

THE MONASTERY GUEST

MY few days in an English Benedictine monastery as a non-Catholic guest were an experience from which I have emerged full of gratitude. One cannot hope for perfect peace in this world, but I approached that ideal closer than I had ever done before.

After a little while within that sealed seclusion, where everything seen and heard has a purely religious dedication, the world and its vexations faded into an extraordinary remoteness and unimportance. The effect might be described as spiritual "slimming," for the spirit, like the body, is liable to become vulgarized by the gross and the unnecessary.

The experience is open to anyone (within, that is, the modest limits of accommodation at the disposal of the monasteries) who is sincerely desirous of it for his soul's sake. Of that, he would need to give some evidence, for a monastery does not welcome the merely curious guest, or one whose chief object is a cheap holiday.

His *bona fides* accepted, he is received with the most benevolent courtesy. He is as free to arrange his own pursuits as any

considerate guest would be in the house of a good host. Naturally he conforms with the routine of the monastery, joining in its services and occupying the meantime in such ways as consort with the spirit of the place. But no religious pressure is brought to bear upon him.

It may be interesting if I describe my own way of living in the monastery, the population of which consists of about sixty men, of whom rather more than half are choir monks. The rest, lay brothers, do the manual work of the monastery, in the garden, in the apiary, on the farm, building, making cider and butter and cream, tailoring, boot-making, etc., for the monastery supplies all its own needs except the cloth for the black habits of the monks.

I, usually, having dressed and shaved with the hot water which the punctual guest-brother brought me at 6:30, began the day by entering the church by the private door from the cloisters and attending the 7:15 mass; and my other appearances there would be at conventional mass (9 a. m.), vespers (2:30 p. m.) and compline (8:45 p. m.).

Being a Benedictine monastery, there was a rule of silence which prevailed during the greater part of the day and was never broken between supper and breakfast. The lay brothers at their various occupations were partially exempt, but in the refectory the rule was general and absolute, except for the reader, who, seated at a high desk, read to us during meals from some book of a religious character. During my stay, the work was a history of the church in Scotland.

The procedure was as follows:

At the sound of the bell for lunch or supper, the monks assembled silently in the cloisters and double-filed into the refectory in order of seniority. The place of the guests was at the rear. An elaborate grace having been sung, all standing behind the chairs, the monks sat down in their appointed places, which were marked by napkins on each of which lay a wooden strip bearing the name of its owner.

The reader began reading at once, and for a minute no other sound but his voice was heard: then the abbot would reach for his napkin, and at once a general clatter of chairs being drawn up and plates and cutlery being shifted overcame the reading.

The abbot's movement was

also the signal for the entrance of the viands. In from the kitchen came a white-aproned monk wheeling a trolley of food, followed by other white-aproned monks whose duty it was to serve the others.

These duties are taken in turn by all the monks, and I was amused to recognize, on the Sunday, in the stout father with the trolley doling out the steaming food from the stock-pot, the divine who had preached to a large congregation in the church that morning.

The monks' meal — what exactly it consisted of I could not see — was simple but ample, though not so ample as that of the guests, who were very generously regaled. I particularly enjoyed the home-made cider and cream, both of which were provided *ad lib*.

The silence rule was a little awkward for us guests when we wanted salt or bread, or wished to convey a preference to lean meat or fat, but our pantomime became sufficiently accomplished with practice.

Some of the men were very young, almost boys, and I noticed that these were much more austere of countenance and manner than the older ones. Among the latter there were several examples of the "jovial monk" of tradition. He whom I recognized as the principal es-

cort and guide of visitors to the abbey had an exuberantly humorous personality. He would have been entirely at home as a British museum lecturer.

On other faces, the mark of some intellectual pursuit dwelt more conspicuously than the mark of the ecclesiastic. I was particularly attracted by one monk, aged about thirty, with a small, delicately shaped head, a solitary air, and questing eyes that rested, full of musing speculation, first on one and then another of his companions. I found him exciting, for it seemed to me that there was something dangerous about a monk whose thoughts dared to range freely in an atmosphere where intellectual speculation encountered so many bars.

The church offices took up a very large part of the choir monks' day. I could hear them chanting long before I was up. But they have plenty of literary and artistic occupation between these duties.

There is a fine library ranging over a wide field of literature in many languages, including (I was surprised to find) a lot of very ordinary modern novels—part of private library bequests, I suppose. The monks write and study there.

Some play the violin, others put in the evening hour of relaxation playing Bach and Beethoven on the organ, while others, in the common room, converse over newspapers and magazines. Billiards and cards are allowed, and tennis and swimming can be enjoyed in the grounds.

To complete the story of my own devices, I spent the intervals between services and meals either in re-reading my *St. Francis of Assisi* and *St. Thomas á Kempis* in the cloisters or in my own room; in occasional short walks in the beautiful country in which the abbey is situated; in contemplating the many interesting features of the abbey itself; or in rambling about the gardens and grounds where Brother Bee was to be seen gathering honey for the table, and Brother Pig grew uncomfortably portly, and Sister Cow ruminated with appropriate piety in the pastures.

Then, supper over and compline having been sung in the lovely dusk of the half-darkened church, I retired at nine o'clock to bed and a long, dreamless sleep in a stillness which, after London's roaring nights, seemed incredible. — *Horace Thorogood in Hibbert Journal.*

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