

Has your work taught you God's dealings with man? Our work can show us deeper depths of God's greatness. Our Lord must have taught St Joseph to see the beauty in the grain of the wood which the plane laid bare. Are you more patient than you were? Have you used that person towards whom you have an antipathy to help you to a broader, a wider view—to deepen your knowledge, to quicken your love? God chooses each one and has set you here together to get good, to get help, to be taught virtue. Has it? What has community life done for you? Has it given you patience—strength—peace, has it widened or narrowed you? Feelings are beyond our control—judgments are not.

Religious life is not an escape, it is a profession as any other profession—architecture, music, teaching, song—to be used to its fullest, not dodging, not trying to escape: else it is mere fantastic nonsense. We must weigh our souls, our love, our desire and see whether love keeps us going in religious life. Not the cloister will save us, nor the habit; these may easily stunt us. We must have breathing through us the Wind of God, setting us high on the hills, walking like rational creatures in his world. He has made us, he can inspire us, *and he will*. We must keep unsullied our ideals, we shall fall short often, but let us keep on, have great ideals, never sink or flag, never scoff at any greatness, a great life is the folly of a master. *Violence*. We became religious for love. Are we really inspired by love of God? Ask ourselves this and remember what a flame it was that lured us across the threshold of the cloister. Am I still striving for that purpose for which once I came?

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### ' A S O N E ' S S E L F '

BY

MADAME ISABELLE RIVIERE <sup>1</sup>



ALL human misery comes from avarice: corporal misery from the refusal to give one's belongings; spiritual misery from the refusal to give one's time and one's heart.

All the sufferings, acute or dull, all the bitterness, the humiliations, all the grievances, the hatred and despair of this world, are an unsatisfied hunger. Hunger for bread, hunger for help, hunger for love.

From the little lad who heaves great sobs because his mother slaps him for no other reason than that her nerves are on edge, to the

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too old grandfather whom his grandchildren now always forget to kiss; from the plain young woman left alone in her corner, to the wife upon whom her husband no longer deigns to cast his eyes, to the abandoned woman who throws herself into the Seine; from the friend whose companion fails on purpose to keep his appointment to the twenty-year-old boy who dies alone at night in his hospital bed whilst the infirmarian is drinking coffee in the kitchen; from the small poor-law child to the man who is going to be executed, all have suffered from a penury, from a stinginess of love. Each one had a right to a morsel of the life and of the heart of another, which that other had refused him. Each one, in order to live, had need of that which another had reserved for himself, of that which was useless to himself and was being spoilt for want of use.

Men accuse God of being the cause of human suffering, they deny his goodness because they see so many tears being shed, they brandish against him that famous 'Problem of Evil' like a flag of revolt—and they will not understand that he has given them everything where-with to build up their happiness, temporal and external, at the same time as the happiness of a certain number of others; a whole life-time to spend for that, and an inexhaustible heart with which to love. They will not see that evil does not exist of itself, that it is not the invention of some wicked one, superadded to our life to make us suffer, but simply our refusal to use what we possess, our failure to respond when we are called, our non-fulfilment, our fault, a parsimony of ourselves as imbecile and criminal as that of the beggar who dyes of privation on a pallet-bed stuffed with money.

Yet the latter hurts only himself; while as for ourselves, it is all those who have need of us whom we leave in inanition through this miserly and selfish fear of not having enough for our own needs. But who thinks of others before thinking of himself? It is always the same thing: we will turn to aid our neighbour when we have been sufficiently provided for. In the meantime we hold ourselves in reserve, we preserve ourselves, we spare ourselves, we take care of ourselves. What a profusion of words in our language to express this stinginess! This is because it is to be found in every class of society and because it takes every form and shape. When one has given sixpence to a beggar, taking good care not to meet his eyes for fear of discovering what a grain of sand is this small coin in the gulf of his distress, we go off quite proud of ourselves, quite dazzled to see ourselves so generous. . . . What is it in comparison with that hourly debt which we contracted at our birth towards all our brothers? And he who has not given his heart at the same time, even had he poured millions into the beggar's greasy hat, has given only the wind. When he arrives before the Great Judge, his gifts will not weigh a straw, and it is that

heart encased in stone which will weigh down the balance to the depth of the abyss.

'When we give, Madame, we ought to give the best we have', a poor girl said to me when I did not want to accept the most beautiful 'holy picture' she had in her missal. The most precious thing we have — isn't this our heart, our soul? If we keep that back, of what worth is the rest? . . .

If we must absolutely keep back something, let us choose to keep our halfpence! That is what we can deprive ourselves of the most easily. Had Saint Vincent de Paul any sous? But let us give a little of our life, a movement of our soul, a ray of our heart, such is the only capital that counts.

