CLOVIS VINCENT
NEUROSURGEON AND PATRIOT

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“He who cares for patients suffering from brain tumor must bring to his task much thought and stout action. There is need, too, of formidable optimism, for the dice of the gods are ded!” Foster Kennedy.

If this be true in time of peace, security and plenty, how much more then, must one bring to neurosurgery in a country overrun by a savage destructive enemy? No one can estimate, before the need arises, the extent of one’s courage, strength and resourcefulness. It was given to one man, in the course of this war, that all of these qualities be tried. This man is Clovis Vincent, Professor of Neurosurgery at the Faculty of Medicine of Paris, and head of the Neurosurgical Service of L'Hôpital de la Pitié.

Clovis Vincent, spiritual son, pupil and heir of Babinski, of whom the latter said: “When I die I want Vincent to carry on my work...” Clovis Vincent, colleague and friend of Harvey Cushing, with whom he worked in America, friend of Bailey, Peet, Penfield, Cairns, Dott, and del Rio-Hortega, brilliant pathologist who came to Paris to work in his clinic—men who in the four corners of the world have had the vision to lay the foundations for that most exacting form of human endeavour, neurosurgery.

His is a story that should be told. In war as in peace, he cherished the highest of medical ideals—the preservation and prolongation of human life. His faith in his ideal carried him through a myriad of difficulties, and gave him the strength to accomplish, almost single-handed, that gigantic task which he set before himself of his own free will—to keep the doors of his neurosurgical clinic open to those in distress throughout the entire German occupation of France. He undertook that task on June 14, 1940, on the day Paris fell, and those doors are still open today.

Sacrificing his health, his home life, his personal means, and forever exposing himself to the savage vengeance of the Gestapo assassins, Clovis Vincent moved into his clinic on that dark day when German troops goose-stepped down the Champs Elysées. He stood by and lived with his patients. He ate the same pitiful food they ate; he slept on one of the hospital cots; he was on call for almost four years without interruption. And on August 23, 1944, when the last of a beaten enemy stole silently away in the night, he was still on duty, caring for those who had been operated on that very day.

Clovis Vincent is a Frenchman and a patriot. All means justified the end, and the end was to fight, to defeat the purpose of an enemy who had not only invaded his country and his hospital, but the very wards and operating

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rooms where he worked. The tales that could be told are numberless. For reasons of military security, many cannot be recounted now. For other reasons, some will never be disclosed. But one that will never be forgotten is the story of Vincent’s lecture given to a group of visiting German medical officers.

A few weeks after the German Army had come to occupy l’Hôpital de la Pitié, Vincent was approached by the German C. O. This flattering gentleman wondered whether Professor Vincent would mind lecturing to some of the younger medical officers who had heard so much about his brilliant work in neurosurgery. Professor Vincent regretted that time did not permit him to give a special lecture, but if the young students wished to attend his regular Thursday clinic, they might watch him examine his patients then. The courteous conquerors would be very happy to do so, and they would come on Thursday without fail.

In the meantime, word had spread amongst Vincent’s staff of the expected German visitors. It was not without some trepidation that his entire staff—assistants, interns, externs and nurses—crowded into that clinic on Thursday morning. All heads turned to see the visiting gentlemen in green. Very erect, and very smart looking they were, these German medical officers. Some wore short stilettos, the scabbards hanging on the ends of elaborate silk cords; others wore spruce little holsters on their belts. The pistol butts could not be mistaken for syringes. They took their front row places, and all waited in silence.

Tall, erect, white-haired Clovis Vincent walked into the room. Dressed in a white laboratory coat fastened by safety pins, the open collar showing the top of his favorite turtle-necked pullover, the Professor asked that the first patient be brought in.

Clovis Vincent leans over the stretcher, lifts away the sheets and presents his first case:

This is a child about 4 years old, name and identity unknown, found unconscious on the highways northeast of Paris. Gunshot wound of the head, depressed fracture of the skull, multiple lesions of the cortex . . . .

He gives full details of the emergency operation. The stretcher is wheeled out. He presents the second case:

This is a woman about 50 years old, name and identity unknown, found unconscious on the highways northeast of Paris. Gunshot wound of the head, depressed fracture of the skull, multiple lesions of the cortex . . . .

He again gives full details of the emergency operation. The stretcher is wheeled out. Vincent leans over the third stretcher and begins:

This is a child about two years old, found unconscious on the highways . . . .

