

ONE WAY HOME

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'Laetati sumus pro diebus, quibus nos humiliasti, annis quibus vidimas mala.' (Ps. 89.)

THERE are as many roads to Rome as there are travellers. Each one's experience is different, so that the record of each journey has a unique value. I was a girl of eighteen when the Church first attracted me, and a woman of fifty-four when I was finally received. What follows is the story of a long, bitter and unavailing struggle against the endless patience of God.

I was the only child of an Oxford don who died young, and was brought up in the traditional beauty of an ancient university town. My mother was a devout High Anglican, but very tolerant: religion was never forced on me, and as a child I took little or no interest in it. At seventeen I read a little Plato at school, and thus discovered a new world of spiritual values. In this way, helped by my mother's influence, and probably impelled also by some hidden process of inward conversion, I was drawn towards the religion which had hitherto been to me mere words and conventional churchgoing. I began to go to church of my own will, and to read the gospels, *The Imitation of Christ*, a book of selections from the German mystics, Dante, and St Augustine's *Confessions*. There also developed a profound interest in the contemplative life, which persisted, sometimes consciously, but more often in secret, through all the years of my infidelity, working like a recurrent fever in the system. At this time I seriously thought of becoming a Catholic, and was encouraged by my mother, who, like so many Anglicans, had a great admiration for Rome, combined with an intensely patriotic attachment to her national church. I had also a secret desire, which I kept to myself, of eventually joining one of the Contemplative Orders.

In 1913, at the age of eighteen, I became a student at Somerville College, Oxford. Here the atmosphere, though not actively anti-religious, was purely secular, and this was true of the University generally. Apart from one friend who was a Catholic, my companions were mostly agnostics, many in full revolt against a narrow evangelical upbringing. Few of these have since returned

to any form of practising Christianity, though most are friendly and some enquiring. During my first year at College, I continued to go to church and to practise prayer. But I had no support from my surroundings, and the pressing intellectual interests and ambitions of student life gradually weakened religion and crowded it out. I no longer thought of becoming a Catholic, but drifted further and further towards the liberal humanism of Professor Gilbert Murray and his friends. This, but for the war, might have provided me with a permanent substitute for Christianity.

But things went otherwise. In my second year came the war of 1914, which shattered at one blow the flimsy fabric of our optimistic humanism. Today, after a second and more profound upheaval, it is difficult to convey the soul-destroying shock of the first, when we were still cradled in romantic dreams of a secular utopia. Most of my friends became pacifists, eager, sincere, intolerant. They said that Christians, by taking part in war, had betrayed their Master's teaching: so much for traditional Christianity. After much painful searching of heart—for my mother's patriotism was as deep as her religion, and I loved her dearly—I joined them, not only in their rejection of war, but in their repudiation of Christ. At the same time a systematic study of philosophy with rationalist teachers undermined my never very robust theological convictions. In 1916 I formally left the Church of England, and ceased to practise religion in any form.

Intellectually, I became convinced that if there were a God we could not know him, since the human mind is incapable of any kind of supernatural knowledge. Yet in the depth of my naturally Christian heart there remained not only an intolerable sense of loss, but the obstinate conviction—inevitable for anyone who has had even the most immature experience of the interior life—that some spiritual reality exists outside time, with which in favoured moments we can gain contact, and without which we perish. There persisted also a personal love for Christ, though my intellect refused to acknowledge him as God. I remember being asked by an old friend of my mother's, whether, if I met our Lord and he said, 'Follow me', I would go, and I replied without hesitation that I would. I was miserable, with all the stark misery of the very young and hopelessly disillusioned: and thus began, in its acutest form, that truceless war between the doubting mind

and the believing heart, that tension of soul which has lasted until now, when it is suspended but not finally resolved in the darkness of bare faith.

You may say that if I had found some wise spiritual guide, much of this conflict could have been avoided. But I think that so long and bitter a wandering in the desert, with all it held of misery and sin, was needed to teach me my own nothingness. As it was, I did find a guide, though he was not a Catholic, but a spiritually-minded Quaker doctor. Under his influence I joined the Society of Friends, and remained in it for nearly three years, trying, like so many of my contemporaries, to find a religion that would satisfy the heart without binding the intellect. But even the small amount of dogma required by Quakerism proved too much, and I returned to the wilderness. Luckily I had the sense to avoid that curse of our age, a facile pseudo-mysticism uncontrolled by Christian dogma and ascetic practice. Later I was to follow another false scent—the nature-worship of the poets. But this, being more definitely pagan, can be more easily destroyed or baptised.