One day, on a railway station, waiting with some friends for the train to go, we formed on the platform, near the carriage door, a little chattering, merry circle. Suddenly we saw one of the young women of our group break away from us and run up to the carriage in a flash. A poor woman was hesitating at the door, staggering between three dirty bairns clinging to her skirts, and with one arm clasping a baby swathed in rags while with the other she had much ado to retain several dilapidated bundles. With a nice smile, the young woman took the baby and the biggest of the bundles, and quickly brought them down and replaced them in the mother's arms when they had got down on the platform. We had just time to realise what she had done when it was all over. 'You are mad', her husband told her; 'you will have caught fleas'.

Poor little soul, I have looked upon you since then with sorrow, burying yourself in that sinister life of pleasure, having made it or having let it make you close your ears to the divine voice and strive to tear away from your heart what was pure and disinterested. But when I am ready to despair of you, I call up the memory of your coming out of the carriage with a lovely smile on your lips and the dirty bundle against your dainty white frock, and the ragged baby pressed upon your heart. And I like to think that when you must appear before the merciful Judge, who has promised a reward to those who give a glass of water in the name of his love, it is first of all that charming and tender image of you that will attract his gaze, and behind which will be hidden all the others.

To how many of us, indeed, has it often happened thus to forget the fleas, and our light dress, and the disgust, the mocking glances, the fear of making ourselves remarked, in order to bring with a simple and prompt gesture, a whiff of love, the help we can give to one in need? Alas! we have always something to preserve, something which belongs to us or to which we belong, some possession more precious than love and which prevents us from pouring ourselves out in love.

How many beings have you met with in a life-time, who had always, even before you had asked it, offered all that you had hoped of them, whether of money, or time, or compassion, or indulgence or tenderness? They lend once or twice, calculating what they will lose by it; at the third appeal they withdraw into their shell with a kind of indignation: 'I should like to do all I can for him, but he exaggerates; I have my work and my children, etc., etc.'

There always remains some chest too precious for us to dare to turn out, some collection of old objects too long set aside for us to have the courage to get rid of in the end—remnants of material, scraps of fur, old ribbons (they may come in useful some day!), old crazes, little stupid pleasures, *convenances*, with which we encumber the depths of our cupboards and the depths of our life, where there remains no more place for new and fragile things, for the perpetual creation of love. And we grow old among our stores and half-suffocated by them, concerned only with hindering ourselves from dying, useless to ourselves who have learnt nothing, known nothing, done nothing except to keep ourselves alive, useless to those from whom we dwell for ever separated, the dull sound of whose footsteps we hear overhead.

See people who live in each other's near neighbourhood. For the most part, the prevailing sentiment in human relationships, whether domestic, social or international, is the fear of being led to do more than one is bound to do, to give more than one owes, the fear of being taken in, that is to say not to get in return for what one gives up all the gain possible, the fear of lending without interest, without guarantee, the fear of spending without profit. . . .

There are those who would make a kind of rampart of their peevish humour. . . . Less grave in appearance, but still more ruinous, what are we to say of the selfish bad temper to which we are so easily inclined and from which we absolve ourselves so lightly? We have suffered some fatigue, some delay, some disappointment—that is to say, we have given a little more of our time, a little more of ourselves than we had consented to do—then, furious, we turn against the first innocent person at hand to make him pay the damage, in order to compensate for the loss we have undergone at the expense of the peace and joy snatched from him.

'I am worried, discontented; I will get my own back by preventing you from laughing. I have suffered, you must make up for it by suffering too! I am unhappy; no one shall dare be gay in my presence; thinks poor wounded self-love, strangled with unjust resentment. . . .

Thus it is for a bagatelle: a tram missed, the roast meat burnt, a disagreeable meeting, an irritating piece of work—the petty round of trifling worries which only exist by the attention we lend to them—

we banish from our lives and the lives of others joy, liberty, sweet exchanges of affection, we give ourselves up and at the same time all our household to the invasion of the 'daily mediocrity', in the rancour of small losses, of the insignificant miseries which life inflicts upon us.

For, by this perpetual inflexibility of refusal, we deprive ourselves of the best possible remedy against 'worries': by facing them peacefully we realise that in fact they are not of much account since they only affect ourselves, that one can after all forget them without detriment to the gravity of life since nothing essential has been hurt by them. And even if they are of a measure to take away from us our own lightheartedness, at least there remains that of others which it is good to share.

And if we are suffering from a great trouble, we reject by this miserable and bitter brooding over our wound, the only alleviation which can be applied to it—the sight of the happiness of others. We close our heart and our eyes to the discovery—like a rift in the heavy clouds through which the blue sky appears—of that other great firmament of joy from which we have believed the world to be forever separated. We refuse the infinite sweetness which may arise upon our sorrow, like a tender dawn on a devastated sea, on seeing oneself alone touched by it, and the others still safe, still happy! For them the earth still overflows with riches; it is not then that frightful desert I had imagined; here is hope renewed, and all this beauty for them which I may clasp to my heart! Then this secret thought, like a great wave of courage: perhaps I have taken all the unhappiness; none of it is left for them; blessed then be their most precious happiness, and may it endure, and may it be very dear to me, their happiness which perhaps has been paid for by mine!