

The Dancer of Devil's Den

“What news, sergeant?” yelled the officer to the panic-stricken enlisted man, who was looking back and forth at all of the men and horses. The scene was bedlam. An urgency saturated the air as the late afternoon heat of early July joined forces with the sight of the enemy pressing the issue at their front. Cannons roared and bullets shrieked, yet the soldier in blue ignored all of that, and the officer, searching for something or someone in the chaos. “Sergeant!” the officer demanded once more.

The soldier finally turned to the officer and with no formality, hollered, “General Warren has sent me with a message for the commander of the 1st Division, but General Barnes, damn him, cannot be found!”

“He reconnoiters there!” The officer pointed to the Southeast. “What is the message from Warren?”

“I am to deliver it to General Barnes personally!” declared the soldier.

“Damn it, Sergeant! I don’t have time for formalities! What is the message?” The sergeant gained a fraction of control over his frayed nerves, enough to realize he was speaking to a full colonel. With a regained sense of military bearing, he gathered himself.

Then he shouted, “We must occupy that hill yonder!” He pointed beyond the colonel to the closer and smaller of two rounded knolls, or knobs, on their left flank. “It must be done or they will have the high ground on our flank!”

The officer did not hesitate in his decision. "Tell General Warren it shall be defended! I will take the responsibility of taking my brigade there!"

"Who do I say gives the order?" The sergeant was already hurrying away.

Despite that, the officer yelled after him, "Vincent! Colonel Strong Vincent!"

"My dearest husband, strong in name, strong in heart." The bride of one day reached up and caressed her new husband's bare chin and then brushed his bushy sideburns.

"You make me blush my dear Eliza." He smiled gently, filled with memories of the night before. A feeling of completeness swelled within him.

"Tell me you will stay, the war be damned."

His smile grew wider and he gently chided her, "Such language, my love." She did not apologize. "I am afraid I cannot. I have my orders."

"May the devil take your orders!" the bride commanded. "Wed one day and gone off to war the next. No one should have such misfortune."

Her husband could not stop smiling. The world did not matter. Nothing mattered beyond kissing his wife, which he did. "Liz, my sweetness and light, do not trouble your mind. You know I love you and I always shall. Every opportunity for leave, I promise I will come back home. I will count the days until we are together again." She opened her mouth to speak, but

he gently placed the tip of his finger on her lower lip. She held back and he said, "And if I fall, remember, you have given your husband to the most righteous cause that ever widowed a woman."

"I'd rather be your cranky old wife many years from this day than your beloved widow tomorrow."

"The Orange Blossoms are routed! Norton, come here! I need another set of eyes. The New Yorkers have bought us some time!" Colonel Vincent looked across the valley, created by Plum Run, to the large rock formation below him and knew it would soon be occupied by Confederate sharpshooters. Beyond that he saw cannons being turned in his direction. As he looked farther left he saw troop movements across distant fields and knew an attack would soon come. Thunder erupted below. The Rebels had captured the New Yorkers' guns and now had begun to fire them.

The colonel did not move at first. There was, as yet, no troops on top of the hill with him, and even if they had seen him, why would they waste artillery ammunition on one man? Far more likely that they would take a few potshots with whatever rifles they possessed. Yet the whistling roar of the rounds grew louder and if not for the fact that he had already "seen the elephant" at places like Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, he might not have known to duck and take cover, riding out the barrage instead of running away in the open. Air and

ground bursts exploded around him. A moment of confusion took hold. Then he heard, "Sir, are you all right." It was then that he saw the problem.

"Down with the flag, Norton! Damn it! Down with the flag! Go behind those rocks with it!" Norton, the flag-bearer for the brigade, retreated back the way he came, furling the flag as he went. Vincent noticed a pause in the cannon fire and soon followed. Both of them sank down behind the boulders that littered the top of the hill. In a surprising burst of emotion, the colonel began to laugh. Norton, who was also his bugler, gave him a strange look and then also began to chuckle as more explosions rained dirt and small rocks down on them. Vincent slapped Norton on the knee and said, "Tell me, Norton, what did you do to make them so mad?"

