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A FLEMISH HOME OF THE TRAPPIST MONKS

By John Ball Osborne, A.M.

Late U. S. Consul at Ghent, Belgium



IN an oasis of the dreary Belgian Campine, within the bounds of the rural commune of Westmalle, twelve miles eastward from the city of Antwerp, stands a monastery of the Trappists, those silent soldiers of Christ whose regulations truly represent the acme of monastic asceticism, and whose order, the product of mediævalism, is enveloped in an atmosphere of romance, mystery, and pathos—probably more so than any other close corporation of the great Church of Rome.



A visit to La Trappe having been recommended as a sort of moral tonic, I set out from my home in Ghent, early one summer morning, and, proceeding to Antwerp, boarded a train on the steam-tramway which runs to Turnhout.

The sun was high in the heavens when I reached the monastery grounds and rang the bell at the entrance. In response there was a shuffling of wooden-shod feet, and a pair of scrutinizing eyes appeared at a tiny grated window in the gate; then a key was turned, a chain jangled, the gate creaked ajar, and I entered the sacred precincts. Before me stood a frail little man in Trappist garb, with tonsured head, grizzly beard, brown woollen robe tucked up from attenuated calves, clumsy sabots, and a bunch of keys suspended from his girdle. I stated my mission, whereupon the friar porter dropped on his knees for a moment's prayer, and then, arising, silently conducted me across the tidy area and into the main building, a large, plain brick structure. Inviting me to be seated in the reception-room, he hastened away to announce me.

Shortly the père hôtelier (guestmaster) appeared and greeted me cordially. He was a handsome young man, whose face bore the unmistakable stamp of intellectuality and strength of character, and whose dignified and graceful manners recalled the days of former social triumphs; for he was a member of the nobility, and, in accordance with the custom of the Trappists, had been selected to act for a period of three years as the sole link with the secular world because of those

same polished manners, so well calculated to give to visitors a favorable impression of the order. In one month more his period of service in this capacity would expire, and he would then lapse into the silence that dominated those about him. I fancied I detected a sigh of regret when he referred to this fact; but it may have been my imagination.



The community at Westmalle was established a century ago and consists of about seventy monks, presided over by an abbot, who is styled the Reverendus Dominus Abbas, and whose only mark of rank is a wooden cross which he bears in chapel. There are two grades of monks, the pères (fathers) and the frères (brothers), the former being those who have pursued a course of study and become priests, and are distinguished by their clean-shaven faces and grayish-white robes with dark scapularies, while the brothers are mostly persons from the lower walks of life, wear brown robes, and may allow their beards to grow. Some writers have referred to the "brothers of the choir;" these are not a distinct class, but merely those who understand Latin and can chant the service. The community is a rigid democracy: previous social conditions practically count for nothing, and scholarly priests of aristocratic stock share equally in the manual labor and menial tasks, working shoulder to shoulder with men of a class which they probably once despised. Postulants must be of age and unmarried. On the completion of a novitiate of at least one year (but which may be extended at the discretion of the abbot) they renounce the world forever, and seek to attain spiritual perfection through prayer, contemplation, fasting, and laborious occupations, besides occasional flagellation as a measure of penance.



The weirdest feature of Trappist life is the ban of perpetual silence under which the monks voluntarily live; and yet it is not *absolute* silence, for that would be well-nigh impossible in such a large body of active workers. In the first place, the abbot and the guestmaster are permitted to speak with visitors, and the schoolmaster to communicate freely with his pupils; then there is the famous phrase "Memento mori" ("Remember thou must die"), the ordinary salutation among Trappists; and, furthermore, the voice of all is raised in prayer and song at chapel, while at daily chapter meeting each one publicly confesses every petty fault which he imagines he has committed, and if he forget anything which a brother has noticed, he will be charitably reminded of it. But even with these exceptions the rule of silence is a most trying penance. It is on record that two brothers (by blood) once entered this monastery, and during a period of twenty years did not exchange a dozen words apart from the mournful greeting. The

hôtefier said that he had learned from the abbot that two of his comrades had formerly been inmates of the Trappist house at Tracadie in Nova Scotia, and that another had passed his novitiate at the abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky, but he added that he himself had never spoken to them. This impressed me, since I had been informed that his nearest relatives had removed to the Belgian colony at Green Bay, Wisconsin, and it would be only natural for him to display the keenest interest in American affairs. As a substitute for speech, the Trappists employ a code of signs devised mostly by the Abbot de Rancé (who reformed the order about the year 1663), which enables them to get along very well.



