

Under Which King

By R. H. Benson

Within a day or two of our conversation on St. Teresa, I asked the old priest about what is called "Quietism." A friend had given me an old copy of Molinos' *Spiritual Guide*, and I knew that the writer had been condemned and imprisoned for life, and yet I could not understand in what lay his crime.

"It is difficult to put into words," said the priest, "or even to understand, why certain sentences are condemned, since it is probably possible to parallel them from other Catholic mystics whose names are honoured. Yet' the fact remains that the result of Molinos' teaching was neglect of the Sacraments and of external means of grace, which was not so in the case of the schools of other mystics.

"But I will tell you a story," he went on, "to illustrate the effect of certain kinds of mysticism; and I must leave you to judge whether my friend was right or wrong in what he decided, for I must tell you first that the incident did not happen to me. On the whole I may say that I have my own opinion on the subject, but I will not tell you what it is, as sometimes I am strongly inclined to change it. However, you shall hear the story. Shall we take a stroll on the terrace?

And, when we had reached it, he began:

"My friend was a priest of about thirty years of age (this happened some forty years ago). He was working in the country at the time, and had a great deal of leisure for reading, and this he chiefly occupied in the study of various mystics, and most of them of the Quietistic school. You know, too, that one of their characteristic lines of thought lies in the abandonment of all effort save that of adhering to God, and even that is to be a passive rather than an active effort. The soul must lie still, says one of them, and be drawn as if by a rope up the Mount of Perfection. The slightest movement will check or divert that swift and steady approach towards God.

"But my friend not only studied writers this school intellectually, but he put himself more or less under their spiritual direction. He told me afterwards that it seemed to him that if he used the Sacraments faithfully, and if he found that his devotion towards them did not cool, he would be sufficiently protected against possible extravagances or heresies in his spiritual reading. His daily meditation, too, he told me, began to mean more to him than ever in his lifetime: the presence of God seemed more real and accessible, and, above all, the guidance of God in his daily life more apparent. The time that really matters, as he said to me once, is the time between our religious exercises; and in this time, too, God manifested Himself. In fact, from all that he said to me, I have very little doubt that his character and spiritual life were both deepened and purified, at any rate at first, by his devotional study of these mystics.

"One word more before I begin the actual story.

"I said just now that the guidance of God began to be more apparent in his daily life. There are two main ways of settling questions that come up for decision, and both ways are possible to a religious man. One way is to lay stress on the intellectual side, to weigh the arguments carefully, and decide, as it were, by reasoning alone: the other is to lay comparatively little stress on the arguments and the intellectual side generally, and to make the main effort lie in the aspiration of the will towards God for guidance. We may call them, roughly, the intellectual and the intuitive. Now of course my friend's mystical studies inclined him more and more towards the latter. He told me in fact, that in the most ordinary questions—in his visiting his people—in his preaching—in his dealings with souls—he began more and more to refuse intellectual light, and

to trust instead to the immediate interior guidance of the Holy Ghost. More than once, for example, he laid aside the sermon had prepared, as he entered the pulpit, and preached from a text that had seemed to be suggested to him. Of course it was not so good from the literary point of view; but that, as he very justly said, is not the most important question in judging of a sermon. He seemed to find, he told me, that his spiritual power in every way developed, both in his interior life and in his dealings with others.

“In his conversations, too, he would allow long silences to come, if it did not seem to him that God moved him to speak; at other times he would drop conventional modes of speech and say things that, humanly judged, were calculated to do the very opposite of what he personally desired. Sometimes in such a case his wish was attained, and sometimes not; but in both cases he forced himself to regard it as if he had succeeded. In short, he acted and spoke in obedience to this interior drawing, and disregarded consequences entirely. And this, I need hardly say, is one road to interior peace.

“And then at last a startling thing happened.

“There had been some crime committed: I have not an idea what it was. Two men were involved in the consequences. One, whom we will call A., had committed the crime: but he could only be prosecuted if B., whom he had seriously injured, consented to take action. Now my friend was deeply interested in A., and he thought he knew that the one chance of A.’s salvation lay in his being allowed to go unpunished. But Lord B., who, by the way, was an Irish peer, of no importance himself, though his father had been well known, was a hard, vindictive man, and had publicly announced his intention of ruining A. In this state of affairs my friend was asked to intercede by A. and his friends.

“Lord B. lived in a large country-house some four or five miles from my friend’s house. He was an unmarried man, but generally had his house fairly full of his friends, who did not bear the best possible reputation.

“My friend arrived at the house by appointment with B., whom he did not personally know, towards the close of a rainy autumn afternoon. In spite of his anxiety he had resolved to be guided as usual by the interior monitor whom he had learnt to trust, and he had hardly thought of a single argument which he could use. Yet he felt confident that he was right in coming, and equally confident that he would know what to say when the time came. As he got near the house this confident sense of guidance increased to an extent that almost terrified him. It seemed to him, as he walked under the dripping yellow branches, that a strong, almost physical, oppression carried him forward. As if in a dream he saw the manservant appear in answer to his ring, and heard, as from a great distance, the man tell him that Lord B. had come in a little while before, and was now expecting him in the smoking-room.

