

ROMANCE IN RELIGION

NOT many of us are favoured with visions, usually through our own fault : for the best of all visions is the right appreciation of the inner significance of all these everyday things we have looked at for so long with unseeing eyes. That, we are sure, is the real character of the visions of the mystics. And these are visions which do not come suddenly and as suddenly fade away, leaving nothing but a memory behind them ; they remain for ever.

It was a vision of this kind that came to a certain brother as he stood one night chanting matins in the choir along with the others. Humanly speaking, he did not deserve to have a vision, for he was not in the dispositions which are piously supposed to lead to such favours. His lips were mumbling the psalms, but his mind was far away, and he looked to be bored. To speak the truth, he was tired, and longed for nothing so much as the end, so that he might go to bed. And if you could have seen into his mind and heart, you would have found that the attitude of his soul was no better than that of his body. He was in a mood of dejection and disappointment, for he was young in religious life, and religious life had not come up to his expectations. All his young life he had been a romantic dreamer, for ever lending himself to an imaginative exaltation of the past. He felt that he had been born several centuries too late, and he was never more happy than when he could bury himself in some story of those good days long past, when every ordinary thing seemed to be clothed in the dress of romance. In comparison the world he knew was drab and colourless.

The discovery of the existence of an order of friars in this modern world of materialism had come to him as

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a revelation that something of his world of romance still remained, and he became a friar forthwith. His first year as a novice was nearly all that he had ever hoped for; the habit, the tonsure, the solemn ceremonial of the ordinary things of everyday life, the choral office chanted at extraordinary hours of day and night, and not least, the old-world priory nestling among the hills far away from the cities—all this went to create a fancy that it was the modern world which was unreal, and the past which was permanent. He had never enjoyed himself so much in his life before. Days passed by in content and tranquillity and he was satisfied to let them go on thus for ever. And when at the end of the year he took his vows, making profession of obedience in the hands of the prior after the old feudal manner and signing the deed of profession on the very high altar, he walked on air.

But anyone with experience of religious life, or even of human nature, might know that this sort of thing could not last; there was bound to be a rude awakening for life is nowhere all romance. Thus after a year he was driven forth from this refuge and thrust among a noisy crowd of busy students. He suddenly found himself in an atmosphere of intellectual activity which tried him extremely. Early and late his days were now spent in philosophical studies for which his beautiful imagination was only a hindrance. Strange new ideas strove for a place in his thoughts and distracted his attention, with the result that his morning meditation was no longer the comfortable half-hour of fervour which he had found so pleasant. Soon the old glamour departed from his life in the ceaseless round of study, lectures, choral office, meals and sleep which kept him so unromantically busy and left him no time for day-dreams. So we find him sadly disappointed at the perishing of his dream-world, conscious that there was something lacking in his life which might lift the drab

things of daily life to a more romantic plane; and on this night he found it. He said that it was like the opening of an invisible door which admitted him to a new atmosphere, and it was the old atmosphere of romance in which he had delighted to wander. Nothing was changed, but he saw all things differently.

Suddenly, and for the first time in his conscious experience, he became aware of the deep boom of sound that rolled among the dark rafters overhead as it rose from the sturdy young voices down below. It came to him now as a song in itself, apart from any meaning contained by the words of which it was composed. Indeed, up among the rafters the words could not be distinguished for the rolling and the echoing of the sound. It was majestic, like the surging of the sea heard by the poet—

‘ That voice is round me like a burning sea.’

It was continuous, for there was an echo of sound up aloft which carried on the note even during the pauses of the office below. He could not help looking up as though to catch a glimpse of the invisible singers who were thus joining in the song, but all was shrouded in mysterious darkness. Letting fall his gaze he was startled by the contrast made by the white habits of his brethren on the opposite side of the choir. He saw a new significance now in these white-robed and hooded ranks which faced each other like armies drawn up for battle. It struck him that there was in reality an element of contest in this double choir, as the deep note of the voices rolled backwards and forwards from one side to the other. Each side seemed to be striving to outstrip the other in telling the praises of God; and then both would bow low in adoration while the doxology was chanted.

This surging of the sound from side to side was still ringing uppermost in his ears as they came to the

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words, *elevaverunt flumina vocem suam, elevaverunt flumina fluctus suos*—‘the floods have lifted up their voice, the floods have lifted up their waves.’ True, the sound of the chant was like the surging to and fro of the tide on the sea shore in which the psalmist had heard the voice of the waters praising the Creator. With the thought of this there came to him the significance of the canticle which they were about to sing, *Benedicite omnia opera Domini Domino*. Not men alone but all created things sing the praises of God. The whole of creation is one vast hymn of praise, the manifold works of God making up a splendid harmony, music for the ear of God. Saint Francis found out the secret and expressed it in his canticle—

Sir Brother Sun

Who is our day, through whom Thou givest light:
Beautiful is he, radiant with great splendour:
Of Thee, Most High, he is a true revealer.