Another salvo let loose before he got his answer. As the rounds approached, Norton gave a snort and said, "I told them Grey Backs they would've had a chance here if they hadn't shot ol' Stonewall a few months back. They did the job for us." Vincent did not hear much of what Norton said. The artillery rounds had already begun to explode.

A cry of pure pain erupted from the porch. Elizabeth took a deep breath and another and then another. She could feel the contraction beginning to fade, but the pain seemed to trail behind, lingering, once more telling her that she could not do this. She was alone and she was not strong enough, she told herself, to get through it on her own. The contractions had started as she rode home from her family's picnic. Perhaps it had been the bumpy carriage

ride. Whatever its cause, she had not made it to the door. Now she was lying on the porch swing, screaming to the heavens. She knew she needed help. Once she got past this, she was going to take her husband's advice and move in with his parents. Her panting went on, not slowing one bit. Yet, the contraction was almost dissipated. That she could feel. Maybe she could make it to the home of her friend, Pearl, before the next one hit. Elizabeth felt a small sense of calm settle over her and seized the moment to take a deep breath. She closed her eyes, praying that no more contractions would come for a long time. Without warning, as if in answer to her pleading, a shadow passed over her, blocking the setting summer sun. A shiver ran through her spine, goosebumps rose on her arms, and her first conscious reaction was to shut her eyes even tighter.

"Can I help you Mrs. Vincent?" With trepidation slowly growing in her mind, Elizabeth looked up at weary eyes, wrinkled skin, and the gray beard of a raggedy man who seemed to need her help more than the reverse. Yet, there was something soft about him, an obvious empathy for a person, a desire to help.

"I am having some contractions," she grunted out. "My mother warned me. They are likely false. The baby is not due for more than a month."

"Shall I call for your midwife?" asked the old man.

"My midwife..." Elizabeth let loose with a terrible holler and began to pant again. The contractions were getting closer together. Her prayer had gone unanswered. This should not be happening she thought. Through strained breaths she said, "The midwife has gone to Warren for the holiday."

“Are you opposed to a Catholic, Mrs. Vincent?”

Her face twisted into a snarl from the pain radiating through her torso. “No. No, I’m not.”

“I’ll return, shortly with Sister Marie, she of the Nativity.” The old man turned and began to step down off the porch. Elizabeth was confused by his declaration. She knew not a nun of that name.

Trying to find a reason to trust him, she asked, “Who are you, sir?”

“My name’s Norton, Oliver Norton. I served under your husband.” His chest swelled a little with pride and he smiled sadly at the memory. The contrast of the emotions was noticed by Elizabeth, despite the surging pain.

“Oh, that can’t be.” Elizabeth’s face scrunched up for a moment before she continued. “My husband’s an officer...a colonel in the 83rd Pennsylvania. He’s fighting south...to the south of Harrisburg. You’re...You’re...”

“Too old. Yes, ma’am. I was wounded quite some time ago. I came back to the shores of Lake Erie, hoping to heal up some. Never did. Don’t walk too good, but I’ll hurry to get Sister Marie.” He started to go, but felt the need to say one more thing. He smiled again and said, “He’s a general now, you know. Charge of a whole brigade.”

Colonel Rice of the 44th New York did not like his orders, not one bit. "Colonel Vincent, I must protest this deployment. The 44th and 83rd always fight side by..." An artillery round came in, exploding, and cutting off the colonel's demand.

Vincent was still establishing himself as the brigade commander after the debacle of Chancellorsville had led to his promotion. "Colonel, there is no time for that! Them Rebs are coming! They're coming right now."

"The 16th is ready. Deploy them to the right. Let us establish the skirmish line here." Rice pointed to the ground below them. Vincent was troubled by the questioning of his orders, but having been the commander of the 83rd he knew that Rice was correct about the two regiments being at their best together.

