squalling infant was welcomed into the Gonzalez home in Fromista, Spain. When the waters of Baptism swept the child into the protecting arms of the Church, the youngster was called Peter. The Gonzalez family was what we would call well-to-do or middle class. Peter was given all he wished for and became, in all probability, a spoiled child. Education was not exactly forced on him. He took to learning and soon had gathered all the fruits of wisdom that evening sessions around the family hearth could offer. When he was ten years old, the good Señora consulted the master of the house about the advisability of sending their offspring to a school of higher learning. Señor Gonzalez agreed with his wife's notion, so the young boy was packed off to nearby Palencia.

About this time St. Dominic Guzman was passing from the Arts course at Palencia to a canonry at Osma. Also, the University of Palencia had become fully accredited and was placed under the pro-

tection of Alphonso IX. The *trivium*—grammar, rhetoric and logic—and the *quadrivium*—arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy—did not prove too much of a strain on the mental powers of Peter. His natural attraction for study persisted, but books could not exhaust his youthful enthusiasm. Finding an outlet for energy is just about the easiest thing a schoolboy can do. For some inexplicable reason, nothing less than a glorious riot, or a general free-for-all, seems to satisfy boyish desires for amusement. And the usual victims of the medieval school-boys were the long-suffering shopkeepers. Needless to say, Peter must have shuffled his feet in guilty silence before the tribunal of his mother's brother, the Bishop of Palencia, on many an occasion. These barbaric forays of the boy hurt the Bishop. Young Peter had been put under his care and had developed into a rowdy before he could exercise any influence over him. What would his sister think of such loose guarding?

Peter lost the desire for disturbing the equanimity of the merchants once he had passed out of the *quadrivium*. He now began to consider his vocation. Was he to be a teacher? No, a teacher's life was too dull an existence. Soldier? Well, that was a thrilling sort of life, but the work was hard and the pay inadequate. Farmer? No. Merchant? Definitely no. Merchants rarely smiled and constantly walked the streets with furrowed brows. Then he must become a priest. There was nothing else left and, after all, he had to do something for a livelihood. That wasn't such a bad idea at all. Some day he might even succeed his uncle in the bishopric of Palencia. His uncle, so he thought, lived an untroubled kind of existence; he ate well, had enough money and never worried. Then there was no doubt. He *would* become a priest!

Once this course was decided, Peter dipped into the study of theology. In due time he was elevated to the diaconate, and it was at this period of his late life that mud played its destiny-shaping rôle. As Peter had been a spoiled child, he was now on the way to becoming a spoiled cleric. His studies came with little mental effort, his meals were the best, his clothes the finest. Life was bright, the future brilliant. He was proud of himself, proud of his abilities and this pride was foreshadowing a fall.

On Christmas Day, Palencia was alive with color and gaiety. The feast of Our Saviour's birth awakened in all the inhabitants of that medieval town a joy and feeling of good fellowship that was unknown throughout the year. Peter was alone in the Bishop's residence. His books had been put aside for the present and he was awaiting the arrival of his friends. When they came, he would ride

off with them and spread their gladness about the town. Peter heard them coming. He met them at the entrance to his uncle's residence and they were off on their mission of gloom-chasing. Peter was resplendent in his gorgeous riding clothes; his handsome face and figure were the envy of his group and the admiration of the townfolk. Peter was aglow with pride, and lo, the fall was at hand. His mount was very nervous. As Peter waved to a friend, the horse reared, the rider lost his seat, and was flipped unceremoniously into a slimy mud-hole. Angry words bubbled to Peter's lips, but not past them. His friends, surprised for the moment, remained silent. Then they began to slap their thighs and roar their amusement at Peter's plight. Peter shook his muddied fist at the fast-vanishing horse, looked with bitterness at his laughing companions, and with a scornful glance quieted the annoying crowd. He was wild with anger, but across his mind flashed the memory of another fall.

It had happened on the road to Damascus. Another man had been dismounted. "And as he went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew nigh to Damascus: and suddenly a light shined round about him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him: 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?'"¹

Peter thought, "Is this the handwork of God? Have I, too, been guilty of persecuting Christ by my life? Is God pointing out the fickleness of the world in this way? I looked noble. The world fawned and bowed before me. I have been humbled in the mud. The world laughs at me and makes me the fool. The fool? I will be a fool, but a fool for the sake of Christ." These thoughts scurried through his brain in an instant.

The crowd had begun to laugh again and was howling uncontrollably as Peter struggled slowly to his feet. Then Peter started to laugh. So strange a laugh it was that the mockery of the people was hushed, and they stared in amazement. But Peter kept on laughing and began to stroll back to the Bishop's home, tossing off his spotted cloak as he went along. And the silenced crowd wondered.

