

# In the Convent Chapel

By R. H. Benson

One evening about this time, on coming indoors for tea, I found the old man seated at the open door that looked on to the lawn, with a book on his knees, and his finger between the pages. He held the book towards me as I came near him, and showed me the title, "The Interior Castle."

"I have just been reading," he said, "Saint Teresa's description of the difference between the intellectual and the imaginative vision. It is curious how she fails really to express it, except to any one who happens to have had a glimpse already for himself of what she means. I suppose it is one of the signs of reality in the spiritual world that no one can ever describe so much as he knows."

I sat down.

"I am afraid I don't understand a word you are saying," I answered smiling.

For answer he opened the book and read Saint Teresa's curious gasping incoherent sentences—at least so I thought them.

"Still," I said, "I am afraid—"

"Oh," he said almost impatiently, "surely you know now; indeed you know it, but do not recognise it."

"Can you give me any sort of instance?" I asked.

He thought for a moment or two in silence; and then—

"I think I can," he said, "if you are sure it will not bore you."

He poured out tea for us both, and then began:

"Most of the tales I have told you are of the imaginative vision, by which I do not mean that the vision is in any way unreal or untrue, which is what most people mean by 'imaginative,' but only that it presents itself in the form of a visible picture. It seems chiefly the function of the imagination to visualise facts, and it is an abuse of that faculty to employ it chiefly in visualising fancies. But it is possible for spiritual facts to represent themselves vividly and clearly to the intellect instead, that the person to whom the intellectual vision is given does not, so to speak, 'see' anything, but only 'apprehends' something to be true. However, this will become more clear presently.

"Some years ago I took my annual holiday in the form of a solitary walking tour. I will not tell you where I went, as there are others concerned in this story who would dislike intensely to be publicly spoken of in the way that I shall have to speak of them; but it is enough to say that I came at last to a little town towards sunset. My object in coming to this place was to visit a convent of enclosed nuns whose reputation for holiness was very great. I carried with me a letter of introduction to the Reverend Mother, which I knew would admit me to the chapel. I left my bag at the inn, and then walked down to the convent, which stood a little way out of the town.

"The lay sister who opened the door to me asked me to come into the parlour while she told the Reverend Mother; and after waiting a few minutes in the prim room with its bees-waxed floor and its religious engravings and objects, a wonderfully dignified little old lady, with a quiet wrinkled face, came in with my letter open in her hand. We talked a few minutes about various things, and I had a glass of cowslip wine in a thick-lipped wine-glass.

"She told me that the convent was a very ancient foundation, that it had been a country house ever since the Dissolution of the Religious Houses, until about twenty years ago, when it had

been acquired for the community. There still remained of the old buildings part of the cloisters, with the south transept of the old church, which was now the chapel; the whole, with a wall or two, forming the courtyard through which I had come. Behind the house lay the garden, on to which the window of the parlour looked; and as I sat I could see a black cross or two marking the nuns' graveyard. I made inquiries as to the way the time of the community was spent.

“‘Our object,’ said the old lady, ‘is perpetual intercession for sinners. We have the great joy of the Blessed Sacrament amongst us in the chapel, and, except during the choir offices and Mass, there is always a nun kneeling before It. We look after one or two ladies incurably ill, who have come to end their days with us, and we make our living by embroidery.’

“I asked how it was that she could receive strangers if the order was an enclosed one.

“‘The lay sisters and myself alone can receive strangers. We find that necessary.’

“After a little more talk I asked whether I might see the chapel, and she took me out into the courtyard immediately.

“As we walked across the grass she pointed out to me the cloisters, now built up into a corridor, and the long ruined wall of the old nave which formed one side of the quadrangle. A grave-faced and stout collie dog had joined us at the door and we three went together slowly towards the door in the centre of the west wall of the restored transept. The evening sun lay golden on the wall before us and on the ruined base of the central tower of the old church, round which jackdaws wheeled and croaked.”

The old priest broke off and turned to me, with his eyes burning:

“What a marvellous thing the Religious Life is,” he said, “and above all the Contemplative Life! Here were these nuns as no doubt they and their younger sisters are still, without one single thing that in the world's opinion makes life worth living. There is practically perpetual silence, there are hours to be spent in the chapel, no luxuries, no amusements, no power of choice, they are always rather hungry and rather tired, at the very least. And yet they are not sacrificing present happiness to future happiness, as the world always supposes, but they are intensely and radiantly happy ‘now in this present time.’ I don't know what further proof any one wants of Who our Lord is than that men and women find the keenest, and in fact their only joy, in serving Him and belonging to Him.