Another round hit in front of them. The percussion was heard and felt. The tick tock of a watch passed as Vincent waited for his hearing to clear, and without acknowledging any acquiescence, shouted, "Order the 16th to our right flank, there!" Colonel Rice nodded his head in agreement and gratitude. Colonel Vincent could not let the challenge go completely unaddressed. "I am going to check the left flank unless, Colonel, you have another regiment you feel should be there!"

"No, sir!" shot back Rice, trying to convey his deference. He saluted sharply and moved off to give the orders and place his men. The battle was coming. There was no more time to waste. For a moment, Vincent could only snarl. He did not like it when soldiers lost their discipline. He especially did not like them saluting him in the middle of a battle. Why not send a courier to tell the enemy's sharpshooters who your commanding officers were?

“She’s a lovely little girl, Mrs. Vincent.” The baby began to coo and squirm. Then she went back to nursing. “What will you name her?”

“Thank you, Sister. Blanche. Blanche Strong Vincent.”

“Your husband’s name. That’s a good name. Little Blanche. She should have that connection.”

“Colonel Chamberlain!” The commander of the 20th Maine turned to see his brigade commander hurrying down the hill through the trees, riding crop in hand and moving as if driving an invisible beast onward.

“Colonel Vincent.” Chamberlain kept low and waited anxiously for orders. Vincent surveyed the skirmishers placed before him. There was nothing he would change, but he knew that commanding was not only about tactics. You had to put men in the place where they could do their best, but you must inspire them to go beyond that.

“I place you here! This is the left of the Union line. You understand? You are to hold this ground at all costs!”

Chamberlain responded with the greatest commitment. "It shall be done." That was all that needed to be said. Vincent did an about face and began to return to the top without any more discussion or even instruction. He had full confidence in Chamberlain and his men. Something told him they would hold the line, no matter how many times the rebels attacked.

"Thank you for coming, Sister. It is so nice of you to check on us."

"Oh, it is my pleasure, Elizabeth. Look at her. Hello, little Blanche. Such a strong little girl. You will be walking in no time. My, my."

"Strong thought she would be a dancer. The one time he was home while I was expecting with her, I showed him how much she kicked."

The nun off-handedly commented, "I am so happy that young soldier came to get me last July. If he had not, I never would have met you and little Blanche. Je suis bénie."

"Young soldier?" asked Elizabeth. "No, no, it was an old man that went to get you that day. I was in a lot of pain, but I remember that."

"Sir, the right flank! It is breaking!" Colonel Vincent heard his flag-bearer's voice above the din, but ignored it nonetheless.

“Norton, look here. Do you see that?” The colonel pointed across the valley to the huge rocks he had feared would hold their enemy’s best riflemen.

“What? Sir, the 16th is breaking! Is that...Is that...” The young soldier’s reflexes fired at the whistle of several Minie’ balls flying past. He ducked down, but could not resist rising up again, transfixed by what he saw.

“Here, a look through the glass!” The commander handed his telescopic sight to his bugler without taking his eyes from the rock. Norton held the sight to his right eye and exclaimed, “My god! My god! What is that little girl doing? What is she wearing?”

“She is dancing the ballet. It reminds me of Flore et Zephire. I saw it once in Boston, when I was at Harvard.”

“Do they not see her, sir? Why don’t they stop? Why don’t they...We have to stop firing! Sir, we must...” A 0.69 caliber round slammed into the rock to the right of Vincent and Norton. Shards of the boulder sprayed them both, causing them to turn away. When they returned their gaze to the valley of death, the girl was gone. “Where is she? Sir, where did she go?”

“My little girl is gone,” was what Norton thought he heard Vincent say, but it made no sense and he dismissed it.

