

IN A SYRIAN MONASTERY

BY JOSEPH G. HAROUTUNIAN

IT was during the summer of the year 1922, after my Freshman year, that my mother decided to take me to a summer resort and she chose the beautiful town Zableh. In that narrow strip of land, on the western shore of the Mediterranean, nature is ever mild, colorful, and pretty. Chains of mountains, with green valleys and smiling villages, perfect cedar trees and over-burdened vines: this is Syria. Zableh is the name of some thousand lowly houses, scattered upon the graceful bosom of a long sunny valley; it is about two hundred miles from the sea and has a population of ten thousand, in round numbers. In this small town, there are no less than thirty-eight monasteries, each belonging to a different sect or order, Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Jesuit, Franciscan, Benedictine, etc.

As the son of a Protestant minister, my curiosity was immediately awakened to know about the lives of those several thousand monks who spent their lives in apparent laziness. My unruly imagination pictured me preaching to those snobs to leave their useless monasteries and to help the people in the towns to become better men and women; to come out of their hallowed Hadic holes and throw themselves into the burning torrent of normal life; to live, to love, to struggle, to save and to die! Great heavens, what a sermon! With my iron fist I was pounding the tables, the walls, and the door of my room. The irresistible desire to make a benighted monk see the truth, to save a soul for society, was driving me to a frenzy only known to a soldier ready to fire his last shot. It was to be my first but the future of human society was at stake. Unborn generations were watching me pull the trigger and I had to fire.

However, before I could do this, I had to come in contact and become friends with the monks; and this was no simple matter. I spent whole afternoons walking along the main street in the valley,

trying to get acquainted with a hermit, a priest or anything with a cloak on, and every time I returned home unsuccessful, tired, and dejected. I was too happy to appeal to their austere natures. I neither knew how to make the sign of the cross nor even dreamt of asking their blessing by kissing their hands. Every man, woman or child, sturdy laborers and blossoming young maidens, stopped and kissed their hands. Once or twice I was tempted to do the same but the Protestant in me wouldn't have it. Days came and past and there I was, my sermons burning my own soul.

It was after two months of failure that a friend of mine told me of a monk who was looking for a tutor in English. "Heavens!" I said, "bring him to me: I'll teach him all I know." Next day he came over to our house with a long dark haired, hollow cheeked, bearded specimen of a monk. No flower of the feminine sex has ever given me such a thrill. I told him I would teach him English, all I knew, in the best way I could, and for nothing, if he would only let me live in their monastery for two days. He hesitated, and said he couldn't do it without the abbot's consent. I told him that I would insist upon this particular compensation and he went away. After two days he returned and told me that the abbot had consented. "The fool," I said to myself, "he should have known better. That place will only be fit for grandma's genii when I get through with you."

So the next morning I took a nightshirt and followed my monk to his home. We walked slowly and solemnly over well moulded hills and hidden valleys, following narrow pathways shaded by the rustling willow trees. Wild and ugly blackberry shrubs hid the vast stretches of mellow vines but a sweet odor from the heavy vines made one's lips quiver with hope. The thirst of my body was added to that of my soul; and yet we walked and walked. But after half an hour, "Here we are," he said; and as we entered the convent grounds, marked off with a high fence of treacherous barbed wire, I promised him to be God fearing and reverent for the next two days and to conform to all the convent rules. We passed the gardens and entered into the convent through an immense and roughly arched gate. The monk's voice sank into a whisper, he bent his head and walked toward a stone statue of the Madonna at the center of the circular courtyard and I followed him. When we reached the gigantic image, he crossed himself three times; then turned and

looked at me, expecting me to do the same. I didn't know how to do it and as a sufficient excuse I informed him I was a Protestant. He lowered his eyes to the ground for about a minute and then asked me to follow him. We had hardly walked ten paces, when three huge convent bells began a wild medley: meanwhile we stopped, the monk crossed himself and murmured a prayer which lasted as long as the bells kept ringing, which couldn't have been less than five minutes. A monk came out of a door, crossed the courtyard but absolutely ignored our presence. "I don't see how God can stay in a place where people have such stupid notions about piety and manners:" I was talking to myself.