When a man becomes a Trappist he assumes the name of some saint, and henceforth is dead to the outside world and almost as much so to his companions, whom he knows only by their religious names. The abbot is the faithful guardian of his life secrets and alone knows the motives that impelled him to become a recluse. Although he may at stated times read strictly religious works, he is not permitted, after the novitiate is at an end, to write or receive letters, and everything beyond the monastery wall, so far as he is concerned, is a hopeless blank. The veterans do not even know who are the reigning sovereigns of the various countries of Europe (with the possible exception of Belgium), and if they were to suddenly return to the scenes of their youth, they would be in the same plight as was Rip Van Winkle after his long sleep. It is said that the only knowledge that reached these monks in regard to the Franco-Prussian War—the greatest battles of which were fought within half a day's journey from their retreat—was when one evening at chapter the venerable abbot impressively said: "Brethren, two great nations are at war; let us pray for them." Doubtless a similar announcement was made in 1898 on the occasion of the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Far more pathetic is their hopeless ignorance of the fate of those formerly held most dear. Many letters come to the monastery announcing the death of relatives of the monks; these are seen by the abbot only, and at chapter he may simply announce: "The mother of one of our number is dead; let us pray for her soul." Never to his dying day does the bereaved Trappist learn that he was praying for his own mother.



It is claimed that they devote eleven hours of the twenty-four to worship in one form or another. Doubtless this is true; at least it appears probable from an examination of the daily routine. At midnight the chapel bell tolls and the monks rise and prostrate themselves on the floor. After a silent prayer they return to bed until two A.M.

(earlier on religious fête days), when they again arise and attend matins and laudes in chapel, which last until half-past three o'clock. A period of meditation follows, and at half-past five comes the office of prime. At seven they begin their daily work on the farm and in the various workshops, and are thus occupied for about two hours. Shortly after nine they resort to the chapel for the successive offices of tierce, sexte, and none. They dine at noon and then return to manual labor for two hours. The hour from three to four P.M. is spent by each one in private reading or prayer in his cell, and at four they attend vespers. Then they partake of a light supper, followed by a short interval of repose. At six they recite compline in the choir, and subsequently spend a half-hour in meditation, and lastly assemble in the chapter-room for public confession, brief announcements, and one more prayer. By this time it is eight o'clock, the day is closed, and the monks retire to sleep the sleep of the blessed until midnight, when another day's routine begins.

Much of the information which precedes was imparted to me by the guestmaster while we conversed in the reception-room; when the subject seemed exhausted we rose and started on a tour of the premises. The first object of interest to which my attention was called was a remarkable clock in the corridor, where a marvellous representation of a human skeleton, wrought in gray stone and armed with a scythe, bends over a large dial which imperceptibly and noiselessly revolves in such a manner that the long, bony forefinger of the grim symbol of death always indicates the exact time. This inanimate expression of human mortality appeals constantly to the Trappist's eye, just as the Latin salutation does to his ear.

Passing a tiny apothecary-shop wherein the dominus medicus was busily engaged in compounding a potion for a sick brother, I was shown the refectory with two long, parallel tables extending on either side and joined at one end by a short cross-table where the abbot sits between the prior and the doctor. No table-cloths are used; but the tables are kept scrupulously clean, and at each place lie a napkin, mug, knife, wooden fork, and a spoon. In the centre of the room is a lecturn from which the prior holds forth in prayer or reads from the Scriptures during meals. The Trappists consider eating to be a necessary evil; and curtail it to such a degree that one step further would be suicide. Dinner, to which scarcely fifteen minutes is devoted, consists of a mess of vegetables boiled in water without butter or salt and served in a crude earthenware bowl, a slice or two of rye bread without butter, and a mug of milk or water as a beverage. Supper is the barest apology for a meal, being nothing more than bread and water. The guestmaster did not mention breakfast; if there be such a meal, it probably consists merely of a glass of water. A slight relaxation of this dietary is allowed

to invalids, who may have two eggs a day, while on extraordinary occasions, such as a funeral feast in honor of a departed friar, the monks revel in an egg apiece. They are strict vegetarians, and a Trappist must be in the very jaws of death before he will consent to eat meat. How these poor, untiring toilers can exist on such feeble food surpasses my comprehension; and yet I saw individuals at Westmalle who had been undergoing the rigid régime for half a century. The majority of the veterans, however, were haggard, sad-faced, and gaunt, and bore no resemblance to the proverbially sleek, jolly, rotund monks of the cloister. What splendid testimony to their sincerity it is that there are no desertions from the ranks!



A few steps from the refectory I emerged into the little cemetery, hemmed in by buildings in such manner that from every inner window the monks may have an unobstructed view of their mortal destination. Each grave was marked by a large, plain wooden cross, bearing the religious name, age, and date of death of the occupant. Here one of the popular notions respecting the Trappists was partly verified and partly exploded. Friends at Ghent had given me to understand that the usual avocation of these monks is the digging of their own graves (the same is stated in many publications), so that I was fully prepared to find the ground in the cemetery thoroughly honeycombed. What I did find, besides what has been described, was a *single open grave* with an uninscribed cross projecting from its depths. The grave had evidently been dug for some time, perhaps several months; and I did not need to be informed that it had been prepared, not for any particular tenant, but merely for whomsoever Death should next claim. As soon as one grave is filled, another is commenced near-by by some monk to whom the task has been assigned; but it is usually left uncompleted in order that whenever a friar feels in the digging mood he may resort there and do a little excavating, inspired by the fervent hope that he may be working upon his own tomb. When a Trappist is in the throes of death, ashes are sprinkled upon the floor in the form of a cross at his bedside (sometimes in the chapel), and over the ashes is strewn a bundle of straw, upon which the sufferer is laid down to die. When the spirit has fled, the body, attired simply in monastic garb, is borne upon a pall to the grave and buried without coffin or other covering.

