

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE MONASTERY

I STEPPED off the train in a truly penitential state of mind. Waving aside the coachmen and disregarding the cries of the jitney-drivers, I set out on my two-mile tramp; for I had determined to walk to the monastery, as the monks and friars had done in the days of yore. Saint Dominic had undertaken long journeys on foot; in fact, he had forbidden his religious to ride on horseback. Certainly, then, I reasoned, I must deny myself at least this worldly luxury. After a few minutes' stroll I stopped to make inquiries concerning the whereabouts of the novitiate. The result was disheartening; the good farmers were very willing to assist me, but no two of them agreed on what direction I should take. "Keep to your left, then turn to your right, and after an hour's walk or so, you will see a red brick building." Another replied: "Oh, mebbe it's three or four looks up the road, a little beyond Hudges' farm." This diversity of information which, by the way, I received from the two most intelligent appearing gentlemen, was anything but satisfactory. I was undaunted, however, by these inconveniences, for I had worked my fervor up to a high pitch on the train by reading the "Lives of the Brthren," and now I considered it to be inconsistent with the religious vocation to consent even to the least touch of impatience.

In spite of my confusion and utter helplessness, I plodded on, up hill and down dale, sweltering under the scorching August sun and fairly eating the dust. I tried to keep in mind the "left and the right and the three looks up the road." Now and then I paused to deliberate and reconnoitre; and finally, on one of these occasions, my searching examination of the surrounding country was rewarded; a

short distance ahead the roads crossed, and on the left-hand side was a farmhouse—better still, there was a well near the fence. I had read of mendicants stopping by the wayside to rest, quenching their thirst at a country fountain, and consoling the passers-by with their holy conversation. I figured, therefore, that it would not be at all unbecoming for me to visit the farm yonder. "Just in time to be served," I said to myself, as I approached the fence. A woman, drawing water from the well, evidently conjecturing my purpose, offered me a cupful without waiting for my request. Summoning all the grace and courtesy I could command, I accepted the coveted potion, at the same time wishing heaven's choicest benediction on the good Samaritan. While she refilled the cup I pronounced an extemporaneous speech on the exquisite merits and unusually fine quality of the water.

"Traveling a long distance?" she observed, scrutinizing me inquiringly.

It seemed to me that, in all justice, I should satisfy her curiosity as a recompense for her kindness; so, tipping back my hat and resting my elbow on the fence, I assumed an air of importance and commenced:

"Yes, madam, I've come a thousand miles."

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, holding up her hands in horror; "you've sure had a long walk."

I tried to explain, but all my efforts were futile; she would not be convinced, and when I stopped to catch breath, sighed, "My soul, what a long walk in this hot weather!"

"Pardon me, madam," I interrupted, "could you inform me how I might get to the Dominican novitiate?"

"Oh, yas, yas, Brother, it's next to the graveyard," she responded, accom-

panying this bit of news with a sweeping gesture which might indicate almost any point of the compass.

Although flattered by the dignified title "Brother," gratuitously conferred, yet I felt slightly ruffled by this blunt reply. I did not deem it prudent to ask where the cemetery was located—she might not see the point.

Again I continued my weary way, by no means encouraged by my interview with this simple country woman, refreshed, nevertheless, by the draught of clear water. Then suddenly, when I had mounted the next hilltop, the haven of rest loomed up in the distance. There was the farm, Hedges' I suppose, and the cemetery a little beyond. No longer did I heed the perspiration trickling down my cheeks; no more did the sickening heat retard my footsteps. On the contrary, I quickened my pace, my heart bounded with joy and expectation, and I tried to arrange my hair with my fingers; the while my mind was filled with the pleasantest vision of stately cloisters, monastic cells, a barren refectory and austere looking friars chanting Divine Office.

"I need not go to the front door," I whispered to myself; "I'll just cut across this field and try the back entrance."

I was there in a few moments and tapped gently on the door.

