Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.
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X. TRIAL AND TEMPTATION

> Lord, for Thy great pain have mercy on my little pain.
> — Margery Kempe of Lynn.

> He said not: "Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be afflicted," but He said : "Thou shalt not be overcome".—Julian of Norwich.

There are times when the human heart longs to escape from the overwhelming evil and sorrow of the world. The Psalmist yearned for the wings of the dove that he might escape from the tempest and wander far off and remain in the wilderness. Obeying this impulse, world-weary souls have oftentimes fled to some remote spot as to a place of refuge.

The hermits have been stigmatized as weak and morbid persons who sought retirement in order to avoid the struggles of life ; but, in truth, the very object of the true solitary when he set his face toward the wilderness was to enter into fierce conflict with the tempter. "The fiend tempteth much those who lead a solitary life, for envy that he beareth them : but he is there always overcome. For our Lord himself standeth by them in the fight, and emboldeneth them to resist strongly, and giveth them of his strength."

The desert, then, was a place for combat and conquest—not "a retreat for the feeble, but a training-place for the strong".[1] So terrible was the warfare, that raw recruits were not permitted to engage in it ; they had first to prove themselves disciplined soldiers of Christ. St. Benedict, himself an anchorite, ordains thus in his Rule :—

> "The second kind [of monks][sic] are the hermits, that is, settlers in the wilds, who, not in the first fervour of religious life, but after probation in the monastery, have learned by the help and experience of others to fight against the devil, and going forth well armed from the

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HERMIT TEMPTED BY THE DEVIL

[Plate XXXI : Hermit Tempted by the Devil.]

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ranks of their brethren to the single-handed combat of the wilderness, are able without the support of others to fight by the strength of their own arm and the help of God against the vices of the devils and their evil thoughts."

The same ideal of spiritual warfare inspired the recluse in England. Cuthbert, even in the monastery, would withdraw to the most secluded spot, there to contend with the invisible adversary ; and, when he went to Fame, he ousted "that wicked enemy with all his followers". Nearly seven centuries later, another Northumbrian hermit retired to Norham, that there, apart from the turmoil of men, he could fight with the old enemy. Indeed, the reality of the personality of the devil was so strong to the minds of men like Cuthbert, Guthlac, Roger, Godric, Robert, and Richard, that they seemed themselves—like Anthony of Egypt—to have actual conflicts with demons, whose insults and attacks are described at length in the lives of these saints.

The inexperienced solitary was warned against the snares of the devil :—

> "Account no vision that ye may see, waking or sleeping, or in a dream, to be anything but an illusion, for it is one of his stratagems. He hath often thus deceived wise men of holy and pious life, as him . . . whom he made to believe that he was an angel, and of his own father that he was the devil, and made him kill his father."

The allusion here is to the popular allegory of The Pilgrim. The tempter "full of fetheres bryght and clere" went to a certain hermit in the desert, bidding him beware of Satan who would assail him on the morrow in the likeness of his father. Thus counselled, "this innocent, this sely man" started up anon, and took a knife and slew the old man (Plate XXXI).[2]

Richard the hermit warns his solitary friend Margaret against the quaint and subtle temptations of the fiend. He relates the story of an anchoress to whom the evil one often came in the form of a good angel, saying that he was come to take her to heaven. Overjoyed, she told this to her shrift-father, who, doubting the vision, counselled her to bid the angel show her the Blessed Virgin. At her request, he showed her the fairest woman that might be ; but when she knelt and

said *Ave Maria*, the fair figure vanished. Richard himself was specially anxious to help recluses and others who were vexed by evil spirits. He was once summoned to a lady's death-bed, whence, by means of prayer and holy water, he ejected a multitude of horrid demons.[3] The mediaeval belief in dæmonology was of a highly superstitious character, and the terror of death was enhanced by the thought that devils and angels were wrestling for the departing soul.