“Well, I remember that something of this sort was in my mind as I went across the courtyard beside this motherly old lady with her happy quiet face. She had been over fifty years in Religion, my friend had told me.

“At the door she stopped.

“‘I will not come in,’ she said, ‘but you will find me in the parlour when you come out.’

“And she turned and went back, with the collie walking slowly beside her, his golden plumed tail raised high against her black habit.

“The door was partly open, but a thick curtain hung beyond. I pushed it quietly aside and stepped in. It seemed very dark at first, in contrast to the brilliant sunshine outside; but I presently saw that I was kneeling before a high iron-barred screen, in which was no door. On the left, in the further corner of the chapel, glimmered a blue light in a silver lamp before a statue of our Lady.

“Opposite me rose up the steps before the high altar; but not far away, because, as you remember, the chapel had once been the transept of a church, and the east wall, in the centre of which the high altar stood, was longer than both the south wall where a second altar stood, and the modern brick wall, that closed it on the north. A slender crucifix in black and white and six

thin tapers rose above the altar, and high above stood the Tabernacle closed by a white silk curtain, before which flickered a tiny red spark.

“I said a prayer or two, and then I noticed for the first time a dark outline rising in the centre of the space before the altar. For a moment I was perplexed, and then I saw that it was the nun whose hour it was for intercession. Her back was turned to me as she knelt at the faldstool, and her black veil fell in rigid lines on to her shoulders, and mingled with her black serge habit below. There she knelt perfectly motionless, praying. I had not, and have not, a notion as to her age. She might have been twenty-five or seventy.

“As I knelt there I thought deeply, wondering as to the nun’s age, how long she had been professed, when she would die, whether she was happy; and, I am afraid, I thought more of her than of Him Who was so near. Then a kind of anger seized me, as I compared in my mind the life of a happy good woman in the world with that of this poor creature. I pictured the life, as one so often sees it in homes, of a mother with her children growing up about her, her hands busy with healthy home work, her life glorified by a good man’s love; as she grows older, passing from happy stage to happy stage, comforting, helping, sweetening every soul she meets. Was it not for this that women—and men too, I thought, rebuking myself—were made? Then think of the sour life of the cloister—as loveless and desolate as the cold walls themselves! And even, I thought, even if there is a strange peculiar joy in the Religious Life—even if there is an absence of sorrows and anxieties such as spoil the happiness of many lives in the world—yet, after all, surely the Contemplative Life is useless and barren. The Active Life may be well enough, if the prayers and the discipline issue in greater efficiency, if the priest is more fervent when he ministers outside, and the sister of charity more charitable. Yes, I thought, the active Religious Life is reasonable enough; but the Contemplative—! After all it is essentially selfish, it is a sin against society. Possibly it was necessary when the wickedness of the world was more fierce, to protest against it by this retirement; but not now, not now! How can the lump be leavened if the leaven be withdrawn? How can a soul serve God by forsaking the world which He made and loves?” . . .

“And so,” said the priest, turning to me again, “I went on—poor ignorant fool!—thinking that the woman who knelt in front of me was less useful than myself, and that my words and actions and sermons and life did more to advance God’s kingdom than her prayers! And then—then—at the moment when I reached that climax of folly and pride, God was good to me and gave me a little light.

“Now, I do not know how to put it—I have never put it into words before, except to myself—but I became aware, in my intellect alone, of one or two clear facts. In order to tell you what those facts were I must use picture language; but remember they are only translations or paraphrases of what I perceived.

“First I became aware suddenly that there ran a vital connection from the Tabernacle to the woman. You may think of it as one of those bands you see in machinery connecting two wheels, so that when either wheel moves the other moves too. Or you may think of it as an electric wire, joining the instrument the telegraph operator uses with the pointer at the other end. At any rate there was this vital band or wire of life.