"Come in," rang out a stentorian voice from inside.

Upon this vociferous invitation I entered with alacrity.

I found myself in the kitchen. Before me stood a robust friar, clothed in the white habit, and, besides, wearing what I believed to be the black cappa.

"He must be the prior," I concluded, "else he would not wear his black mantle here." He greeted me with a broad smile and eyed me critically, while I studied the stone floor.

"Father—" I commenced, bracing up.

"Did ye come to wash dishes?" he asked, nipping in the bud a pretty little introduction which I had composed.

"Yes, certainly, Father, anything you say," I replied in submissive tones, thinking, perhaps, this was a mild way of administering the discipline to the uninitiated.

"Brother Alexix is sick," he said, "and couldn't wurk to-day. Sit down, me bye, and take a rist. Ye seem to be all out of breath."

It never occurred to me that a man was expected that day to take Brother Alexis' place in the kitchen, and that I, unfortunately, was mistaken for that individual.

"It's mighty hot wither," he continued, handing me a glass of water. "Take off your coat, me bye, and make yersilf at hume. I'll draw the wather from the will, and whin ye're cooled off, ye kin lind a hand."

My host disappeared out the door before I could collect myself sufficiently to thank him for his gracious attentions. I had been accorded a princely reception, even though my first assignment was dish-washing.

"Oi see ye've rolled up yer sleeves," said my "superior," reentering the kitchen. "Now, if ye will, jist hand me those dishes, please."

I readily obeyed and commenced with a will to wash a few plates. Gradually I took more courage, for "Father" was very agreeable and talked continually. Moreover, I believed this to be the usual method of receiving novices.

At this juncture I heard a voice at the door which I had entered a short time before.

"Brother Felix," it said, "I have been expecting one of the postulants to-day. Did he come around this way?"

My "prior" dropped his towel and ran to the door, while I gazed after him, perplexed that one in his position should answer to a title which, less

than an hour before, my benefactress had deigned to bestow upon me.

"No, Father Lambert," he replied; "the dish-washer is here, but Oi hev not seen the new novice."

Father Lambert entered and evidently comprehended the situation at once, for he laughed heartily and proffered his hand. In my bewilderment, I forgot that my hands were sopping wet, and joined in a warm—also moist—shake. Although I forced Father to use his handkerchief rather strenuously, having splashed water on his capuce and poured a goodly portion of it down his sleeve, he appeared undisturbed and still wore a good-natured smile.

"I am the novice-master," he said. "I see Brother Felix has broken you in already."

Brother Felix stared at Father Lambert and then at me. He completely lost self-possession, and dropped a plate or two on the floor, at the same time stammering a sincere apology for his blunder. His peace of mind seemed to be restored when I assured him that I had been delighted with my task. As I turned to the novice-master, Brother Felix humbly inclined his head and retired to the farthest corner of the kitchen, gazing intently out the window, doubtless meditating on the dish-washer who did not arrive. In passing out the door I noticed that this brother wore a black scapular and capuce, instead of a cloak as I had at first supposed. I was a bit disappointed to learn that such a cheerful old man was not in reality my prior.

"Come this way," said the novice-master, opening the door; "I'll show you to your room. After you have had a wash and a rest, you may look around the grounds and get acquainted. I'll send one of the novices for you."

Father Lambert led the way up two flights of stairs and then unlocked the novitiate door. Half way down the

long corridor he pointed out a cell and motioned for me to enter.

"Real monastic," I soliloquized, as I closed the door behind me. The profound silence—so intense, indeed, that I felt I could hear it—was broken now and then by the neighing of a horse on the farm or the singing of a bird. Now I stood in the middle of the room, and stretched out my arms, missing the walls on either side by only half an inch.

"It'll do," I muttered, though I had expected a cell of considerably smaller dimensions.

As I contemplated with satisfaction the scanty furnishings of the room, I leaned over to test the bed with a slap.

