

all sensible and intelligible things, keeping them under and suppressing them with a strong endeavour of thy mind, and rise up unknowingly to union with God, who is above all substance and knowledge'. (McCann's edition of *The Cloud*, p. 403).

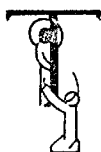
Those who have experienced this type of prayer will know how involuntarily drawn they are to it, and yet how useless, almost futile, it seems. The mind appears almost as a blank, thoughts are impossible, nothing 'concrete' of any value is to be taken away in the form of pious thoughts or even resolutions. It seems to leave the intellect starved so that the lack of nourishment threatens to atrophy its living powers. What use can such blankness be to God or man? This indeed, if we are to follow the teaching of *The Cloud*, is one of the great hardships of the union of love. A man has to be ready to abandon, at least in this sense, even the use of his faculties. He has to nought himself to such an extent that he may appear a fool before men, unable to keep abreast with them intellectually. Of course it will not be so since he rests in his love at the very source of being; but he has to have the preparation of soul by which he might so abandon himself. This noughting is the greatest of humiliations and makes him perfectly meek.

Meekness . . . is subtly and perfectly comprehended in this little blind love set on God, when it is beating upon this dark *cloud of unknowing*, all other things being put down and forgotten. (c. 24, p. 68).

PILGRIMAGE TO EINSIEDELN

BY

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HE small local train from Lucerne winds its way up the wooded mountains to the famous medieval shrine of our Lady of Einsiedeln. There is no official pilgrimage going on at the moment, only a few peasants and hikers. The pilgrim from England looks out of the window at the grandiose lines of the mountains, with the Rigi in the distance, and wonders what he will find at this sanctuary of our Lady, once as renowned throughout Europe as Lourdes is today. Now the abbey comes into view; and at once the note is struck that will sound again and again during these thirty-six hours; the note of contrast, of dissonance: the rich, overladen baroque building set within the

wondrous simplicity of the Alpine scenery, a strange encounter between the pretentious architecture of self-centred Renaissance man and the glory of the mountains made by the Lord.

At 4.15 next morning the pilgrim is woken up by a tremendous noise—the bells of Einsiedeln, as powerful as the surrounding mountains, calling all the neighbourhood to Mass. From half past four till nine or ten, Masses follow each other every half hour at the shrine of our Lady, to say nothing of those at the many side altars. One produces a card that admits to Holy Communion at the altar of the 'Gnadenbild' (picture of grace) and enters the chapel that stands by itself opposite the high altar at the other end of the church. There, surrounded by gilded clouds and gold and silver votive offerings, dressed in a richly embroidered scarlet mantle, is the famous black Virgin of Einsiedeln. No one knows when the venerable old statue came to Einsiedeln or who brought it, nor when the first miracles happened which made it famous throughout the medieval world. This only is known that it was not always black; but the smoke of innumerable candles burning before it darkened its colours and the faithful got used to its blackness and loved it. Then when the French destroyed the chapel in 1798 it was hidden in the earth; the moisture of the soil dissolved the soot and brought out its original colours. So, when the troubles of the revolution were over and the monks dug it up, they feared that the people would not recognise it, and therefore painted it black—and black it has remained ever since. The pilgrim cannot regret it; for the verse of the Canticle, 'Nigra sum, sed formosa, filiae Jerusalem', seems suddenly to spring to life, as the eyes, tired of the surrounding pomp, come to rest on the dark little face, silent, aloof, remote. . . .

The Mass begins. It is the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, but the Mass in the 'chapel of grace' is always the Mass of our Lady, with a commemoration of the feast of the day. 'Introibo ad altare Dei . . .' With the eyes of the body still fixed on the mysterious black face, the soul is suddenly drawn into a powerful stream, carried on it. . . . All distractions, all thoughts even, cease or fall away; the prayers of eleven centuries seem to materialise, as it were invading the soul, making her pray, wordless, thoughtless, drawing her upwards to the Mother full of grace. And, imperceptibly almost, still in the stream, the eyes both of body and soul leave the black little face, gliding downwards to the small white Host that the priest raises slowly over his head, as if offering her Son not only to the Father, but also to the Mother whom he redeemed from all stain.

