

# CHRISTMAS AT LA TRAPPE

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THE autobus from Mile End Station to Oka was uncomfortably crowded with French people returning to spend Christmas in the country with their families. They had an amazing number of packages and parcels, and kept getting off and on at incredibly short intervals. The result of this procedure was that an almost incessant current of cold air was generated, which played about our feet and necks, and sent us cowering and shivering into the innermost depths of our furs. Outside the city the frozen landscape glimmered bleak and sullen. The wind moaned drearily among the ice-coated branches of the cowering trees, grumbled among the eaves of the steadings, cursed as it tripped over the lurking snake fences, and played a surly game of hide and seek with itself among the silos. It seemed, in its unrelenting bitterness, to flout the very spirit of *Noel* and begrudge to men the very joy they took in its keeping. It snarled and wept and howled like some outcast demon in the Land of Frozen Silence.

Occasionally, when the driver halted to re-adjust a recalcitrant skid-chain, one caught a glimpse of unpainted, one-storied wooden farm houses with frost-blazoned window panes and rows of icicles hanging from the eaves like some gigantic chandelier. The smokers sat in the rear of the bus and filled the air with the pungent fumes of strong French tobacco and cigarettes. For the most part they sat in glum and self-conscious silence. Only one woman showed any inclination for conversation. She talked incessantly to some half a dozen acquaintances in a *patois* which, while utterly unintelligible to myself, sounded tantalisingly but elusively familiar. Her husband, schooled and disciplined to ignore her babble, smoked and spat and yawned prodigiously . . . .

Beyond St. Eustache with its long wooden bridge approach and its historic, shell-pocked church, the country began to change, and when the autobus began to feel its way cautiously down a steep curve, I was certain that I recognized my whereabouts, although I had been only once before in the district.

"Is this Oka?" I asked my vis-à-vis, stupidly forgetting that my destination was the Abbey of La Trappe and not the village of Oka which lies several miles beyond it.

"Zees ees La Trappe," the talkative woman answered.

"Vere ze monks dwell," her husband added.

"Cheese," said another woman, nodding her head, sagely.

"Zay mak eet," explained the garrulous one, pointing in the direction of the Abbey.

"Ver good. Oh yais. Ver, ver good," supplemented her husband, in the tone used by a pushing salesman to a hesitating customer.

I made my way to the door stiffly as the autobus came to a halt. My fellow travellers eyed me with stolid curiosity. Probably they thought I was mad to wish to purchase cheese from the monks at that hour of night.

"*M'sieur descend ici?*" enquired the chauffeur, opening the door.

"*Oui,*" I answered, shivering in the bite of the snell December wind.

The chauffeur extracted my suitcases from the tarpaulin-covered rack in the rear of the bus, deposited them at the entrance of a gloomy-looking drive, bade me *Bon Soir*, remounted his seat and whirred off into the night. I felt suddenly very lonely. I could see the huge, forbidding-looking mass of the Abbey buildings looming dimly through the straining trees, silent as the grave and dark, save for a solitary light which shone, beacon-like, across the snow. A dog howled somewhere; the wind moaned and sobbed along the valley; an iron gate creaked eerily on its rusty hinges; a falling star flashed across the heavens. I almost expected to see the wraith of some dead Trappist glide from the little wooden building at the entrance of the drive, which was the original foundation of La Trappe. . . . I peopled the avenue with ghosts—with shades of bearded, tonsured men in white. Almost fearfully I peered into the darkness, feeling myself in the presence of the unseen, living dead. . . . A mist seemed to swim before my eyes; the substantial to become unreal. . . . the unreal to become substantial. . . . I shook myself, and with quick resolution picked up my "grips" and made for the solitary light, through the falling snow. . . . I had been to the Abbey once before, on a memorable occasion. Indeed it was as a result of that visit, and the cordial invitation of Little Brother that I found myself there again. On my knock at the outer door, he emerged from his office and came down the corridor to greet me.