"Just a wee bit softer than I expected; but it's just the kind of a berth the saints used—I've seen pictures of them," I whispered to myself, rubbing my hands together in approval. Every night for a week before leaving home, I had slept, or rather had squirmed and tossed about, on a hard board as a preparation for the ascetic life I was about to undertake.

"Aha, just what I want," I exclaimed, spying a breviary on the table. "I'll need to look this over and get a few points before I can sing the midnight Office."

Feeling sufficiently rested now, and overcome by eagerness, yea more, fiery zeal, to embrace the Dominican life with all its rigors, I decided the time was ripe to call on the novice-master. I took the "Lives of the Brethren" from my pocket and laid it on the table in place of the breviary, which I securely tucked under my coat, noting at the time that the books had similar bindings. My next move was to hunt up Father Lambert. How to communicate my message to anybody I could not determine. I felt sure that a fraction of silence would not only be a sacrilege, but would result in a disgraceful dismissal from religion. While stand-

ing, looking from one side to the other, praying for an idea, and dumbfounded, as it were, my painful situation was somewhat relieved by the appearance of a friar near the other end of the corridor. When in the world, I had often observed deaf and dumb people carry on a lively conversation with their fingers, but I had never found it necessary to learn the code. Yet in the present case this seemed to be my only hope. Now the novice and I met, and before I had time to try a few signals, he clutched my hand and whispered:

"Are you the new novice? I am Brother Wenceslaus."

He was a short, cheery looking friar with a smile that connected both ears. I noticed that he spoke in broken phrases and covered his tones carefully. Perhaps I might venture to speak without incurring excommunication from the Church and expulsion from the Order.

"The novice-master's room?" I gasped.

Brother Wenceslaus covered his face with his hands and made several unsuccessful attempts to suppress his laughter. He pointed to a door and withdrew in haste, kissing his scapular. I straightened out my face into what I intended to be a solemn expression and in general tried to affect the gravity of a deacon. Then I stepped up and rapped on Father's door.

"Come in," called a voice, possessed of the same smothered effect.

I timidly opened the door and, casting my eyes on the floor, did my best to strike a soft tone:

"Father, I am now ready for the hair-shirt and habit."

The novice-master looked up with a whimsical smile and replied:

"You'll receive the habit after a ten-days' retreat; we'll see about the hair-shirt later."

Father Lambert laid down his pen and sat back.

"I just sent Brother Wenceslaus for you," he continued. "He'll show you the farm and the lake. You'd better see the place before you commence your retreat."

Father opened the door and there in the corridor stood my warden, doubtless with a happy thought on his mind, for the facial ripple was still visible. However, Brother Wenceslaus proved himself a capable and patient guide.

That night, as I was about to go to bed, a strange impulse led me to go to the door of the chapter-room and listen. I did not feel guilty of eavesdropping; in truth, it seemed altogether wise as a preparation for what was ahead of me. Within the novices were assembled and Father Lambert was addressing them:

"The brother who tried to play a trick on me will please make the *venia*. This noon, while in the new brother's room making preparations for him, I left my breviary on the table. I told one of the novices to get it and put it in my stall in choir. Instead he slipped in the 'Lives of the Brethren.' Now this is the first offense of the kind, but I think the novice should be punished. Brother Wenceslaus, make the *venia*."

My heart sank within me. I knew that Brother Wenceslaus was as innocent as any of the infant martyrs. He was the victim of a stupid action which I had unwittingly performed. I remembered that Brother had taken the "Lives of the Brethren" from my table and had left it in choir on the way out doors; but I was too much engrossed in scanning the wonders of the monastery to demand an explanation. Should I go in and accuse myself? No, that might complicate matters. I resolved to make amends on the morrow and to confess my fault in the next chapter. That night I was haunted by fearful dreams of friars chanting the "Lives of the Brethren" at midnight.

—Leo Davis, O. P.