After the war, I became a classical lecturer in the University of Reading. I had always wanted to be a writer, but my attempts had so far been a failure, and my work as a teacher, though reasonably successful, brought me no satisfaction. Dearly would I have liked to find oblivion in the tide of post-war pleasure, for with religion I had thrown over, at least intellectually, the restraint of morals. But not only my Christian upbringing, but a temperament naturally in love with silence and solitude made me shrink from a pagan society which meant nothing to me, and from a strident modern world in which I could find no rest for my soul. And yet I had no means of escaping from that world, or of overcoming it.

Since I could not become a happy carefree pagan, I would be a gloomy and defiant one, a puritanical atheist, like Lucretius or Mr Bertrand Russell, whose beautifully written *Free Man's Worship* made a deep impression on me. I also admired the bleak pessimism of A. E. Housman and the passionate godlessness of Thomas Hardy, with his nostalgic love for the ancient pieties of the countryside.

In those miserable years of exile, two things alone kept me from cynicism and despair—the love of music and the love of wild and solitary nature. While teaching at Reading I lived at

Oxford, where I would haunt the College chapels, hidden in a dark corner: the chanting of the Canticles and Psalms fed my hunger in some way unknown to me. The holidays I would spend in remote country places, where I could be alone with sea and sky, finding peace and detachment in the contemplation of things which, if not eternal, seemed of immense duration in comparison with our transience. And here again, without knowing it, I was being made ready for grace. Again I tried to write, and published a novel in which was expressed all the bitterness of my heart. It was well reviewed, but sold a bare three hundred copies.

At the age of thirty, and against the advice of all my friends, I gave up my lectureship, took a course of training in agriculture, and after a few years' work on a friend's farm, I rented a small holding in the Western Highlands of Scotland, which I worked with the help of a young boy. To one unaccustomed to hard physical labour, the life was strenuous in the extreme, but it gave me peace of mind and distraction from personal troubles and the gnawing disquietudes of the spirit. Here I learned to value patience and endurance and singleness of mind, and to find my delight in the beauties of nature and the slow satisfying round of the agricultural year. Here also, at the age of thirty-nine, I wrote *Highland Homespun*, the first of a series of books describing farm life in remote districts. Since that time I have lived continuously in the country, working hard in solitary places and mostly alone. It was pioneering work on poor soil, which satisfied my constant thirst for adventure. My reading was largely of travel and exploration, my heroes men like Lawrence of Arabia and Scott and Wilson of the Antarctic. These last two influenced me profoundly. Whatever one might believe or disbelieve, it would be worth while to live and die like that. And in the midst of the deep personal troubles that assailed me in those days—troubles that often brought me to the verge of despair—I was always conscious of the hidden and inviolate depths of the spirit, where, if only I could discover the way in, I might regain the lost peace of my youth.

Below the horizon, unseen and very far away, was the Church, to which by a slow and irresistible current I was being unconsciously drawn. So little was I aware of this drawing, that had I been dying, I doubt if I should have sent for a priest. Yet it angered me to hear Catholicism attacked, just as any slighting or

ribald reference to our Lord left me enraged.

It must have been at the beginning of the last war that I first became conscious of the 'drift to Rome', for I remember, in the summer of 1940, saying to a friend: 'I shall certainly end as a Catholic: the question is no longer the whether, but only the when.' But even then the problem had no real urgency. What kept me back? I think it was the great happiness I found in my work, which was doubly creative; for in addition to the writing of books, I had taken over a small derelict holding which I made it my war job to bring into cultivation. I was living the life of my choice among beautiful surroundings, without family or financial worries. Alone in the world, I seemed to have outlived most personal problems and passions, and every moment was occupied with work that either physically or intellectually satisfied me. And in the background was an unacknowledged fear of the insatiable demands of God: if you gave him an inch he would take an ell, and if you offered him a blank cheque he would seize your whole fortune and a bit more.

But at the same time, in moments of deeper reflection, two things came out clearly: one, that for the world's immense troubles the religion of Christ was the only hope; and the other, that in the life of the individual, the love of God, which brings with it the love of our neighbour, was the only thing that mattered. But I had as yet no explicit faith in God, and had I been asked whether I believed in his existence, should have answered that I did not know. And yet, perhaps as a memory of previous spiritual experience, or by an intuition of what lay hidden in the obscure depths of the soul, I had some idea of what was meant by the love of God and what it implied. But I went no further along that road. The passion for natural beauty, which inspired my writing and dulled my spiritual hunger by cheating it of its true food, stood as a barrier, so that I seemed to need nothing more.

Meantime there awoke a purely intellectual interest in the Church, and I began to read Catholic apologetics and philosophy. Maritain, Christopher Dawson, Karl Adam, Ronald Knox, Arnold Lunn and others. I saw the reasonableness of the Thomist philosophy and of the historical claims: I saw that if Rome fell, then all other forms of Christianity could order their coffins.