The apparition sometimes assumed human shape. To Robert of Knaresborough, much tried with "imps and warlows," the devil appeared as a lad gaping and grinning at him ; but the sturdy saint took his staff and beat "Sir Gerrard" soundly.[4] To the sick Emma, he seemed to take the form of a physician, who desired to touch her person and prescribe a cure ; but the holy woman exorcised him by the sacred spell *Verbum caro factum est*.[5]

The subjection of the body was the lifelong labour of recluses. The seriousness of the struggle is shown by the extreme measures devised by way of training. Wulfric, for example, "used to mortify his members with much fasting, and bring them under control by toil of vigils, so that his flesh scarcely hung on his bones". He and certain other champions of the ascetic life, were clad not only in spiritual but material armour. Night and day the iron habergeon pressed the rough hair-shirt upon the emaciated frame. When Wulfric, having worn out one penitential suit, obtained a new one from Sir William FitzWalter, its length impeded his kneeling.

The knight offered to send the coat of mail to London to be shortened, but the anchorite bade him in God's name take a pair of shears and cut it. Whilst he hesitated, thinking the good man mad, Wulfric brought shears out of the house, and, having drawn a thread through the rings of the chain-armour to mark where it should be cut, he placed it in the window before the knight, saying : "Be steadfast, and fear not. I go to pray to my Lord about this matter ; meanwhile do you set about it confidently." The two warriors were now busily occu-

pied, the one in praying, the other in cutting. Their work prospered, and the iron seemed like a linen texture. Amazed, Sir William fell at Wulfric's feet, but he

raised him and bade him tell no man. Such things, however, cannot be hid, and the fame of the wonder-worker traversed the whole realm. "From that time the man of God, without any shears, with his own weak fingers, but with no less faith, distributed rings of the coat of mail to heal the diseases of all who asked it of him in charity." Godric wore the *lorica* for fifty years. Indeed, he wore out three in succession, the metal rings of which were treasured as relics.

Another ascetic practice was that of standing in cold water for hours, sometimes throughout the night. Godric often stood in a hollowed rock in the icy waters of the Wear, or descended into a tub sunk in the floor of his oratory. Such being likewise Wulfric's habit, it is not surprising to learn that he was wont to suffer torture with the cold (p. 107).

Nor was the anchoress less ready to endure almost inconceivable misery. Christina was shut into the corner of a hut, huddled up on the bare floor. The door was so fastened that she could not herself open it, and she was released once a day, at dusk :—

> "Here the handmaiden of Christ sat crouching on the hard cold stone. . . . Oh, what discomfort she there endured from heat and cold, hunger and thirst, and daily fasting! The place was too narrow for her to wear the clothing needful for cold weather, whilst in the heat this close-fitting closet allowed her no refreshment."

The description of physical agony is too painful to repeat, and "to all these sufferings were added many and terrible diseases". Roger, her spiritual father, was remarkable for his asceticism. William of Malmesbury says that he led an austere life, "seldom heard of in our times" (c. 1 125). He had been on pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre, where he resolved upon a life of sacrifice and self-abnegation. The ardent receptive nature of his young disciple led her to emulate his austerities. After she had endured much suffering for over four years, a vision of comfort was vouchsafed to her. One fairer than the sons of men appeared, bringing a golden cross. He bade her take up this cross, as all must needs do who

would fain go to Jerusalem ; but He promised that she should not bear it long. When Christina told this vision to Roger, he wept for joy, saying in the vulgar tongue: "Rejoice with me, *Myn gode Sonendayes doghter* (that is, my good daughter of the Lord's day) for your tribulation will shortly be ended" : and so it came to pass.

Roger, Christina, and Wulfric, Godric and Bartholomew, all lived in the twelfth century. When the *Ancren Riwle* was compiled (early in the thirteenth century, as is supposed) there were still persons performing similar penances :—

> "I know a man who weareth at the same time both a heavy cuirass and haircloth, bound with iron about the middle too, and his arms with broad and thick bands, so that to bear the sweat of it is severe suffering ; he fasteth, he watcheth, he laboureth, and, Christ knoweth, he complaineth

> and saith that it doth not oppress him, and often asketh me to teach him something wherewith he might give his body pain . . . I know also a woman of like mind who suffereth little less. And what remaineth but to thank God for the strength that He giveth them?"