This wonder did not pass quickly. A few days later the profligate Peter went off to join the newly-formed band of mendicant friars whom St. Dominic, the canon of Osma now turned apostle, had gathered together. As in St. Paul's time, great wonder must have been stirred up by his sudden veering away from the part of a persecutor to the company of the persecuted. The world finds it hard to put credence in such radicalism, and such a sceptical attitude is justifiable in regard to most men. But blessed radicals like Paul and

¹ Acts IX, 3-4.

Peter Gonzalez are different they never swerve from the one road to the true goal, once that path is made known to them.

Peter did not merely flip over a new leaf. He did more than that. He flung the whole book he had written by his actions into the bottomless abyss of the past, and immediately set to work writing another volume. He steeped himself in the Sacred Sciences. His zeal and his natural ability pushed him along with great strides. He yearned to become an ardent preacher, and he set up for his model, St. Dominic.

Putting off the old man is a task which involves a tremendous amount of will power. Man labors for a mark in the world; the saint labors to put a mark on the world. Man may become dissatisfied when he attains his mark. The saint can only rejoice when he has accomplished his mission. He brands the world with a salutary mark—the sign of the Cross. Man strives for his own glory; the saint strives for the glory of God. Now Peter was well on the way to becoming a saint. He wanted to make God's word better known among his own easy-going people, and this was to be done by preaching. Peter had all that was necessary for a preacher; he had an attractive figure, a fine voice, smooth presentation, knowledge of his subject, and above all, zeal. His sermons fell like a fiery brand of truth among his auditors. God was good to this medieval Paul and often showed His love for His servant by having miracles worked through his intercession.

Once, while he was preaching to a great crowd at Bayona, the people became troubled by the approach of ominous storm clouds. The rumble of thunder crept closer and closer to the apprehensive group of listeners. There was no protection from the storm nearby. The frightened people prepared to scatter. Peter noticed this and cried out, "Fear not. He whom the winds and sea and earth obey will not allow the storm to harm you." After he said this, he raised his arm and commanded the clouds to part. The sky above the audience cleared immediately and Peter continued his sermon as the rain poured down on all sides of the group at a distance of only a few paces.

Hand in hand with Peter's fame as a preacher went also his renown as a confessor. King Ferdinand III of Castile asked Peter to accompany him in his expedition against the Moors. Peter had an unusual influence over the men. He kept up the morale of the army as well as the morals. His passing from rank to rank of Ferdinand's troops struck terror into hearts of the Moors. He was like the sun and a cloud. As the sun he brightened the hopes of the Spaniards,

like a cloud he shadowed the expectations of the Moors.

Another story about this holy man brings out an example of perversity in human nature. Why should anyone want to wish evil on another? It is difficult to explain, but the fact exists. At any rate, some men (perhaps they had wagered on the outcome,) persuaded an attractive, but rather foolish young woman to tempt Peter. Posing as a penitent, she presented herself to the friar. Peter penetrated her shameful designs immediately. Wrapping his cappa about his body, he flung himself into the flames of a nearby fire-place. The woman screamed and begged the saintly man to forgive her. Peter came out of the fire untouched by the flames and the woman became truly penitent. Friar Gonzalez would rather have had his body seared by flames than to have his soul burned by passion.

Sailors have recognized Peter as their patron and many petitions have been presented to the Holy See that the title "Patron of Sailors" may be officially granted to him. This devotion to St. Telmus or St. Elmo, as the sailors call Peter, arose out of the friar's appearance to a storm-tossed crew. This miracle happened while Peter was still alive and has been repeated many times since. The word *corposant*, referring to St. Elmo's fire or the glow or brush seen at night on a spar or yard of a ship, comes from *corpus sanctum* ("holy body of Blessed Peter") and is now a recognized English word.

"Many are the miracles," runs the account in the *Lives of the Brethren*, "recorded of Brother Peter Gonzalez of Spain. . . . Among these [one hundred and eighty miracles] may be reckoned five lepers made clean, ten possessed persons restored to their wits, very many blind, deaf and dumb, throat diseases, ulcers, contracted limbs, and fevers, all of which were healed by invoking him." Added to this gift of miracles was also the gift of prophecy. Among the things he foretold was the day of his death, Easter Sunday, 1246. He had been preaching the Holy Week sermons at Tuy and after completing these talks he went to join his apostolic model, St. Dominic, in heaven. He was beatified by Benedict XIV, and his feast is celebrated in the Dominican calendar on April 14th.

Men are often inclined to pass over small things in their lives. Suppose that Peter Gonzalez had thought his fall into the mud a mere accident. If he had, there is no doubt about how he would have spent the rest of his life. He would have been a worldly priest, utterly useless in winning souls for God. But a new Gonzalez rose out of that Palencian mud-hole, a Gonzalez whose body was covered with clinging mud, but whose soul had been seared with grace. Mud and grace united to form an invincible combination for the listless Peter. Mud made him a ridiculous sight. Grace made him see.