But none has put it more finely than Clement of Alexandria. Speaking of the fable which makes the Thracian Orpheus tame the wildness of the beasts by the magic of his song, he says that there is another Singer better than Orpheus and a song more powerful than that of the Thracian—‘the immortal measure of a new harmony, the new Levitical song,’ the new canticle which the psalmist bids us sing. This divine Singer with his immortal song, he says, has not merely tamed wild beasts but has made men out of beasts, and men have come to life again by the power of the strains of this song. Moreover, ‘it also composed the universe into a melodious order, tuning the discord of the elements in a harmonious arrangement so that the whole world might become a harmony This is that immortal song which is the stay of the universe and the harmony of all things, reaching from the centre to the circumference and from the extremities

to the inner part; it has harmonised everything, not according to the Thracian's music which is like to that invented by Jubal, but according to the paternal counsel of God which fired the zeal of David. And He who is born of David and yet was before Him, the Word of God, despising the lyre and the harp which are but lifeless instruments, and having by the Holy Spirit tuned the universe and especially man—who composed of body and spirit is a universe in miniature—makes melody to God on this instrument of many notes. And with this instrument—I mean man—He sings harmoniously: 'For (says He) thou art my harp, and flute, and temple.'¹

Even now they were singing the last psalm of Lauds, the new song of which Saint Clement spoke. *Cantate Domino canticum novum*. They were indeed singing unto the Lord a new song in that it was renewed every day, but at the same time a song so hoary with age that to find its first singer one would have to go far back into the distant ages of the past. How many centuries had passed since the old walls of Solomon's temple had first resounded with its melody while it was sung by the singing-men and singing-maidens in their choirs! And when the temple fell and the voice of the song was silenced in its courts, then the early Christians took up the refrain and the sombre tunnels of the catacombs echoed and re-echoed to these words which he now chanted. If he wanted an example of devotion to the office of the Church, what could he find better than that of these early followers of Christ whom the pagan satirist Lucian ridiculed because they spent whole nights in singing hymns! When persecution ceased and the enjoyments of peace led to a relaxation of this primitive fervour, the world was made witness of the marvels of the Thebaid where the Book of Psalms provided the daily prayer and

¹ *Cohortatio ad Graecos*, chap. 1.

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food for the meditation of the solitaries. When he heard them chanting the psalms amid the silent wastes, Palladius the Galatian thought himself already in heaven. 'At the ninth hour,' he says, 'one can stand and hear the strains of psalmody rising from each dwelling and believe himself to be high above the world in Paradise.'

The Thebaid did its work and passed away; but the song of praise went on, losing nothing of its sweetness. Augustine, with the recollection of the chant of the church at Milan still fresh in his memory, calls out: 'Thy hymns and songs, O my God, and the sweet chant of Thy church stirred and penetrated my being. These voices streamed into my ears and caused truth to flow into my heart, and from its springs the emotions welled up, finally the tears flowed, and I rejoiced in them.'

With the spread of monasticism the volume of sacred song grew apace. The choirs of Benedict's sons took up the ever-swelling note and the divine melody echoed in every corner of Europe. Then came Dominic and he began to sing with all his characteristic enthusiasm. 'Sing up, my brothers!' he would call out to them across the choir. During the seven centuries that had elapsed since then his sons had never ceased to sing that song. There was inspiration in the thought that during all this time not a night had passed but these psalms of Matins had been chanted by some of his sons in some part of the world. The new song begun by Dominic had become an unending song. The dreamer thought of the unbroken line of brethren which reached back from himself to his Father, and instinctively he turned his eyes to the reredos on which the saints of the Order stood grouped around the cross. He now stood, as it were, in the place that they had once occupied during their mortal life. Would he ever stand where they stood now,

continuing the chant of praise which they had begun in earthly choirs?

His eyes fell to the altar below, shrouded in mystery except for two lights like two eyes gazing at him. These lights were like living things, always flickering, rising and falling, every movement reflected a hundred times in the sheen of ornaments of the altar. This silent and ceaseless activity was finely symbolical of the spring of divine activity contained within the tabernacle. There was the bond of union which joined those now singing in the choir with the saints on the reredos who were singing in another choir.

But now the office had come to an end, and the echoes of the last cry of *Deo Gratias* were reverberating among the rafters, as though loth to give place at last to silence.

FRATER QUIDAM.