Although the compiler of the Rule could not but admire their courage, he did not commend their practice as a pattern for other recluses. Those who have not physical strength to fast, keep vigil, endure cold, and such other hardships, as many can bear and many cannot, may very well be excused, and please God with less. He forbids the misguided self-torture practised by the great ascetics :—

> "Wear no iron, nor haircloth, nor hedgehog-skins ; and do not beat yourselves therewith, nor with a scourge of leather thongs, nor leaded ; and do not with holly nor with briars cause yourselves to bleed without leave of your confessor ; and do not, at one time, use too many flagellations."

Their food had seemed to him less than was fitting, and he bids them fast no day upon bread and water without permission. For the devil craftily suits the temptation to the nature of the recluse ; knowing, therefore, that he cannot make this one sin through gluttony, "he incites her to so much abstinence that she is rendered the less able to endure fatigue in the service of God, and leads so hard a life, and so torments her body that her soul dieth". The night's rest must not be

neglected ; "in bed, as far as you can, neither do anything nor think, but sleep". Foolhardiness concerning health is sternly condemned, "Sickness is a fire which is patiently to be endured—sickness which God sends ; but not that which some catch through their own folly."

Richard the hermit also writes against self-neglect. With him it was a matter of personal experience, he having frequently been so exhausted by abstinence as to suffer excruciating headache. The tempter, he says, sometimes entices thus : "Eat little, drink less; reck not of sleep, wear the hair and the habergeon, so that there be none that pass thee in penance". This so enfeebles them that they cannot love God as they should. He reckons it no virtue but a sin to withhold necessaries from the body. The young anchoress should eat and drink, better or worse, as it comes ; when she is proved, and knows herself and God better than she did, she may take to more abstinence.

The ascetics sought to discipline themselves until all the desires or shrinkings of nature were changed. Thus Margery Kempe so dwelt upon the thought of Christ's Passion that all pain was transformed "in the sight of the soul". She saw Christ in every sufferer and "she had great mourning and sorrowing that she might not kiss the leper when she met them in the way, for the love of our Lord : which was all contrary to her disposition in the years of her youth and prosperity, for then she abhorred them most". She even desired pain for herself, but it was revealed to her that inward communion was better than any outward

observance : “Daughter, if thou wear the habergeon or the hair, fasting bread and water, and if thou saidest every day a thousand Pater Nosters, thou shalt not please me so well as thou dost when thou art in silence, and suffereth Me to speak in thy soul”.[6]

It was for strict, self-controlled recluses of this kind, who were inclined to excessive penance, that both the *Ancren Riwle* and *Form of Living* were written. There were others, however, who considered comfort and health overmuch and raised objections to discipline. “My dear sir,” one of them is heard to say,” is it wisdom now for a man or woman thus to afflict

themselves?” But the writer of the Rule replies that Christ's followers must surely imitate Him in suffering ; and he quotes from the earlier Rule to enforce the lesson that not without bodily discipline can purity be maintained :—

> “Let not any one handle herself too gently, lest she deceive herself. She will not be able, for her life, to keep herself pure, nor to maintain herself aright in chastity without two things, as St. Ailred wrote to his sister. The one is, giving pain to the flesh by fasting, by watching, by flagellations, by wearing coarse garments, by a hard bed, with sickness, with much labour. The other thing is the moral qualities of the heart, as devotion, compassion, mercy, pity, charity, humility, and other virtues of this kind. . . . Yet many anchoresses, more is the harm, are of such fleshly wisdom, and so exceedingly afraid lest their head ache, and lest their body should be too much enfeebled, and are so careful of their health, that the spirit is weakened and sickeneth in sin.”