For our Lady dominates this place in an extraordinary way;

not for one moment is the pilgrim allowed to forget her: at Einsiedeln her Son seems never to be present without her. After the last prayers following the Mass the gates of the chapel are opened, and the thanksgiving is made in the church itself. There is no black face now to help the soul to concentrate; the eyes of the body close to shut out the stucco angels that look for all the world like cupids without bow and arrow, the innumerable Saints in agitated postures, the paintings on walls and ceilings—all this worldly splendour that the 18th century deemed the worthy adornment of the house of God:

When the Divine Presence becomes fainter and the senses take note once more of what is happening, the loud, rhythmic recitation of the Rosary strikes the ear. At the Communion Altar on the left a monk leads the recitation during the principal Mass for the people; all the congregation make the responses except a group of nuns who sit with their backs to the altar following their own private devotions, but receiving Holy Communion with the others. Is this really a Benedictine Abbey? Even if one wanted to follow the Mass at the Communion Altar it would be impossible, for it seems as if not only the voice of the Celebrant, but the whole rhythm of the Mass itself was drowned in the prayers of the Rosary, which are interrupted only for a few seconds during the Consecration and the Communion.

A little before eight the High Mass begins in the presence of the Prince Abbot. As it is the Feast of Peter and Paul, surely this will be an unforgettable liturgical event. The soul prepares to let herself be carried into the presence of God on the waves of the plain chant that will soon fill the large church—when the eyes fall upon a monk standing on a raised platform obviously making ready to conduct the choir. A choir of monks, chanting the Mass under a conductor? But the exquisite music that soon fills the vast building is not plain chant. The rising crescendos, the exciting changes of *forte* and *piano*, *lento* and *allegro* fit in well with the cupid angels and stucco saints. No, plain chant would not match this building. Here one is really back in the 18th century, in the days when so often the Mass was principally a musical performance, a work of art. At Einsiedeln this attitude is so consistent that even visiting Benedictines are not allowed to join the choir because they might spoil it—they have to take their place with the congregation; and it is equally significant that, though it is still quite early, no one is allowed to communicate. Here is a real survival of a time that seems far more remote to the Catholic of our own day than the Middle Ages—it is as if all the developments of the last fifty years had passed by this rococo abbey, and for a moment the pilgrim from

England is tempted to condone all the excesses of our liturgical fans, so incongruous seems this Mass in which the artistic accessories have actually been allowed to suffocate the sacrificial rite. There seem only two simple things in this great church: the tiny white Host and the dark little face of the Virgin.

But no. This is not quite true. An unforgettable experience is still to come. Every night at eight o'clock, after the day's work is over, a handful of people from Einsiedeln and the neighbouring villages, old women and peasants, gather in the chapel of the black Virgin to recite the evening Rosary led by one of the monks. It is the quaint German form of the Rosary, according to which the mystery is not announced before each decade, but is inserted into each Hail Mary, for example: ' . . . blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus, who was crucified for us. . . .' However, it is not this oddity that strikes the pilgrim, but the way the prayers are recited. Kneeling before the black Virgin these simple people say them slowly, deliberately (the five decades with the surrounding prayers take about half an hour), in a loud voice vibrating with a love and conviction that are overwhelming. Here is a faith that has been transmitted from one generation to the other these last thousand years, a faith that has never known a doubt, not even a difficulty, not even a wavering, something as robust as it is simple, with which the very air seems to be instinct. These people are children gathered round their Mother with an absolute trust: 'Du wirst uns ja helfen; Du musst uns ja helfen' (You will help us; you must help us)—it seems as if a strong current went out from the Mother to her children and from them back to her; and the stranger is drawn into this current, in which all problems and complications fall away and there remains only the utterly simple faith that unites the soul to her God.

The prayers are finished; and now the day is closed with a hymn. Is it perhaps a little sentimental, without poetic beauty? What does it matter? Sung by the vigorous voices of these Swiss peasants it rings out into the night, a confession of faith as unshakeable as the dark mountains around them. What does it matter that one missed the plain chant and disliked the architecture? In the hymn and the Rosary faith becomes luminous and hope all but palpable, and the soul finds her way back to simplicity. And before that black Virgin who takes her children into her motherly arms man learns once more to be a child: Our Lady of Einsiedeln, pray for us.