But the visiting German medical officers have discreetly disappeared. They no longer cared to learn any more about neurosurgery.

This is but a simple tale. Above and beyond this or that incident that makes Clovis Vincent a patriot and one of this war’s heroes, there rises an
even greater figure. Of him it can be truly said, to paraphrase a great saying:

Greater love hath no man than this, that he was ready to lay down his life for the thing he believed in most—neurosurgery.

* * * *

Clovis Vincent's own account of the Clinic of Neurosurgery of L'Hôpital de la Pitié, as it was during the occupation, follows:

We are free again. The Gestapo no longer stalk us. We can look back and speak without worrying about the possibility of immediate dire consequences. We no longer have to think: "Who is in that suspicious looking car driving up and down our street? Are they coming to look me up? What alibi must I prepare in order to explain away the mischief I have done?"

I felt certain, from the start, that the English would win in the battle for Britain. The day the Germans entered Paris, I spoke to the Director of the Assistance Publique (State Hospitals) of that period. I had seen him several times in the course of that preceding week in order to discuss my retreating with the French Army. I could not believe that we would not put up a fight on the Loire, flanked as it is by its tributaries and protected by the mountainous regions of the Morvan. That is why I said, "Even if we sign an armistice, England will win."

"Why?" he asked. "Because," I replied, "one must have ships to travel on water, and Germany has no ships." Then I added, "France will take up arms again." And I returned to La Pitié.

The following morning the Germans had already sent their wounded to my clinic. They knew, even better than did the medical G.H.Q. of the French Army, that in La Pitié Hospital there existed a department of neurosurgery. A few days later the German doctor who was to become C.O. of La Pitié informed me that I was to remain at the hospital. All of the other heads of departments had been expelled. I must add that his behavior was irreproachable; he even tried to be friendly . . . . This did not prevent me from refusing to attend the banquet he gave for the German and French doctors on the day of his departure.

At this time, America had not yet entered the war, and the Rockefeller Foundation still had its office in Paris. I wanted to leave France, cross over to England, and join up with de Gaulle's Army as a combatant. I spoke to Dr. O'Brien of the Rockefeller Foundation of my plans. He said, "You must remain here. This war will last a long time. Our civilization is in great peril. Small islands of civilization must be formed. You must form one of these islands." I remained. And for 4 years I lived with the Boches alongside of me. Up to 1942 our relationship was formal. The German doctors called me in on consultation and asked me to operate.

But during all of this time I lived with the thought of secretly resisting the enemy. In December of 1940 the Society of Neurology refused to admit our friend Madame Roudinesco as a member. Ballots had been taken three times in succession, and each time her candidature had been turned down. I protested against this act, called their voting unfair, and wrote to the President of the Society, telling him of my protest. I added that I would not set foot into their meetings until a new era would come. Theirs was a political vote; Madame R. was reproached for being a Jewess.

This was also the period when I turned down an offer to collaborate with a "very distinguished gentleman" who was sent by the Germans to see me. My secretary was present at this interview, and recorded the conversation in shorthand notes, in accordance with my instructions.

"What is it you wish, Monsieur?" I inquired.

"I have been sent by the Collaboration Group to ask you to say a few words on what you think of collaboration. We will record your speech and present it on the air as an interview-broadcast. You will be in good company with Mr. George Claude, etc."

I interrupted immediately and said: "Monsieur, in this world there are not only Germany and France, there is also America, and I must not forget that I owe my chair of Neurosurgery,
created by the Rockefeller Foundation, to the Americans; you must therefore understand, Monsieur, that I will not say anything along those lines."

The man, very embarrassed, fumbled, excused himself, and left saying, "I did not know these details; if I had known them, I would not have permitted myself to come here and bother you."

During this period too, I managed to save from the firing squad a Frenchman who was a magnificent English spy; and hid in my clinic, for almost two and a half years, the Mayor of . . . . whom I got out of prison towards the end of 1940; and, thanks to certificates and numberless maneuvers, gave an Allied agent, Mr. . . . . , the opportunity of escaping.

My entire staff knew that I would not admit an armistice that had been decided upon by an old fool, blown up with pride, in a fit of depression and Anglophobia; this old man who believed from as far back as 1917 that France deserved to be defeated. They knew also that I was certain of a German defeat. At that time I said to one of my assistants, Dr. T., who was a friend of Pétain: "Pétain is an old. . . ." He replied, "I will not permit you to speak thus of Maréchal Pétain." I said, "I'll speak thus if it so pleases me."