One fault to which solitary women were prone was that of sitting too long at the parlour window. “Wherefore, my dear sisters, love your windows as little as possible ; and see that they be small,—the parlour’s smallest and narrowest.” Within the shutter was a heavy curtain bearing on both sides “the white cross appropriate to white and unstained maiden purity, which requires much pains well to preserve”. Convent-bred or sheltered in her own home, the inexperienced inmate of the cell found herself exposed to new temptations. The extreme monotony made her yearn for diversion and excitement ; hence the warnings of Aelred (*Cap*. VI.). Danger might arise from that old woman, who, hoping for alms, comes as a messenger, and whispers soft words in her ears. Bad women will come as well as good. Settling down before the window they utter a few pious phrases and then pass to secular matters and even weave love-tales : thus they drive away from the recluse almost all sleep. Bearing in mind that she was an anchoress, “a woman in whom such confidence is put,” she was to keep a strict watch over herself, lest she should bring reproach upon her holy calling : “for who can with more facility commit wickedness than the false recluse?” Constant vigilance was needed.” Surely our foe, the warrior of hell, shoots, as I ween, more bolts at one anchoress than at seventy and seven secular ladies.” Hers was by no means one great renunciation

followed by years of freedom from tribulation, as was pointed out by her sympathetic spiritual guide :—

> "An anchoress thinks that she shall be most strongly tempted in the first twelve months . . . and when, after many years, she feels them so strong, she is greatly amazed, and is afraid lest God may have quite forgotten her, and cast her off. Nay! it is not so. In the first years, it is nothing but ball-play."

For the young and feeble are spared at first, and drawn out of this world gently and with subtlety ; thus are they gradually taught to fight and to suffer want.

Secret faults, such as spiritual pride and a desire for praise, were to be shunned :—

> "For the sorcerer would fain cajole you, if he might, and with flattery render you perverse, if ye were less gentle and docile. There is much talk of you, how gentle women ye are ; for your goodness and nobleness of mind beloved of many ; . . . having, in the bloom of your youth, forsaken all the pleasures of the world and become anchoresses."

Richard Rolle alludes to the temptation of ostentatious piety : "Men that come to thee, they love thee, for they see thy great abstinence . . . but I may not love thee so lightly for aught that I see thee do without". The prefatory note to the Sarum Office strikes a note of warning against self-satisfaction, lest at the outset the person to be enclosed should imagine that he was being separated on account of merit, but rather, lest he should infect his fellow-men. He must consider himself as it were condemned for sin and committed to a solitary cell as to a prison.

The much-tried anchoress was inclined to low spirits. She was therefore reminded that the Lord would sometimes withdraw Himself for her good—like some fond mother who hides from her darling, and waits until he calls Dame! Dame! when she leaps forth laughing and kisses away his tears.

> "When two persons are carrying a burden, and one of them letteth it go, he that holdeth it up may then feel how it weigheth. Even so, dear sister, while God beareth thy temptation along with thee, thou never knowest how heavy it is, and therefore, upon some occasion, he leaveth thee alone, that thou mayest understand thine own feebleness, and call for his aid, and cry aloud for him. If he delay too long, hold it up well in the meantime, though it distress thee sore."

Some of the sicknesses and sins of the solitary life were intimately connected. Indolence, languor, apathy, despondency—all arising from accidie, a besetting sin of the cloister—were not unknown to the recluse. Doubtless, her mind became morbid and her nerves overwrought by the unintermittent strain of existence under conditions so unnatural ; this resulted in peevishness, and she was obliged to confess to having grumbled and having been of gloomy countenance. She was therefore counselled never to be idle, but to work, read, or pray, and be always doing something from which good may come.

