

## MONASTIC NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT

FEW people now read *Vathek*, and Redding's *Memoirs of William Beckford* are probably read even less often. Indeed the book is not easy reading. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls it 'prolix,' and someone recently said that it was the worst biography he knew. With the advent of other biographies of Beckford it may cease to be even useful. Yet the patient reader is not wholly unrewarded. There are passages in it that he would be sorry to have missed, even though the feelings they arouse are not precisely those intended by the author. Thus in a long and reverential account of Beckford's travels we mark with pleasure that he left Bologna, 'renowned for sausages and lap-dogs,' 'as an earthquake had just before put the land and people much out of humour.'

But it is when the Church is concerned, and especially monasticism, that Redding is most interesting. Catholic worship always fascinated Beckford, and its lasting effect on his mind will appear from later extracts. He was at the Grande Chartreuse when he was nineteen. He stayed there three days, read the works of St. Bruno, and wrote with some enthusiasm of the place. Indeed he left some exceedingly poor lines in the album of the monastery, 'the larger portion being those of the tutor, Dr. Lettice, the pupil being, perhaps, not at the moment duly inspired.' These favourable impressions never wholly faded, but other experiences were not so happy. In 1780 he made another tour, and in the Low Countries 'he was active, and visited all the public buildings, and lions in the churches, such as the statuary and pictures.' 'The precious bodies of the Magi, who travelled to Bethlehem, were at Aix-la-Chapelle; and the traveller paid his devotions at the shrine of monkery.' At Bonn he found 'the road lined with beggars, crucifixes, con-

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vent walls, lazy monks, and '—not altogether surprisingly—'dejected peasants.' At Florence he visited the Franciscan convent and saw the christening of the Grand Duke's daughter—'very theatrical, as usual on such occasions'—but it is at Vallombrosa that we get our first real insight into the monastic life. 'The visitors alighted before the entrance of the convent; a blazing fire was within, and five or six overgrown friars, sleek and rosy, seemed to have no ill opinion of their existing state. Letters of introduction produced the heads of the Order, round and plump as Chinese.' *O si sic omnes!* 'The young boys of the seminary there, dressed in black, and looking pale and wan, were moving to their dwelling, under the superintendence of a gaunt priest, who drove them along like a herd.'

After his wife's death, Beckford travelled in Spain and Portugal, and from this period we have many spirited accounts of Catholic men and manners. Thus, at a Corpus Christi procession, 'flocks of fallow monks were seen on all sides, white, brown, and grey, pressing along like turkeys driving to market.' And at the Carthusian convent of Cachiez 'they met with a youth of good parentage and talent, who, for some unknown cause, had entered as a monk, exciting pity at the reflection of how many suns he was condemned to see go down in that seclusion.' The monastic state, it will be seen, does not appeal to our author. His estimate of it is well conveyed in a striking summary of the career of 'the Archbishop Confessor' of Portugal, who had 'from a common soldier, risen to be a corporal, then sank into a monk, overflowing with good humour and toleration.' He paid a visit to 'the Grand Inquisitor of Portugal and Archbishop Confessor . . . an honest, pleasant man . . . who talked much nonsense about England and its archbishops.' 'While thus employ'd, a court fool, several Domini-

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cans, and other odd characters entered the great audience chamber.' The Archbishop invited Beckford to dine with him, and 'three roasted pigs were brought in upon a tray of massive silver, and a vast and excellent pillau. It appeared that the Archbishop's table never exhibited any other variety of dish, except on fast days. An Archbishop fed upon roast pig must have been a novelty—how would it answer, touching the services of the Church?' The Archbishop seems to have had some good points. Other ecclesiastics fare worse, as, for example, 'the newly-consecrated Bishop of Algarve, with a small, black, sleek, school-boyish head and sallow cheeks which were overshadowed with a pair of green spectacles. . . . In time it was possible he might come to acquire that varnish of hypocrisy without which the least holy intentions often miss their aim.' Beckford was present at a number of ceremonies—'in fact, the Church's doings were so continual a tax upon the strangers' time that they became a bore,' and once 'for his relief he turned to the theatre, to dissipate the fumes of so much monastic holiness as he had been suffering from'—but one must do duty for all. 'It was the day of that most holy Saint Anthony on the morrow; already rockets were shooting upward, bonfires blazing, French horns sounding for the five hundredth and fifty-fifth anniversary when that sorely tempted saint passed away out of his temptations into the glories of Paradise.' (Redding seems throughout to confuse Saint Anthony of Padua with Saint Anthony of the Desert.) 'They had built a new church over the hallowed spot where the saint was born, to the great edification of Lisbon. The building was a poor affair; but over the saint's image—the idol should be the real term—there was stretched a canopy of flowered velvet . . . . A pompous ceremony followed, at which a number of gawking English were staring from the portal

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of the Church at the ceremony. A host of priests attended, while music, fit for jigs and minuets, rather than for any devotional service, composed the musical part of the entertainment.' It is not safe to conclude that Beckford would have preferred Plain-song, though he had ideas of what befitted worship. For at Batalha, where he thought the music impressive, 'there was no pomp,' says Redding, 'no glitter nor splendour, but all was in character, a profound religious awe pervading the service, and impressed upon the countenances of the priests. The voices of the monks were clear and deep-toned, the chant simple and grave, its austerity mitigated in some places by the treble of young choristers, whose sweet sounds found their way to the heart, and recalled our own beautiful cathedral service so strongly, that he could not help weeping.'

