

## ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

'The most pure suffering leads to the most pure and deepest knowledge.' — SPIRITUAL CANTICLE.

THE first monastery of the Carmelite Friars of St. Teresa's Reform consisted of a small house with a porch for church, one single room for dormitory, a kitchen which also served as the refectory, and a garret for choir. Its roof leaked, and in winter the snow would fall on the coarse habit of Fray Juan, who had changed his name of St. Mathias to John of the Cross, for it was the Cross with which he was in love, and the mystic teaching he gave to the Church is sealed with the sign of our salvation.

Mystics, alas, seem to be *en vogue* again among writers Christian and otherwise — alas, because mysticism by its very name seems to suggest mystery, dark and wonderful experiences, losing oneself in the One or the All (it does not matter which); tempting men to spiritual experiments which can only end in disaster. But mysticism is nothing of the kind, and anyone who longs for mystic experiences or who would understand Christian mystics with such notions in his head is grievously deceived. 'Do not seek Christ except on the Cross,' St. John once said to one of his friars, and the Christian mystic who always seeks God through Christ, will also be found only on the Cross.

There is, perhaps, no other Saint whose life as well as whose doctrine bear the imprint of the Cross so openly, so challengingly even, as the life and the writings of St. John, whom the Church calls in the Collect of his Feast '*Perfectae sui abnegationis et Crucis amatorem.*' The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night of the Soul* trace but the *Via Crucis* of the soul aiming at perfection — the way of purification so painful and so intense that they seem to belong to the flames of purgatory rather than to this earth. At the very outset of this *Via Dolorosa* — and there is none other leading to the Mount of Vision — the Saint asks no less than complete renunciation. Are you attached to a friend or to a book, to some food or to a rosary? Cast it away, or all else will be useless. What a task for the will, what a continual watch to be kept on thoughts, desires, affections, what continual sacrifices for the soul. Not big sacrifices — that would be comparatively easy — but small ones, dull ones, known to none but God, day by day, hour by hour. . . . For this is the rule of life the inexorable Carmelite sets before all those who would aspire to Mystic Union: 'Strive always, not after that which is most easy, but after

that which is most difficult. Not after that which is most pleasant, but after that which is most unpleasant. Not after that which is consoling, but after that which is afflictive. Not after great things, but after little things.' Those are indeed hard sayings, opening out not on a vista of divine thrills but of spiritual drudgery, *agere contra*, always, everywhere, in all things. Yes, in all things—not only in material things, but, if possible, even more in spiritual things. That would be poor detachment which rejects material joys only to fill itself with consolation in prayer.

True devotion, according to St. John, consists in 'the annihilation of all sweetness in God, in dryness, in distaste, in trouble, which is the real spiritual cross.' And his worst thunders are reserved for those who hanker after sensible consolations: 'They seek only for delights, but this is not self-denial, nor detachment of spirit, but rather spiritual gluttony. They render themselves spiritually enemies of the cross of Christ, for true spirituality seeks for bitterness rather than sweetness in God, and inclines to suffering rather than to consolation.' No, there are no fine feelings even in the first steps on the way of contemplation, when meditation has ceased, and the soul is left bewildered in emptiness, passing her hours of prayer in helpless realization that she can neither think nor feel nor imagine any more, as in the days when she first began to be drawn to the things of God. Then prayer itself becomes drudgery, a sheer submission of the will to God who is neither felt nor enjoyed—only served. For one thing only is necessary for men: 'To deny themselves in earnest, inwardly and outwardly, giving themselves up to suffer for Christ's sake, annihilating themselves utterly. That spirituality, therefore, which would travel in sweetness, is, in my opinion, worth nothing.'

For prayer means seeking God, not self, and the less our emotions enter in, the less our desires are satisfied; the more it crucifies, and the nearer we shall be to him who was crucified for us, though we may think we are farther away. And this dryness may go on for months; for years. But at last, when we have passed through this bitter furnace in which our spiritual selfishness has been purged, we shall arrive in the land beloved by all psychologists and romantics far more than by the mystics themselves, the land of visions and locutions, levitations and ecstasies; and we remember the scene in the parlour of the monastery of the Incarnation at Avila, when a stupefied nun surprised St. Teresa and her confessor, St. John of the Cross, each raised into the air on either side of the grille. Yes, God works wonderful things in his Saints—yet they are, after all, but physical effects of spiritual causes, and what are they compared with God? Very little indeed to St. John. For when the soul gets attached to

their sweetness she leaves the one sure way, the way of renunciation, and may even fall into spiritual pride. Therefore she must continue to walk the hard road of detachment, humbly receiving those graces without desiring them or glorying in them—for to St. John of the Cross, as to St. Paul, there is but one thing in which the soul may lawfully glory: the Cross of Christ.