Instead, his focus went back to the Michiganders on their right. “Colonel! Colonel, our right flank!” With a snap of his head, Colonel Vincent came out of his stupor and raced over to rally his troops who seemed on the verge of collapse. The enemy was giving the 16th all it could

handle and Vincent knew he had to take direct command. His riding crop was raised high as he leaped onto a boulder. Norton heard him shout encouragement and knew that the line would hold, as if someone had sent him a telegram saying so. Deep within his soul, the flagbearer felt that victory was now certain, but he also understood that Colonel Vincent would not lead them to triumph. Terror filled his mind and screamed down his spine. He cried, "Colonel! No!" but it was too late. At the very moment the soldiers from Michigan began to surge forward, a Minie' ball struck Vincent's thigh and tore through his groin, knocking the commander from the boulder. Norton rushed up the hill to pull the wounded colonel back from the line. As he went, the flagbearer saw the gap in the rocks, and knew the risks of exposure, but thought nothing of it. There was Strong Vincent, his hero, lying in the shadows of the boulders as the falling sun withdrew its light. Blood was already pouring from his body and spreading out on the pebbles and sandy soil. He had to get to his commander. He had to save him. Yet, there are things that always lie beyond our reach. The soldier failed. Norton never heard the soft lead projectile, but he felt the crushing impact shatter the edge of his pelvis and exit his back. It spun him around and he collapsed to the ground a few yards from the colonel.

Goodbye, Little Blanche." Tears streamed down Elizabeth's face. She reached out and touched her daughter's cheek with the back of her hand.

Sister Marie stood back from her, "She has gone to be with the Lord, Elizabeth."

"She will dance with the angels."

“Not even a year...not even...” The nun, in her many years of being a midwife, had seen many children, including her own, be stillborn or die young. Even so, she began to choke up. The pain of a child’s death never diminishes. You simply cannot grow numb to that, but Sister Marie had always been able to keep her composure, wanting to be strong for the bereaved and heartbroken mothers.

Elizabeth brushed Blanche’s silky hair away from the sweet face of her daughter. “Where you are now, Blanche,” she whispered, “You can be whatever you want to be.” She started to sob a little, but managed to regain some control and in her softest voice said, “Be whatever you want, my angel.”

Sister Marie could not stop her own tears. This was the first time she had broken down since she had begun her career as a midwife, so many years before. She took a deep breath and asked God to give her the strength to offer comfort and empathy to Elizabeth. In a whisper she said, “Sit Dominus eleison. We will be our most glorious when we go to be with the Lord.”

Elizabeth wiped the tears from her eyes and said, “Not me, Sister Marie.”

“No, my child?”

“No. No more glory.” There was pain in her words, but also anger. “I just want what was taken from me. I want to be old and have gray, thinning hair. I want wrinkles around my eyes, and maybe a little too plump around the middle. I want an ache in my back as I sit on the porch swing and hold Strong’s hand. We’re sitting there, mostly in silence, but when he tells me he loves me, I say, ‘What?’ in a loud voice because I’m hard of hearing. He laughs at that. We just sit and watch the sunset and look back on our life in peace, because we know our

family is safe and our lives have meant something. There are tears of joy we cry at Blanche's wedding. Then there is dread as we wait for news of the birth of her first child. The joy of mischief comes back to me from ignoring Blanche and baking a pie for my grandchildren just because they're my grandchildren." Elizabeth was out of breath at the end of her vision. A few moments passed as she gathered herself. Tears were wiped away. Sniffles were breathed in. More tears fell and were ignored. Then Elizabeth looked at the nun and said, "That's what I want, Sister. Can the Lord grant me that?"

"Will he recover?"

"No, sir. My colonel is dying. He has been delirious now for days." Norton looked to the room where Vincent was being attended, then he looked back to the general officer that questioned him. The flagbearer and bugler pushed his own pain aside and leaned up on an elbow. "You know, as we approached the battle he said it would be a glorious fight." Tears welled up in the soldier's eyes, as it had every time he had thought of that moment since he woke up in this farmhouse. "We were back here...back here in Pennsylvania. Glory be. Imagine that. Now, he just keeps...he just..." The bugler was barely hanging on himself. "I want to play at his funeral," came as a whisper. His voice diminished more as he said, "We started playing it last year. We call it...Taps." He slipped off his elbow and allowed his head to come to rest on a thin pillow. He quit talking, knowing the situation was clearly evident.