"You are welcome, sir," he said in English, throwing back the loose sleeves of his brown habit and extending his hand in greet-

ing. "Will you please to step for one moment into the reception room while I go to fetch the Guest Master?"

"Don't you remember the last time I was here, Brother?" I asked him as he turned to leave the room.

He jerked his head on one side, hid his hands in his sleeves and studied me thoughtfully.

"Don't you remember?" I prompted, "the occasion when I came here with Father Gagnon and, while you were showing us the pedigreed Ayrshires, my car became impatient at our long absence and plunged into the gulley?"

"Ah! *Now* I have you," cried Little Brother joyously, rubbing his hands together gleefully inside the sleeves of his habit, and breaking into his familiar peal of laughter. "That was a wonderful occasion. And only last year another similar accident occurred—this time to an American car. A lady was seated in it while I was showing her husband round the building. He had forgotten to put on the brakes, too, and the car made a somersault into the ravine—with the American lady inside it, screaming. And, when it had gone a sufficient distance it stopped just as your car stopped. My word! but how the American lady screamed! Fortunately she was more frightened than 'urt. But Meestaire Roy did not bring back his car? Yes? No? Eet was a great occasion. And now I shall go to fetch the Guest Master. Ah, yes! A great occasion. Eet was a great occasion."

Little Brother tucked his hands deeper into the wide folds of his habit, and departed chuckling.

A few moments later he appeared with the Guest Master—Father François Xavier—a young priest with a closely trimmed brown beard. Advancing slowly towards me, he threw back the sleeves of his white habit with the peculiar movement of the Trappists, extended his hand and in turn gave me greeting.

"My name," he said, speaking in very deliberate English, "is François Xavier."

"Saint François?" I blurted out.

"Not yet," he answered smiling, and showing good teeth. "That weel come later."

Like Little Brother, Father François had a sense of humour, and we at once found ourselves on a footing.

"And now," he continued, "perhaps Mr. Roy will permit me to show him something. . . . If you will please step this way?"

He picked up one of my grips, opened a door at the far end of the corridor and motioned me to precede him. We entered the Refectory where those in retreat have their meals. A herb omelette

and a plate of sardines had been prepared for my entertainment, in addition to apples, milk, seed cake and pie.

"You will find us very quiet here just now," Father Xavier explained. "There is only one *retraitant*—a Brother of the Holy Cross. But, there are other places set, should anyone else care to be our guest."

I ate frugally, feeling almost ashamed to appear to enjoy the food while Father Xavier, who had, in all probability, not broken his fast for many hours and probably would not for many hours more, stood patiently by.

"Then, perhaps I may be permitted to show you to your room," the Father said, when I assured him that I had dined to repletion, and, each of us picking up a grip, we mounted a flight of thickly carpeted stairs.

"This," he continued, indicating a room, "is my private office. You are welcome to go there to consult me at any time during the official hours. Here, opposite, is the little private chapel where those in retreat come to meditate and where I celebrate mass for them."

"And this," he indicated, throwing open a door and switching on a light, "will be your room. But, before I leave you just now, I will show you the door of the chapel."

He led the way to another doorway behind which was a flight of stairs leading to the gallery reserved for the use of *MM. les Retraitants*. The chapel was in complete darkness, save for the one solitary red light gleaming above the altar. A mass, Father François explained, would be celebrated at midnight. In the meanwhile, he recommended a few hours' rest. He was retiring himself with that end in view. He conducted me back to my room, promised to return to waken me in time for the celebration, bade me a courteous adieu and left me. . . . It was easier, however, to woo sleep than to obtain it. I threw myself on my bed, but sleep eluded me. The most commonplace sounds seemed exaggerated in the tense silence. The clock in the corridor hammered out its strokes with sledge-hammer blows; the flooring creaked and groaned as if unseen presences lurked there. A fragment of icicle detached itself from the gutter, and plunged with a vicious stab into the frozen snow. And, ever amid the soul-racking silence, the undercurrent *motif* of the sobbing winds in the fir-capped hills.