In 1942, when the direction of Paris passed from the hands of the Wehrmacht to the Nazis, my relationships with the Germans became more strained. First of all, they were afraid of the presence of my clinic right in the middle of the hospital they occupied, and they invited me to leave La Pitié. They said to me: "You have a very busy clinic. Every Thursday and every Sunday hundreds of visitors walk into your clinic. Can you be certain that there are neither Jews nor Communists among them?" I replied, "How do you expect me to be certain?" They said to me: "You have a very busy clinic. Every Thursday and every Sunday hundreds of visitors walk into your clinic. Can you be certain that there are neither Jews nor Communists among them?" I replied, "How do you expect me to be certain?" They said to me: "You have a very busy clinic. Every Thursday and every Sunday hundreds of visitors walk into your clinic. Can you be certain that there are neither Jews nor Communists among them?" I replied, "How do you expect me to be certain?"

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It took six months to completely reorganize the clinic. Many patients died because they could not be operated upon. Many records and specimens were lost in the hurried moving, and a lot of our surgical supplies, gowns, etc. were stolen. The moving had one advantage: I no longer saw them, and they no longer asked anything of me. They had received orders to this effect.

Our resistance became more active. All in the clinic knew what was on their chief's mind, though I managed to give the least outward signs of activity in the resistance. Two of my externs were arrested: one was released; I do not know what became of the other. One of my former interns took refuge in the city of Lyons, where he later joined the Maquis; his record with these men of the Resistance is magnificent. He was with E.B. in the V . . . . , and it appears, unfortunately, that he was killed. Another assistant, married to one of my former interns, had to flee with her husband. They managed to get across to Africa and at present are in the Army of General . . . . (I am certain that these two pupils of mine were denounced.)

During the last 18 months, when French Resistance became more active and began committing acts against the enemy, the Clinic operated on and made dressings for those who were wounded in their encounters with the enemy. The mistress of one of these wounded denounced us to the enemy. As a direct result, one of my department heads, . . . . , this incomparable man, took the blame on himself for these secret treatments. The enemy began hunting for him, but, warned in time, he evaded capture and joined up with the Maquis in the greater Paris area.

We continued to hide Communists and men of the Resistance. One of these, suffering from a skull injury, watched over by the enemy for 8 months, was freed through a coup carried out successfully by his friends. On the day he escaped, my clinic was raided by the Gestapo, and a company of policemen searched the building from cellar to attic.

I was personally chosen as a candidate for the various Resistance Movements Committees. I did not have an important role. I could not. Alongside such leaders as . . . . , my part was small. Without them the Resistance would not have been.
But French neurosurgery had to be preserved. And, in my clinic, I was about the only one who could guard it. Neurosurgery, as I see it, imposes the obligation of keeping alive, at any price, the patients one operates upon. And in order to do so, a close watching of these patients must be kept continuously. The war had made my obligations more imperious. We were short of everything needed in our work. At one given time there were only 6 needles in our clinic. The assistants, depressed, distracted by the difficulties of the life we were living, committed errors which were not without consequences. The nurses, poorly paid, undernourished, often ill-treated by the inspectors of the Assistance Publique, sometimes forgot the most elementary gestures and procedures in their work. And mortality increased by 10 per cent. Since the liberation it has fallen back to from 12 to 15 per cent.

Nevertheless, during the last months, neurosurgery came pretty close to sinking. The work of 4 years just missed being destroyed. After the landing in July, because of the increased arrivals of wounded Germans, the German medical high command decided to take over the Maternity building in which we were lodged, in order to put their wounded there. I resisted, inch by inch. Nevertheless the Germans first occupied one-half of the ground floor, then, despite my resistance, took all of the first floor. The patients had to be transferred to La Salpêtrière Hospital. At the end of July they wanted to take over the rest of my clinic. I said that I would not leave because I could not leave, that there was no place in Paris that could take me in.

Behind the screens that separated me from the German occupants I kept a bridgehead: 30 beds, the operating rooms, and the radiology department. The Germans could not crowd me out of these. It was from this vantage point that we saw, one night, the departure of the invaders, a departure intended to be secret. And I was able to retake my wards, after having first disinfected them, because pus had flown everywhere.

Reorganization was speedy, and 15 days ago I was able to show to American neurosurgeons, American neurosurgery in France, which I had guarded, because of them, in France.

Clovis Vincent

Paris,
March 30, 1945.