When God sees the soul willing to forsake all for him, he will not withhold that cup of suffering by which even the roots of imperfection will be removed. Then she enters on that mysterious path which the Saint calls the Night of the Spirit, and which is none other than the intense light of infused contemplation. For the soul is still imperfect, and when the rays of Divine purity beat against her, she can only perceive them as darkness, and, becoming aware of her misery as never before, the shadows of death and hell fall upon her, and cast her into depths of suffering vouchsafed only to those called to the highest union. For he who would be united to his Lord already in this world must drink the Cup that he drank and suffer the desolation that he suffered on the Cross. For the ascent of Mount Carmel is the ascent of Mount Calvary, and though St. John of the Cross did not receive the Stigmata in his body, as St. Francis on Mount Alvernia, he received them in very truth in his soul. We know only what happened to the outward man when the Carmelite friar of the Reform was thrown into the dark cell of the monastery of his mitigated brethren in Toledo, kept a prisoner on bread and water, his clothes, which were never changed, clotted with the blood that streamed from his shoulders under the disciplines administered to him—deprived of Mass, and saying his office standing on a bench, holding his breviary against the glimmer of light that came through a loophole under the roof.

But we know nothing of the sufferings of his soul, though we may guess, for they are described in the *Dark Night* with a scientific precision that in its objectivity bears the stamp of a deep personal experience. For the nearer the soul is to the uncreated Light the deeper the mystic darkness that enshrouds her, when Divine Truth reveals to her the abyss of human unworthiness and permits the devil to try his fiercest onslaughts on the chosen servant who is to be raised to the summit of mystical life. Then the soul, tried in the furnace, seems to lose all her faculties and all her discernment, thinking herself to have succumbed to temptation when really she has heroically resisted, and to be an outcast from Divine Mercy, which is in fact showering ineffable graces upon her. In the dark cell of Toledo, in utter desolation of spirit, John of the Cross was purified from the last dross of the earth. And in the same dark cell was composed his

first work, the *Spiritual Canticle*, that wondrous song of the soul admitted at last to the Mystic Marriage :

The bride has entered  
 The pleasant and desirable garden,  
 And there reposes to her heart's content ;  
 Her neck reclining  
 On the sweet arms of the Beloved.

The time has come when the soul need no longer be afraid of delusion, for neither the flesh nor the devil can enter into the inner chamber of that interior castle where, all her deepest desires now being fulfilled beyond all human thought, she cries out in ecstasy : ' My sole occupation is Love.' My sole occupation is Love . . . yet it would seem to a man seeing the Saint kneeling in that terrible cell, in hunger and darkness, that his sole occupation was suffering. And so it is. On the Cross of Calvary Divine Love and human suffering became indissolubly united, and will remain so to the end. For suffering does not cease with the Mystic Marriage. It goes on ; it increases with the longing of the soul to become more and more like her Divine Master. ' To suffer or to die,' said St. Teresa ; ' He knows nothing who knows not how to suffer for the love of God,' said St. John of the Cross. But how can it be, we may ask, that a soul that enjoys the constant union with God can still suffer intensely? That does indeed pass human understanding. But as the Beatific Vision did not prevent the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord from suffering more deeply than any man, so the Mystic Union does not hinder the Saints from drinking the Cup that he drank.

In the years that followed his imprisonment at Toledo troubles and hostility both from outside and from inside the new Carmelite Reform were a source of constant suffering to St. John. But amidst all contradictions he poured out his soul in the *Living Flame of Love*, singing the praises of the Blessed Trinity, for ' O wonder ! the soul is now overflowing with the divine waters which run from it as from an abundant fountain unto everlasting life.' Yet in the midst of the wonders of his inner life he grasped the Cross more firmly ; gentle towards others, he gave no rest to his wearied body, so that his brethren wondered how he could practise such austerities and live.

And that the death of his Saint might be even more precious in the sight of God, before his life ended the cup of bitterness was filled to overflowing, and his constant prayers for humiliations and sufferings were abundantly heard. In the last year of his life he was deprived of all his offices by his brethren, who suddenly turned against him ; he retired to Peñuela, one of the most austere houses of Carmel, to

finish his life as the least of the members of the Order he had himself done so much to restore. But even this was not enough. Owing to the hatred of one of the friars to whom he had once administered a well-deserved rebuke, the rumour was spread about that all his sanctity had been sham, and falsified evidence was collected against him. When the trouble was at its height, God added to it a painful illness. He was ordered to leave the unhealthy climate of Peñuela, and so chose as his dying place a monastery where he knew the prior was hostile to him, that he might not miss the last chance of increasing his cross. There, covered with sores, unable to move, speaking with difficulty, and treated harshly almost to the end, he lived through long weeks of desolation, before at last he went to 'chant matins in Heaven' where Love reigns alone and suffering is no more.

How is such a life to be borne, we, who are not mystics, may ask; a life that seems to consist of nothing but suffering and renunciation? It is borne, and joyfully borne, only by Love. Not by that cheap emotional counterfeit which we usually understand by this word, now so dishonoured in human language, but by that wondrous love which resides in the will and flows from there into the depths of our being, that love which is a spark of the boundless fire of the Divine Love burning in the deep mysteries of the Blessed Trinity, the love which created and redeemed the world. For the love of the mystic is that *caritas* of St. Paul's glorious chapter in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, the love that suffereth all things, because it seeketh not its own. Love and suffering, indissolubly bound: take away from Christianity the love of suffering, the love of the Cross, and you will take the heart out of the Mystical Body and be left with that lifeless corpse which passes so often in the world for the religion of the Crucified. But St. John of the Cross, as every true mystic, lived very near the Divine Heart and knew Its secret. For the Lord said, 'Take upon you your cross'; and his Apostle answered, 'I am crucified to the world,' and his Church chants her triumphal hymn through the ages, *O Crux, Ave*.

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