Reëntering the house and climbing a narrow stairway, I found myself in the dimly lighted dormitory, on the threshold of which my conductor admonished perfect silence. Along either side of an oblong room I saw a row of small sleeping-apartments partitioned off and curtained from view. Each monk occupies one of these cells, and for a bed has a straw mattress and pillow, besides a single woollen blanket. The dormitory is not heated, and on bitterly cold nights inmates who

feel the approach of the freezing state are constrained to arise and whip up the tardy circulation with the knotted cord which each one keeps at hand, particularly for self-chastisement on Fridays.

I descended to the chapel, where I found the monks engaged in the last office of the morning. They had just finished singing a hymn in a peculiar monotone, and with the final notes mournfully prolonged they prostrated themselves upon the stone pavement. It was an impressive scene, affording a vista into the Middle Ages; the rolling centuries have not changed the dress of the Trappists a particle, and the inflection and cadence of their choral music remain precisely the same. I would have preferred to linger, but the *hôte* led the way to the visitors' dining-room, where preparations for my refreshment had already been made.



The dinner that the guestmaster now brought in and set before me was a masterpiece of vegetarianism, and I especially relished it as a welcome relief from the monotonous round of mysterious creations of the *cuisine française* of the Hotel Royal at Ghent. There was delicious milk soup, a tempting mixture of vegetables, side-dishes of eggs prepared in wondrous fashion, incomparable cheese, and domestic beer. This beer was, indeed, the *pièce de résistance*; brewed on the premises by the hands of the pious monks, to whom any adulteration would be a heinous crime, it was nectarean food, rich and redolent of teeming hops. As the last drop in the flagon disappeared, I pronounced it the finest beverage in the world, which is certainly a bold expression, comprehending the fertile valleys of sunny France and the Blue Grass region of Kentucky, and I praised it so highly that the good *père hôte* opened his heart and his larder and produced some white wine of local vintage which reminded me of Sauterne.

After dinner I was shown neat little guest-chambers in the upper stories of the house for the accommodation of strangers and particularly of belated travellers over the desolate Campine. It was a pleasure to learn that this entertainment, both food and lodging, is gratuitous and given ungrudgingly to the humblest visitors (but women are never admitted into any house of the order), and this too in a country where people will hunt high and low for a lost two-centime piece (two-fifths of a United States cent) and where not even a theatre programme is given away.

In a corner of the grounds, by the roadside, is the school-house where the children of destitute peasants of the vicinity receive free instruction from one of the monks, as well as their daily dinner. As I passed the open windows an exercise suspiciously like the catechism

was in progress. Very probably the merits of a monastic life are not neglected in the children's curriculum.

The scenes of the monks' labors next claimed my attention: the brewery, with its vats, pipes, and polished copper utensils—everything in perfect order and a model of neatness; the printing establishment, where a monk was engaged in setting type and another in feeding the press, which was turning out beautifully executed material for a religious book; and the smithy and the carpenter, glazier, shoemaker, and tailor shops—in fact, all the essentials of a self-sustaining community.



The farm is constantly increasing and now consists of more than fifteen hundred acres of productive land, reclaimed by a century of indefatigable toil from a state of natural barrenness, for the soil of the Campine is very sandy. It is a curious spectacle to watch a band of Trappists, youthful striplings shoulder to shoulder with gray-haired veterans, with cowls turned back, robes tucked up, and in big wooden shoes, earnestly tilling the soil in absolute silence, but accomplishing more than twice the number of gossiping laborers ordinarily do. I was not allowed to overlook the barn-yard with its sleek cows and lazy fowl, grown old in the service of the community and grateful to the monks for their vegetarian doctrine, nor the vineyard where are grown the luscious grapes from which the Trappist brand of Sauterne is made. The monks send to market whatever produce they do not consume or give to the beggars who come regularly to the monastery gate. They also carry on a considerable trade in their beer, which is retailed in certain establishments at Antwerp. Another Trappist house in the Walloon region of Belgium makes a speciality of its manufactures of chocolate.



Before leaving the grounds I paused for a moment at the gate-way. Evening was at hand, the chapel bell was plaintively calling the monks to another service, and with hurrying steps they were gathering like shrouded spectres summoned from the tomb. The Spartan life of self-abnegation led by these austere recluses had been a revelation to me; and as I quitted the place and wended my way to the railway station, it was with a sense of having had a salutary experience, and yet with a sigh of relief to be again where there is no ban upon the precious gift of speech.