A tender leniency and strong commonsense are shown by the writer of the *Ancren Riwle* with regard to illness. Remedies might be used, but over-anxiety was to be avoided, both because it was displeasing to God, and because "we often dread a bodily disease before it come". In times of physical weakness, enclosed women ought to do nothing that might be irksome, but rather talk with their maidens, and divert themselves together with instructive tales : "Ye may often do so when ye feel dispirited, or are grieved about some worldly matter, or sick. Thus wisely take care of yourselves . . . when ye feel any sickness, for it is great folly, for the sake of one day, to lose ten or twelve." Prudence was based on the highest motives. They were so to rest that long thereafter they might labour the more vigorously in God's service. The infirm person was to shorten her devotions. "Whoso is very ill, let her be free from the whole service, and take her sickness not only patiently, but right gladly, and all is hers that holy church readeth or singeth."

To learn to suffer, and to suffer well, was one of the chief ambitions of the anchoress. Matilda, who was enclosed for sixteen years at Wareham, was a signal example of unmurmuring patience. This stoical woman would not tolerate complaining in the cell, and when her handmaiden Gertrude (afterwards her successor) was suffering agonies with toothache, Matilda told her that she herself had uttered no word or groan even when her jaw had been in such a state of disease that it seemed to be breaking away.[7]

In a life of untold hardship, the recluse must surely have fallen a ready prey to disease. One was unable to occupy herself on account of failing eyesight, whilst another was a prisoner in herself through deafness. Indeed, when we read of the ill-health of Joan of Blyth (p. 111), of the paralytic seizures and consequent loss of speech suffered by Margaret Kirkby (p. 139), and of Dame Julian's severe attack of sickness, we cannot but marvel that frail women were able thus to endure want and weakness. For this illness Julian had longed and had definitely prayed, though she afterwards confessed : "If I had wist what pain it would be, I had been loth to have prayed". She lay for several days in a helpless condition, and on the fourth night received the last rites of the Church. During the succeeding three days she seemed to be at the point of death. Some minute details of the illness are recorded, as though they were fresh in the writer's mind. "The persons that were with me beheld me, and wet my temples ; and my heart began to comfort." Once, indeed, her mother, believing her to be dead, lifted her hand to close her eyes. When the priest came, with his acolyte, Julian was unable to

speak, but fixed her gaze upon the crucifix which he set before her. Then sight began to fail, and it was dark about her and murky, as it had been night, save in the image of the cross. Julian seemed to see and actually to share Christ's sufferings, and sank exhausted. But, suddenly, all the pain was taken away from her. "I was brought to great rest and peace, without sickness of body or dread of conscience." Through this experience she gained a firmer faith : "then saw I well, with the faith that I felt, that there was nothing betwixt the cross and heaven that might have distressed me".

At the time of her illness, which occurred in 1373, Julian was "thirty winters old and a half". She was still living in 1413, when she would be in her seventy-second year.[8] "I saw," she says in her *Revelations*, "that the age of every man shall be made known in heaven. . . . And specially the age of them that willingly and freely offer their youth unto God, passingly is rewarded and wonderfully is thanked".

The hermit's venerable aspect was proverbial. It was not merely that hardship produced a premature appearance of great age, but the rigour of his life seems actually to have preserved his health and promoted longevity. Hermits of England carried on the traditions of those of Egypt, where Paul had died at the age of 113 years, and was buried by Anthony, who was already ninety. Despite "frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds," the solitary "overpassed his days," until he was indeed, as pictured by Shakespeare, "a withered hermit, five-score winters worn".

Shortly before the Norman Conquest, three ancient anchorites were dwelling at Evesham ; Basing had been in seclusion seventy-two years, but Ælfwin [Aelfwin] and Wulsi no less than seventy-five years. There were also three aged ascetics in the twelfth century. Wulfric lived to be "full of days". Bartholomew enjoyed good health throughout almost the whole of his sojourn of forty-two years at Fame :—

> "He was so strong and in such full possession of his powers that his face was always cheerful and full of the beauty of bright colour, so that even when he was following a course of the sharpest fasting, and neglected all care of his body, any one would think that in all respects he fared delicately".