I grew more restless. Through the frosted window pane I could see the dim outline of the deserted chapel. Beyond it lay

a ridge of low-lying hills. A sledge-scarred drive-way, the ruts showing black against the snow, ran immediately beneath. . . . Turning away, I examined the furnishings of my room. They consisted of a plain writing table with a red check coverlet; a flexible electric standard; a radiator; a washstand; a nickel rail on which hung a couple of hand towels and a bathrobe; a mirror; a clothes stand; a cuspidor; a rocking chair and two stiff-backed chairs; cheap chintz curtains; a tiny holy water stoup; a bed with a red quilt; two oval-shaped prints of The Christ and of St. Benoit. Beneath the latter were the words: *Saint Benoit. Intercedez pour nous. Ne rien preferez a l'amour du Christ, ou il nous conduise tous a la vie eternelle.* On the writing table stood a wooden crucifix with a metal Christ; above it a type-written copy of the Rules of the Guest House in French and English.

"Our guests will kindly remember," ran the English version, "that La Trappe is neither a holiday nor health resort, but a harbour of peace and seclusion dedicated to those desirous of solitude for glorifying God in prayer."

"On rising, guests proceed to the Church as soon as possible."

"They shall attend High Mass and the 'Salve' daily."

"Guests will be punctual at meals. They keep silence at the table and leave the refectory immediately when finished."

"In the evening, immediately after the 'Salve' everyone will withdraw to his room."

"Guests avoid as much as possible encountering the religious; especially do not go where they are working."

"Please remove rubbers on the first floor, and avoid lighting matches on the walls" . . . .

I opened one of my grips, extracted Andreyev's *Waltz of the Dogs*, De Maupassant's *Mam'selle Fifi* and Cary's *Dante*, lay down on my bed again and attempted to read each of the volumes in turn. It seemed to me that *Mam'selle Fifi* had just slipped on to the floor when I was awoke by Father François tapping me gently on the shoulder.

"In quarter of an hour the Midnight Mass will begin," he said. "If Mr. Roy should care to attend." He closed the door quietly behind him.

I was on my feet in an instant. The chapel was lit up, and from my window I could see mysterious figures in white pacing up and down in the annex. I mounted to the dim gallery whence I looked down on the stalls which were rapidly filling with their white and brown garbed occupants—novices, oblates, Brothers and Fathers. Perhaps it was the hour and the occasion; perhaps

it was my quickened consciousness, but, as the wonderful drama of the mass unrolled itself, I seemed to understand clearly, and by intuition, its profoundly emotional significance. I became oblivious of my immediate physical surroundings. I was wafted into regions of the spirit, strange, yet familiar. I became oblivious of the ringing of the bell; of the elevation of the host; of the kneeling Cenobites; of the dimming chapel and the silent figures in the shadows of the cloisters. I seemed to hear a mystical voice speaking these words from a far distance—a voice of infinite tenderness and strength:—

Behold I show unto you a mystery. . . . And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence come they?

And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me. These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. . . . .

I felt curiously detached from myself. I found myself once more in the wood beside the Capuchin monastery at *Point aux Trembles* on the outskirts of a dense crowd of pilgrims. I heard the soft voice of Father Gagnon, asking:

“Will you walk with me in the procession?” and myself answering:

“I shall be very happy to do so,”  
and the solemn murmur of the marching pilgrims reciting the *Ave*. . . .

I seemed to be someone else living at another time—a time that was strange to me, and yet, unaccountably familiar. I found myself wondering whether I actually ever had taken part in some such procession, or if someone of mine ever had, part of whose personality had seeped through the intervening years and reincarnated itself in my present personality. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to find myself plodding along through the woods with these simple and kindly folk. I seemed to be living as it seemed I must always have lived. It was only when Father Gagnon touched my arm and I found him slipping out of the procession that I was suddenly recalled to myself. . . .