Everything was not bad in monastic life, evidently, and the romantic attraction it had for Beckford was seen in the immense house which he built at Fonthill, and which might not unjustly be called the largest Folly in the country. Fonthill Abbey would need an article to itself. Here it can only be said that the monastic spirit was much in evidence. Thus in the gallery of King Edward there was 'an arched vestibule to an oratory beyond, at the extreme end, with closets at each side, to imitate abbey confessionals, and doors of open-work in the screens.' 'In the oratory, which formed five sides of an octagon, with gilt columns at the angles, and in the centre a richly chased gold lamp, suspended from the ceiling, there was an altar and a marble statue of St. Anthony, executed by Rossi. Every decoration of this gallery was, in fact, consistent with the idea of a monastic establishment.'

At Christmas, 1800, Sir William and Lady Hamilton visited Fonthill Abbey with Lord Nelson. Beckford had 'determined to entertain them in a manner worthy of his own excellent taste,' and five hundred

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workmen were set to prepare the Abbey, which was still unfinished. The visitors came through Salisbury, where Nelson received the freedom of the city. Beckford welcomed them at Fonthill House, where they spent three days, and then, on December 23rd, came 'the grandest part of the entertainment.' Never before,' says the *Memoirs*, 'was there such a united display of splendour and good taste exhibited in this country. It was not a tawdry court entertainment, got up by household lords and head cooks, but a splendid banquet, in good keeping with the illusion designed.' The scene of the action was transferred from the house to what was afterward styled 'the Abbey.' The company drove through the grounds to the Abbey. 'Nelson was loudly cheered on entering the first carriage. It would have been out of keeping to exclude the public when the scene was to emulate a monastic establishment.' 'The wall enclosing the Abbey woods was scarcely passed when the procession, under a Gothic arch, was supposed first to enter the abbot's domain. The road then lay winding through thick woods of pine and fir, illuminated by numberless lamps suspended in the trees, and flambeaux without number carried by the sides of the vehicles. The procession was escorted by the military, their band playing solemn airs and marches. The effect was greatly increased by the continuous roll of drums placed about on distant eminences, by the blaze of lights displayed here and there, sometimes moving, at others stationary . . . Nothing could exceed the *tout ensemble*.

'The appearance, on the arrival of the company at the Abbey, hushed them all into silent admiration, at the increased splendour of the lights, contrasted with the deep shadows falling on the walls, battlements and turrets of the edifice . . . . On the summit, over all, attached to a flag-staff fifty feet long, waved the broad flag of a vice-admiral . . . .

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‘ The company was set down in a groined Gothic hall, between two lines of soldiers. They proceeded onwards to the great saloon, which afterwards was called the Cardinal’s Parlour. It was hung with very fine tapestry. Before the arched windows dropped long, full curtains of rich purple cloth. Ebony chairs, and tables studded or inlaid with ivory, for the most part of an antique pattern, but varied in form, composed the character of the furniture. The whole was strictly in monastic taste, and lit with wax in sconces of silver.

‘ In this parlour the dinner was laid out on a table which occupied its whole length of fifty-three feet. A superb repast was served up in a long single line of enormous silver dishes. These dishes were wholly in the massy style and fashion of the ancient abbeys. Their contents were unmingled with any of the refinements of the modern culinary art . . . .

‘ When the dinner was over, the company mounted the stairs to some of the apartments above, that had been just completed. The staircase was lighted by certain mysterious-looking figures, dressed in hooded gowns, holding wax torches. The room which next received the guests was hung with yellow damask, and decorated with cabinets of rare and costly japan work. Among other conspicuous objects were credences, or antique-looking buffets, exhibiting wrought plate, cups, vases and ewers of solid gold. From this room the company entered the library, fitted up in a similar manner. That room was separated by a large Gothic screen from a gallery, the half of which only was finished and furnished. There, too, all was in the monastic taste, with shrines, reliquaries, and religious sculptures—the whole illuminated with wax, in candlesticks of silver upon candelabra, having a most magnificent appearance.

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'As the company entered this gallery, music struck the ear as from some invisible hand, either by being concealed behind a large scarlet curtain backing a shrine, or else from a canopy over it, suggesting a service of the old Catholic times. Nelson, who saw all with silent interest, seemed much struck with this deception of the senses. The whole, he observed, was a representation of the religious worship of Sicily, which he had seen there, and elsewhere in the South.

'In the library, after the old custom, a species of confectionery was presented in gold-wired baskets, with wine and spiceries—a measure adopted, perhaps, to gain time as well, while chairs were arranged in the yellow damask room to receive the company. A clear space was left in front of the seats. When the company had returned to that room and taken seats, Lady Hamilton entered, attired in the character of Agrippina, carrying in a golden urn the ashes of Germanicus . . . .'

With this *Monastic Night's Entertainment* we may leave the *Memoirs of William Beckford*. 'At Font-hill,' says the author, 'the style externally kept was advanced within to keep pace with the more enlarged ideas of comfort and convenience which have so happily triumphed over bigotry, and a creed that, while it added to the pomp of religion, rendered it subservient to very different purposes.'

But Beckford was sadly mistaken about the permanent elements in Catholicism. The great tower of his abbey fell, and the monastic splendours of Font-hill are gone. But a priest lives in the part of the building that survived, and in the house that replaced the abbey, Mass is said daily.

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