Bartholomew retained all his faculties to the end, but in his last days he suffered from an internal abscess, hæmorrhage, and heart disease. Turning to Godric, "the athlete of Christ," who passed sixty years at Finchale, we marvel, with Charles Kingsley, "not only at the man's iron strength of will, but at the iron strength of constitution which could support such hardship, in such a climate, for a single year".[9] The weather-beaten old sailor-hermit was bedridden for nearly eight years, and unable even to turn on his side without help.

How pathetic, and yet how striking, a picture the venerable solitary presented! In his earlier days the famous anchorite of Westminster had been the counsellor of kings (p. 154) :—

> "He had reached the extremity of age allowed to man, even, it was said, his hundredth year. For sixty years he had been immured. Those who conversed with him (but of late his discourse was wild)

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THE CRUCIFIX, CRATCLIFF

[Plate XXXII : The Crucifix, Cratcliff.]

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> saw through an iron grating a long, bent figure, with white hair and white beard reaching to his waist. His face was like the face of some corpse which had escaped corruption—so thin, so white, so sunken it was ; but for the gleaming of his eyes one would have thought him the figure of Death as he is painted in the cloister of Paul's."[10]

The chronicler also gives an impression of the spiritual strength of the veteran. "Formerly he would recount engagements with devils . . . but of late the devils being routed, he was left to his meditations . . . and for the last year or two his soul being rapt, his voice spoke only words uncertain."[11]

From first to last, as we have seen, the mystic was waging war with demons. To strive to dwell in thought solely upon the invisible was a severe strain upon the mind. Some of his fightings and fears were the result of self-

repression and shattered nerves ; some apparitions were hallucinations or feverish dreams. Nevertheless, the indomitable will of these men and women command admiration. We see in them not feebleness but fortitude. They lived a life of unflinching sacrifice—a life typified by the nakedness of the cell with its dominating crucifix (Plate XXXII). Voluntarily they stripped themselves of the natural joys of life. Patiently they persevered in hardness of living and unremitting moral effort. Contemporary writers witness to the reality of their discipline. Langland says :— [12]

> To preyere and to penaunce • putten heom monye,
> For loue of vr lord • liueden ful harde,
> In Hope for to haue • Heuen-riche blisse ;
> As Ancres and Hermytes • that holdeth hem in heore Celles.

And the ascetics themselves testify that they found a rich recompense in thus faithfully performing in what they conceived to be their duty. "Full swete melody makis mery the solitary man," says the hermit of Hampole. "In the end after long toil. He giveth them sweet rest, here, I say, in this world, before they go to heaven ; and then the rest seemeth so good after the labour." So writes, out of her own experience, the anchoress of Norwich.

Footnotes~

1. Farrar, *Saintly Workers*, 51.
2. Lydgate's translation. B.M. Cotton, Tiberius A., VII. f. 56, 90.
3. C. Horstman, *R. Rolle*, I. 12, 13 ; *Offieium*, col. 798-9.
4. Godric also had nicknames for his tormentors, viz., Carcaueresard, Corinbrand.
5. *Lanercost Chr*. (Maitland Club), 185.
6. *Treatise of Contemplation*, ed. E. G. Gardner, see p. 178.
7. B.M. Cott. Faust. B. IV (Vita S. Wulfrici), II. f. 97.
8. Blomefield seems to have read the date in the MS. as mccccxlij. The true reading is mccccxiij. See Mr. Harford's introduction to *Comfortable Words*, p. 7 ; also Mr. Edmund Gardner's article on Dame Julian in the *Catholic Cyclopedia*.
9. *The Hermits*, 311.
10. This description may be compared with Sven Hedin's affecting account of a Tibetan lama, who died, within living memory, after being immured for sixty-nine years.
11. Given on the authority of Sir W. Besant, see p. 155, n.
12. Piers Plowman (E.E.T.S. 28), Text A. Prol., 25-8.