I peered into the depths of the chapel. All was silent and dark. The last of the community had disappeared; the kneeling figure in the gallery had vanished. So far as human fellowship went, I was utterly alone,—alone except for one in white who appeared,



for a moment, to the eyes of the spirit, on the steps of the altar. . . .

Gradually the influence of La Trappe began to make itself felt. From being restless and hesitant I grew tranquil and resolute. Sleep returned and, along with sleep, appetite. I regained perspective, and was able once more to differentiate between the vital things of life and the immaterial. With the "religious", except the few who visited me in my room, I had no dealings. They passed me in the corridors, on the roads and in the fields, silent, cowed men, with down-cast eyes, and gave no sign or token of greeting.

Once Father François accompanied me to the Agricultural College which is run in connection with the Abbey, where we met Father Leonard in his laboratory. Sometimes Father Odilon, tall, bearded, grim-looking, would drop into my room for a bout of theological fence. Despite his severe exterior Father Odilon was a shrewd, kindly man, with a keen sense of humour, and a great gift of laughter. He left me a number of books, including Cardinal Gibbon's *The Faith of our Fathers, Rebuilding a Lost Faith*, etc., in the pious hope, no doubt, that by reading them my conversion to the true faith would be expedited.

"*Vous etes plus Catholique que Presbyterien*"<sup>1</sup> the good Father used to assure me; but, his experience of the world had taught him that "there's many a slip twixt cup and lip", and that potential converts are to be led and not driven.

"Prayer is our primary function," Father François enunciated, after one of our frequent discussions. A week before I would have been tempted to retort with the gibe that is commonly hurled at the Cenobites, that "prayer without works is dead". But, as I had come to know them better, I had learned to appreciate them more.

"In many ways I envy you," I said to Father François at parting.

"Let me assure you, my friend," he replied, "that we too have our troubles—troubles of which the world knows nothing and which it would not understand. No one is compelled to be a Trappist. God does not ask of everyone such a sacrifice. You will return here to us one day, perhaps, and you will always be welcome. You are *un homme serieux* who is seeking the truth. Do not give up the search. And, should one day the gift of faith be offered to you, remember, you will be committing a mortal sin if you reject it."

It was a clear, cold night when I took my departure from La

Trappe. Father François had gone to chapel, and Little Brother accompanied me to the foot of the driveway. The autobus swung round the bend in the road, its two yellow eyes gleaming steadily in the night. Little Brother hailed it, and next moment I was being whirled rapidly city-wards.

Little Brother went slowly back to his Porter's Lodge....

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I suppose that to everyone there comes at times the desire for peace—a great longing and aspiration after holiness and beauty of spirit. One is oppressed by the seeming futility of human life, its baffling problems, its contradictions and absurdities, and conscious of this alone—its speedy lapse and the fading attraction of the things that the eye once found goodly to look upon and on which, in younger days, the heart was fondly set. One realises with increasing conviction how, verily, we are shadows that are presently destined to fade into the eternal silence. One can understand the desire for seclusion for a time—until one has solved a problem, or conquered grief, or fought a hard battle with himself; and to withdraw from the world perpetually as these Trappists do, to subject body and soul to the severest discipline, to immolate oneself voluntarily until the hour of final release, demands a native resolution of no common order. But, as we sped through the frozen countryside, I could not help murmuring to myself these beautiful words, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein”. I thought of the goodly homes I knew; of the friends I have made on my journey; of the men and women who have gone to the far corners of the earth bearing glad tidings of great joy; of those who have descended into hell and brought a gleam of hope into bruised and broken lives. And I could not help contrasting that picture with the austere silence of Oka, and I wondered whether these holy men had not somehow, missed their purpose in life. They seemed at strange issue with God....