The general leaned down and patted Norton with a gentleness men reserve for times like this. "You rest easy, son. And know that we are indebted to the bravery of men like you and the colonel. I came to tell him that he has been promoted to brigadier, a rank he should have been given before."

All Norton could do was weakly smile at the justice and the banality of such a gesture.

From another room in the farmhouse, they heard Vincent's voice calling out, "...hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come..."

"Are sure this is what you want?"

"Yes. I want Blanche to be buried next to her father. I'd also like to purchase the plot next to her, so that someday she will rest between us." Elizabeth and Sister Marie stood over the grave in silence for a long time.

Without looking at the nun, Elizabeth asked, "When are you leaving?"

"You are very perceptive, my child. I am heading back north tomorrow. My time visiting the Benedictine sisters has come to end. I am needed back home."

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "My goodness! All this time and I never even asked you where you are from. With your accent... is it Toronto?"

The Sister laughed in a delicate, yet hearty voice. "Oh, Elizabeth, you have no ear for accents. No, I must return to my sisters in Montreal."

"Montreal? But...Why did you come all this way, Sister?"

"Because I too know what it is like to lose, my child. Not a day goes by I don't think about my beautiful, Jean Marie, and all of the children we had, especially the ones we lost." Elizabeth's face turned to complete shock. She stared with a blank expression at the woman who had brought such aid and comfort to her without ever asking anything in return. It seemed as if she was looking right through her. "I wasn't always a nun," said Sister Marie with a sad, yet warm smile. The two widows looked upon each other with a complete understanding.

Finally, Elizabeth asked, "Will I ever see you again?"

"Perhaps," was the nun's only reply for a long time, for its passage no longer seemed to matter. Then she said, "Who knows when the Lord will call me home? I've been sick for so many years. I never thought I would live this long." She grew quiet, feeling she had gone too far with her own troubles. That was not her way. Deciding to change the tone, she offered better memories. "I've visited here, to teach the Benedictines, twice now. Each time I delivered a baby. The first time was a little boy. It was him who summoned me the day Blanche was born."

An old man stared up at the statue. It was a fine representation of his commander. He rubbed a few tears from his wrinkled and rheumy eyes. A deep breath filled his lungs, and for a moment he felt young again, and strong. Then he coughed and cleared his throat.

A speaker next to him announced, "Here at the 50th anniversary of the battle, we are honored to welcome now, Oliver Wilcox Norton, who fought here with General Strong Vincent on that horrific day, July 2nd."

After the applause died down the old soldier began, "I spoke here when this statue was dedicated in 1878. I was proud to tell people about the colonel, the 83rd Pennsylvania, and the other regiments who fought with us. Right there, right there, with his riding crop held high, he urged his men on. The last thing he told them was, "Don't give an inch!" and those boys from Michigan, they stood their ground. They didn't give an inch, no, not one more inch." For the last time Norton looked up to his commander. Then he said, "Today, however, I'd like to talk about the one who gave him that riding crop. I'd like to talk about the strength of a woman who dealt with unbelievable grief, and still took care of others. Why, she took care of Colonel Vincent's disabled brother for the rest of his life. Imagine that. How do you do that? How do you go on, knowing all you've lost?" He let the question hang in the air for a moment as if he was still searching for the answer. "I want to tell you about all the ones who were left behind. You see, dying is easy. You fight. You kill. You die. Yes, sir, I've seen it. Seen it right here." He pointed out across the valley, his arm sweeping from left to right. "Living with death, it's the living, that's...that's when you have to be strong."