But I still hesitated. In spite of all drawings, I remained con-

vinced of the powerlessness of the human intellect to grasp supernatural truth—even to know if such truth existed. How could we then submit our minds to a system that professed to have an answer to every conceivable question? Impossible. Then one day I took down my copy of Pascal's *Pensées*, and began to read again those profound and searching paragraphs in which he plumbs the depth of human misery and doubt. Then came the famous chapter on the 'wager' which has shocked so many: let it shock them, for it brought about the final conversion of at least one doubter. The question of the existence of God and all it implies is like a forced wager: either you act as if he existed, or you act as if he did not. If you wager that God is, and lose—that is, if at the hour of death you discover that he does not exist, you lose nothing, for you do not know your loss until it is too late to matter. If on the other hand you wager that God does not exist and act accordingly, and then at the hour of death prove to be wrong, you lose eternal life. There can therefore be no doubt as to which way the prudent man will wager.

At first sight, this seems a mercenary point of view. But only a Quietist would forbid us to take a keen interest in our salvation, and Pascal's method is an excellent introduction to faith. It enables us to rid ourselves of prejudices, and *by acting as though we believed* (i.e. by anticipating complete assent) to get a view of Catholic doctrine from the inside. For, as someone has truly remarked, Catholicism is like a stained-glass window, whose colours and patterns are visible only from within. The difficulty of getting a true view of it from the outside, and even more of seeing it by anticipation from the outside, is one of the great obstacles to conversion.

Act as though you believed. Most people would condemn this as wishful thinking, a stifling of the legitimate use of the intellect, the formation of a blind habit to save ourselves the labour of thought. Perhaps: but faith presupposes a certain moral disposition—the willingness to learn, and the capacity to view things as if already inside—which must precede even the first steps of an intellectual assent. What looks like wishful thinking is in fact the result of a supernatural attraction—'No one can come to me save the Father draw him.' As Pascal himself says, in words that recall St Bernard, '*Tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais pas trouvé.*' It is a pity that so few Catholics read the *Pensées*, presum-

ably because some of Pascal's work is tainted with Jansenism. Had he lived to complete the defence of the Christian Faith for which the *Pensées* are notes, it would have been one of the very greatest religious books of the world.

Acting as though you believed, as Pascal points out, involves certain outward practices such as attending Mass. But living in a small village where everything is noticed and commented upon, I delayed matters by showing no outward interest in Catholicism until I actually applied for instruction. I did, however, in the privacy of my own home, make some attempt to pray regularly and to read spiritual books: but the prayer was distracted and self-conscious, and I did not seem to be making much progress. Yet I began to think more about my sins than about my doubts, and to be worried about the shortness of the time left to me. And so it happened that one night I prayed that since I had been so long on the road, I might advance as quickly as possible.

Two days later, out of the blue, came an experience which cast me up, as it were, some years ahead of myself. I have spoken already of what can be loosely called nature-mysticism, and its immense influence upon me. Up to this time, the sense of union with all that is gracious and permanent in natural beauty had been the one thing that seemed to satisfy my hunger, and to inspire whatever was of lasting value in my writings. That day, I came in from work, and went to the desk to look at my mail: and without any warning my apprehension of that beauty, and all that it meant to me, crumbled into dust, leaving me alone with an agonising consciousness of the love of God and my own unfitness to experience it. For a long time after that I saw no more in the sea but a lot of water, and no more in the stars but blobs of matter. But I regained at one bound the capacity for mental prayer, which I had allowed to go underground for thirty-five years. Not long afterwards I discovered, quite accidentally, the works of St John of the Cross. The first reading alarmed me so much that I got stuck in the middle of the *Dark Night of the Soul*, and read no more for several weeks. But I could not leave him alone, and the second reading carried me to the end. No Doctor of the Church is so sympathetic to the converted sceptic. From the '*Que sais-je?*' of Montaigne to the night of naked faith is no long journey, for the second is only the first informed by charity. From that time until the day, nearly a year later, when I was

received into the Church by one of the Dominicans of Blackfriars, I never ceased to find the right books at the right moment: no problem arose to which the next book I opened did not provide an answer. I was living in a remote country place, with no one to help me, and the frequency with which this happened, and still happens, could not be due to chance. Later I tried to study, seriously but not very thoroughly, Catholic theology and history, but always the easiest approach has been through the life of the spirit.

And so, when the truth of Catholicism had fully dawned on me, I saw clearly what I had long suspected, that Christianity alone can save our lost world, and that only the Catholic Church has kept the Christian faith in its fulness and integrity, and interpreted it without compromise and in a fashion suited to all ages and races. While for the individual soul, Catholic dogma and ascetic practice provides a sure framework within which the interior life can be developed in freedom and without danger.