“Now in the Tabernacle I became aware that there was a mighty stirring and movement. Something within it beat like a vast Heart, and the vibrations of each pulse seemed to quiver through all the ground. Or you may picture it as the movement of a clear deep pool when the basin that contains it is jarred—it seemed like the movement of circular ripples crossing and recrossing in swift thrills. Or you may think of it as that faint movement of light and shade that

may be seen in the heart of a white-hot furnace. Or again you may picture it as sound—as the sound of a high ship-mast with the rigging, in a steady wind; or the sound of deep woods in a July noon.

The priest's face was working, and his hands moved nervously.

“How hopeless it is,” he said, “to express all this! Remember that all these pictures are not in the least what I perceived. They are only grotesque paraphrases of a spiritual fact that was shown me.

“Now I was aware that there was something of the same activity in the heart of the woman, but I did not know which was the controlling power. I did not know whether the initiative sprang from the Tabernacle and communicated itself to the nun's will; or whether she, by bending herself upon the Tabernacle, set in motion a huge dormant power. It appeared to me possible that the solution lay in the fact that two wills co-operated, each reacting upon the other. This, in a kind of way, appears to me now true as regards the whole mystery of free-will and prayer and grace.

“At any rate the union of these two represented itself to me, as I have said, as forming a kind of engine that radiated an immense light or sound or movement. And then I perceived something else too.

“I once fell asleep in one of those fast trains from the north, and did not awake until we had reached the terminus. The last thing I had seen before falling asleep had been the quiet darkening woods and fields through which we were sliding, and it was a shock to awake in the bright humming terminus and to drive through the crowded streets, under the electric glare from the lamps and windows. Now I felt something of that sort now. A moment ago I had fancied myself apart from movement and activity in this quiet convent; but I seemed somehow to have stepped into a centre of busy, rushing life. I can scarcely put the sensation more clearly than that. I was aware that the atmosphere was charged with energy; great powers seemed to be astir, and I to be close to the whirling centre of it all.

“Or think of it like this. Have you ever had to wait in a City office? If you have done that you will know how intense quiet can coexist with intense activity. There are quiet figures here and there round the room. Or it may be there is only one such figure—a great financier—and he sitting there almost motionless. Yet you know that every movement tingles, as it were, out from that still room all over the world. You can picture to yourself how people leap to obey or to resist—how lives rise and fall, and fortunes are made and lost, at the gentle movements of this lonely quiet man in his office. Well, so it was here. I perceived that this black figure knelt at the centre of reality and force, and with the movements of her will and lips controlled spiritual destinies for eternity. There ran out from this peaceful chapel lines of spiritual power that lost themselves in the distance, bewildering in their profusion and terrible in the intensity of their hidden fire. Souls leaped up and renewed the conflict as this tense will strove for them. Souls, even at that moment leaving the body, struggled from death into spiritual life, and fell panting and saved at the feet of the Redeemer on the other side of death. Others, acquiescent and swooning in sin, woke and snarled at the merciful stab of this poor nun's prayers.”

The priest was trembling now with excitement.

“Yes,” he said; “yes, and I in my stupid arrogance had thought that my life was more active in God's world than hers. So a small provincial shopkeeper, bustling to and fro behind the counter, might think, if he were mad enough, that his life was more active and alive than the life of a director who sits at his table in the City. Yes, that is a vulgar simile; but the only one that I can think of which in the least expresses what I knew to be true. There lay my little foolish narrow

life behind me, made up of spiritless prayers and efforts and feeble dealings with souls; and how complacent I had been with it all, how self-centred, how out of the real tide of spiritual movement! And meanwhile, for years probably, this nun had toiled behind these walls in the silence of grace, with the hum of the world coming faintly to her ears, and the cries of peoples and nations, and of persons whom the world accounts important, sounding like the voices of children at play in the muddy street outside; indeed that is all that they are, compared to her—children making mud-pies or playing at shop outside the financier's office.”

The priest was silent, and his face became quieter again. Then in a moment he spoke again.

“Well,” he said, “that is what I believe to have been an intellectual vision. There was no form or appearance or sound; but I can only express what was shown to me to be true, under those images. It almost seems to me as I look back now as if the air in the chapel were full of a murmurous sound and a luminous mist as the currents of need and grace went to and fro. But I know really that the silence was deep and the air dim.”

Then I made a foolish remark.

“If you feel like that about the Contemplative Life, I wonder you did not try to enter it yourself.”

The priest looked at me for a moment.

“It would be rash, surely, for a little shopkeeper of no particular ability to compete with Rothschild.”