Strong Vincent (17Jun1837 – 7July1863) was born in Waterford, Pennsylvania, less than 15 miles from Erie. The name, Strong, comes from his mother's maiden name. He attended Trinity College in Connecticut, and was reputedly asked to leave after brawling with a man he thought had insulted the honor of one Elizabeth Carter, whom he would later go on to marry. Managing to fall up, by most standards, he next went to Harvard and graduated in 1859. When he enlisted in the Union Army, he was a practicing lawyer in Erie. The day he enlisted was also his wedding day. He was soon given a commission in the 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteers Infantry and later took command of the regiment in June of 1862. After the battle of Chancellorsville he was named the commander of 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, V (5th) Corps of the Army of the Potomac. On the march to Gettysburg he is reported to have said, "What death more glorious can any man desire than to die on the soil of old Pennsylvania, fighting for that flag." Unfortunately, he did die on that soil, fighting for the Stars and Stripes. Mortally wounded on Little Round Top, he died five days later at a nearby farmhouse.* Vincent's body was sent home and is buried in Erie. His statue stands atop the monument to the 83rd Pennsylvania on Little Round Top, the small hill to the southeast of Gettysburg that played such a large role in the battle there. There is also a statue of him at the Erie Public Library.

Elizabeth Vincent, née Carter, met Strong Vincent at Trinity College. She later became a teacher in Erie. She gave birth to one child, a daughter named Blanche Strong Vincent, who sadly died before her first birthday, a far too common event in that time. Elizabeth would go on to live in Ohio, taking care of her brother-in-law, who was disabled. She never remarried and is buried in Erie, next to her husband.

Blanche Vincent was the daughter of Strong and Elizabeth. Different from what is implied in the story, she was actually born two months after the death of her father. She died before turning one and is buried between her parents.

Oliver Wilcox Norton was the flagbearer and bugler for the 83rd PVI regiment. He was wounded at Gettysburg, but survived the war. He often spoke about the fight on Little Round Top and is credited with providing several quotes of Colonel Vincent. Although "Taps" was written by General Daniel Butterfield to create a more melodious tune to signal the end of the day, the song was first performed by Norton, who was the bugler for the brigade under Butterfield's command. It debuted in the summer of 1862 at Harrison's Landing after the Seven Days Battle and quickly grew in popularity. Eventually, it was even adopted by some Confederate units.

Sister Marie (27Jan1794 – 5Apr1864) was born Rosalie Cadron in Canada near the end of the 18th century. She married Jean-Marie Jetté, a voyageur in the fur trade, in 1811

and had eleven children with him. Five of their children died young. In 1832, Jean-Marie also passed away, dying from cholera. A few years after losing her husband, Cadron-Jetté, who was a midwife like her mother, began helping unwed mothers, often placing them with her adult children or in her own home while they were pregnant. There was a tremendous social stigma during this time period for these women. Her work was supported by the local bishop, Ignace Bourget. Cadron-Jetté took religious vows in 1848 and along with several other women formed the Sisters of Misericorde. She actually took the religious name, Soeur de la Nativité (Sister of the Nativity). According to family sources, Cadron-Jetté struggled with a variety of illnesses from her mid-thirties on, but always worked to help others. She passed away at the age of 70. Though she is not reported to have visited Erie, a city with a strong Roman Catholic presence, there are several miraculous stories about her which happened after her death. She was given the title of Venerable, which means "heroic in virtue," by Pope Francis and is under consideration for sainthood.

*Sources give conflicting accounts of where Colonel Vincent was taken after being wounded. Some say he died in George Weikert's farmhouse. Others say he was taken to a farm owned by Reverend Michael and Amelia Bushman. However, I must note that it does not make sense for him to be taken to the Bushman farm, which would have been behind Confederate lines at the time of his wounding. In fact, several Confederate soldiers were initially buried near their barn. The Weikert farm was to the Northwest and was held by Union forces. It was there that Vincent was promoted to Brigadier General, as approved by Abraham Lincoln, and then died from his terrible wounds.