

THREE LETTERS

BEDE JARRETT

I

Grayscott, April 11, 1924.

Dear Lady M.,

Just a line e'er (sic) I run away, to say that you must take your tiresome sleepless nights quietly and make them your prayers. You can't pray all the time, or indeed very much at all, if prayer means definitely things to be said or the conscious thought of the presence of God; but prayer includes also the resignation of our will to God, so just in the morning tell him you accepted the night watches in union with his, and at night offer them, before they happen, to him in the same union with his long watches. Don't worry or be agitated. Just take it all gently as it comes. You have always been gentle amid many troubles. Take this last trouble as you have taken all the rest.

And may God be with you always.

Sincerely,

F. BEDE JARRETT, O.P.

II

August 9th, 1925

Dear N.,

You ask that question at the end of your letter as Job asked it in that marvellous book of his all those years ago. Why should a man have to suffer when he's been most innocent, why should he have to suffer for another's sin? He certainly does have to. Most often the disloyalties of the world pain not the betrayer but the betrayed. The Agony of the Garden finds the sinners asleep and the Just One in his trouble alone.

None can be innocent as he was innocent, but at least we have times in life when we are less guilty than at others—it is in those less guilty moments, p'raps most heroic moments, that we have our rude shocks and anguish—when we deserved least.

But that 'deserve' philosophy of Job's friends ('You must

have been up to something to have had all this trouble dumped on you') was so shallow, so ununderstanding, that Job and we know it to be inadequate. Actually in the Book of Job, we know it to be wrong because we have been let into the secret in the first chapters and seen God and Satan both agree that Job is innocent. Without that first glimpse, the book would miss its dramatic quality; with it, we know the 'friends' are wrong.

Job learns (i) the fact that the guilty get off pretty freely and that the innocent suffer, and (ii) the interpretation, that suffering is not a spiritual evil but a spiritual good, and (iii) that God is too big a person for us to understand either in himself or in his policy and that we must just leave things to him.

But can't we say that all of us are redeemers of ourselves and of our world of friends and enemies and acquaintances and the rest? And that all redeemers must suffer somehow because of their justice, not because of their injustice, and that this suffering is apportioned in life not according to what we deserve but according to the sins of ourselves and our friends that we are so obviously called on to share.

To us, the Mass is precisely a morning reminder of that; he suffered for others, why not I? Mass and Communion the supreme philosophy of life, not read out of a dry and Imperial text book of stoic complacency, but obtained from the heart of a Friend, we on our knees, with *Dne non sum dignus* on our lips.

Mind, suffering accepted should not mean sorrow or glumness or depression or hurt vanity of that sort; no more than the Passion made him sorrowful. He was glad to carry our griefs, the fact that he was carrying them instead of our having to do so, must have pleased him thoroughly if he loves us as he said he did.

Similarly, then, when we are suffering for others, as we all have to do, we spoil it if we get depressed over it. Were we unselfishly fond of them, we would be glad—not of what has happened, but that we can bear the brunt of the pain of what has happened and so spare them.

We see all mortal kind as a *corpus mysticum* and we know surely that we do bear each other's pain, and that in so doing

we are privileged. The disciple isn't above the Master, is blessed to be even as the Master, broken, naked, lonely, betrayed, and offering all this for himself (we, not he) and for his friends loved passionately and for the world.

That is the Prelude only; the Adventure, who can guess? If you get as far as this in my letter forgive me my garrulity for I see that I've not answered your letter and daren't inflict more.

Affecy. B. o.p.

III

*Rectory of Our Lady of Lourdes,
New York,*

February 2nd, 1933

Dear J.,

I must thank you for the *Fountain* which I read coming across the ocean. In such conditions I could read it as it should be read, leisurely, and yet without reading anything else. I read it, brooding over it, provoked by it, wanting to argue over it, and so on. A most remarkable, most unusual book.

The author, as no doubt he has many times been told, has misunderstood the Catholic, medieval view of asceticism, which does not (and did not) teach that the body was evil. That was the heresy of the Albigeois which the Church dealt with drastically and cruelly (*inter alia* it held the marriage act to be sinful. The Catholic Church held and holds it to be good and blessed). Moreover, the whole mystical teaching of the Incarnation was precisely that flesh had been ennobled by Divinity: 'the Word was made flesh' is probably the most quoted Scriptural phrase in medieval literature. Besides Catholic devotion to our Lady supposes the same viewpoint. The body is holy: a living temple of God. However I think the medieval writers would have made two criticisms of the book. First they would have maintained that contemplation has a material philosophic meaning and that this contemplation can be reached by retiring into oneself deliberately and carefully, turning in and in; but that contemplation has also a spiritual, supernatural meaning and this contemplation can be reached by

the acquirement of the other but does not need it. Partly it does not need it because it is given by God, not acquired by man; partly because it is positive and not negative, the gazing of the soul at God. Man should not seek to retire into himself, but should retire upon God; he does not lay aside the world to look at God, but because he looks at God, lays aside the world. He is invulnerable, beyond the reach of ill-hap, because he has reached that which is all and without which there is none. He is not invulnerable because he is hardened, but invulnerable because what he has no one can take from him. To be invulnerable to ill-hap, because one is hardened against it, is stoical: to be invulnerable because one so loves God that one accepts whatever his will ordains and allows is the Christian asceticism. The centre of the Christian mystical life is God: 'Lord that I may love thee always and then do with me as thou wilt.' Thus the second point of criticism would be that such an aim as Allison had was inhuman. Man loves, must love. Man needs personal character to absorb and hold him. He cannot have a contemplative life unless it is the result of love. Hence the supreme centre must be God. God is apprehended as true, and so the apparatus of dogma is required. Dogma safeguards the true knowledge of God. We want and need to love God as he is, and not a caricature of God, a false, untrue image of him. Faith received (for man can't else know truly what God is like) Christ's teaching of the character of God; that is the base of all Catholic mysticism. The mystic demands solid truth as the essential beginning: 'contemplation is a sight', says Richard Rolle. Then because the soul sees him, it loves him for God is loveable, all good, all beautiful. God is love, goodness, beauty, as well as truth. So the personal being of God is loved (for Christ taught that as the first and only commandment). To love God is to fulfil man's nature: then he loves the world for God's sake. But contemplation needs a personal object, for it is 'a sight' which is to become a love.

But the depth of the book is in the arrival of Narwitz who develops all the other characters, shows the selfish and mean lack of control of the hero and heroine, and puts desire in its proper place as something to be disciplined. The arts are fine arts because of discipline; when discipline

fails them, when they cease to be austere, they become vulgar, flamboyant. Love is an art.

Moreover, the sanctification of man by suffering is the old Gospel re-taught. Only thro' suffering does a man see sanely and finely and truly. Thus here suffering cleansed him, lifted him, broadened his mind, and spirit, made him forgiving; at the end he faltered, drove Julie away, a lapse surely. The Magdalen was not dismissed when Christ came to die. The Mother and John were the most prominent, but not the only ones under the Cross. So, I judge that he failed in his width of vision, in the discipline of himself, in his hold on God when he told her to leave him! Human! but a failure of humanity. His sufferings should have given him that other heroism. But it is a very remarkable book. Charles Morgan needs the teaching of Christ in its fullness. He still stands outside the shrine. One can see how far he has got, with his sincerities and flaming desires and his judgment on the possibilities of man. Where he fails is in lacking the supernatural. He seems as great as a man can be who has not received the fullness, as great as the Greeks. Forgive this hurried verdict. Always yours,

FR BEDE, O.P.

NOTE: Charles Morgan, author of *The Fountain*. Allison is the hero.