“On entering the house these curious sensations, which he hardly attempted to describe to me, seemed to diminish a little, and he felt cool and confident. He told me that the sense of oppression resting on him was dispelled, as if by a breeze, as he passed along the corridor on the ground floor on his way to the smoking-room in the west wing of the house.

“The servant threw open the door and announced him, and my friend went through, and the door closed behind him: but the moment he had crossed the threshold felt that something was wrong.

“There was a circle of men, some in costume, and some as if they had been out all day, sitting in easy chairs round the fire, which was to the right of door. My friend could see most of their faces, and Lord B.’s face among them, as he paused at the door; but not one offered to move, though all looked curiously at him.

“There was silence for a moment, and Lord B. said suddenly and loudly:

“ ‘Well, here’s the parson at last, sermon and all.’

“And then two or three of the men laughed.

“My friend saw of course that Lord B. had arranged the interview in this way simply in order to insult him, and that he would not be able to speak to him in private at all, as he had hoped. There was, he told me, just one great heave of anger in his heart at this offensive behaviour; but he did his best to crush it down, and still stood without speaking. He had not, he said, an idea what to say or do, so he stood and waited.

“Lord B. got up in a moment and lit a cigarette with his back to my friend; and then turned and faced him, leaning against the mantelpiece.

“ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘we’re all waiting.’

“Still there was silence. One of the men beyond the fire suddenly laughed.

“ ‘Now then,’ said Lord B. impatiently, ‘for God’s sake say what you came to say, and go.’

“As this sentence ended, my friend felt a curious sensation run over him, like those he had experienced in the park, but far stronger. He could never give me any description of it, except by saying that it seemed as if a force were laying hold of him in every remote fibre of his bodily and spiritual being. His own will seemed to give up the control into some stronger hand, and he felt a sense of being steadied and quieted.

“Then he was aware that his own voice said a single sentence of some half-dozen words; but though he heard each word, it was instantly obliterated from his mind. In his description of it all to me afterwards, he said it was like words that we hear immediately before we fall asleep in a lecture-room or a railway carriage: each word is English and intelligible, but the sentence conveys no impression.

“While his voice spoke for perhaps two or three seconds, his eyes were fixed on Lord B.’s face, and in that momentary interval he saw a terrible fear and astonishment suddenly stamped upon it. The mouth opened in loose lines and the cigarette fell out, and B.’s hands rose instinctively as if to keep my friend off. One of the men, too, at the further end of the circle suddenly sprang erect, with the same kind of imploring horror on his face.

“That was all that my friend had time to see; for the same power that had laid hold of him turned him immediately to the door, and he opened it and went out and down the corridor. As he went the strange sensation passed, but he felt the sweat prick to his skin and then pour down his face. He heard, too, as he reached the end of the corridor, a bell peal violently somewhere. He passed out into the hall, and even as he opened the front door a servant dashed past him through the hall and down the corridor, up which he had just come.

“He went straight home, feeling terribly tired and overwrought, and had to go to bed on reaching his house, tortured by neuralgia.

“Two hours later a note was brought by a groom from Lord B., written in a shaking hand, with an abject apology for his reception in the afternoon; an entreaty to him not to mention the subject again which he had spoken of in the sitting-room, with a scarcely veiled offer of a bribe, and an emphatic promise to withdraw all proceedings against A.

“On the following day he was told that Lord B. was supposed to be unwell, and that the house-party had been hurriedly broken up the night before.

“From that day to this he has never had an idea of what the sentence was that his voice spoke that worked such a miracle.”

“That is a most curious story,” I said. “What do you make of it?”

The priest smiled.

“I will tell you what my friend made it. He gave up his study of mysticism, yet without in any sense condemning that line of thought of which I have spoken. His reasons, which he explained to me, after coming to a decision, were that such a visitation might or might not be from God. If it were not from God, then that proved that he had been meddling with high things, and had somehow slipped under some other control. If it were from God, it might be that it was just for that very purpose that he had been brought so far, but that he dared not pursue that path without some distinct further sign. ‘In any case,’ he said, ‘no soul can be lost by following the simple and well-beaten path of ordinary devotion and prayer.’ And so he returned to intellectual forms of meditation, such as most Christians use. He died a few years ago, full of holiness and good works.

“But for you there are several opinions open. Either that it was an intensely strong case of hypnotic thought-transference from Lord B. to my friend, and that the latter only spoke mechanically of something that lay in the former’s mind; or you may decide that the whole affair was of the Evil One, and that A. would have been all the better for prosecution, and that an evil being somehow found entrance into the strained nature of my friend, and used it for his own purposes; or that the prophetic gift was bestowed on him, but that the ordeal was too fierce and he too cowardly to claim it. And there are other solutions as well, no doubt possible.

“For myself I think I have formed my opinion; but I would prefer, as Herodotus says, to keep it to myself.”