We were standing in front of an ancient two story building of very simple masonry. Except for a solid balcony running throughout the length of the second floor and some closed shutters, tiny and square, there was nothing on the facade of this house of seclusion that could have attracted the attention of a scrutinizing visitor. Through a large passageway we entered a long corridor running on its two sides. We turned to the right and walked down some fifteen steps. Through a low door, not more than six feet high, we entered into what might be called a large prison cell, where some hooded forms were seated in their wooden chairs, with their backs turned toward us; then there was an altar behind which stood a large and homely pulpit. Two candles, burning on the walls at the two sides of the pulpit, revealed a colorful picture of Christ crucified at the background; otherwise the place was bleak and barren.

In that twilight gloom, which buried the ecstatic souls of some fifty worshippers and left only so many rigid shadows contemplating eternity, I found myself only too willing to close my eyes and join them in prayer; then fixing them upon the flickering candle light, I watched my apostolic fervor burning down with the tiny sticks of wax. I tried to remember the sermons I had composed with such divine indignation but the few stray passages that flitted across my tormented mind, aroused my soul to ridicule and fury.

After a while, a man clothed in white got up from behind the pulpit and started a solemn chant and the congregation joined him with voices which flowed out from selfless souls lost in divine torpor. In that haunted cellar, they sounded like an army of swooning ghosts luring me to the lands of Many Shadows. Regiments of confused feelings permeated every nerve in my body. "How easy

it must be for these people to die! They may be wrong, but God can't help liking them. Don't they ever get tired of this?"

The man clothed in white opened a small book and read in Latin. Then followed a long period of meditation; not a breath was taken, not a movement made; it was men talking to their God, and the whole world seemed to wait and listen. Then the head monk walked out and we all followed him. This was the convent church.

We walked up the stairs, across the corridor and entered a long room containing five long tables and five pairs of benches, one on a side of each table. A white candle exposed the emptiness of each table. We all sat down. There came in several men with cloaks on but no hoods. They were the lay brothers and each carried a large plateful of grapes. They put them on the tables, went out, and returned each with an enormous piece of cheese and two loaves of brown bread. No prayer was made; they were praying all the time. We each took a piece of bread and a bunch of grapes. Silently but voraciously everything was consumed and we returned to the church, but, thank goodness, we didn't stay very long. The abbot offered a short prayer in a thanksgiving tone, blessed us all with water from a silver vase and we walked out.

My friend and I hurried up the stairs (probably he was trying to attract as little attention as possible), then along the corridor to the right, up another stairs, then along another corridor to the left and entered into a dark room. He lighted a small oil lamp which revealed a tiny room with two beds thrown on the floor, one table, one chair, two books and a towel. We stretched ourselves each on a bed and began to gaze at the ceiling.

"Look here, old man," I said, "I want to talk."

"Go ahead," he said.

Putting together all the nerve there was left in me, I opened my mouth and let loose a torrent of piercing Protestant philosophy. I told him to spend a whole lifetime worrying about what is going to come after death was the surest preparation to hell that I knew of; that our present society is the ignoble chaos out of which the elect are to shape the Kingdom of God on earth; that any man born of a father and a mother, living upon the accumulations of past and present experience, and shielded behind the noble flag of his country, who chooses a life of indifference and eccentricity, is a

traitor par excellence and to be hurried into the eternity of his dreams; and so on for some twenty minutes.

"We will have to wake up at two o'clock in the morning so you better sleep," was the only answer I got.

"To pray," I remarked with indignation.

"Yes," he answered.

So we went to bed.

I was dreaming that some Arab robbers were pouring burning oil into my ears when I jumped off my bed at the sound of the infernal bells. The monk was drying his face with the only towel in the room. "Good morning," I said, put on my clothes, washed my face somewhere in the corridor and we walked out of the room, to begin the day. I looked at my watch: it really was two o'clock in the morning.

"To the church, of course," I said and bit my lower lip. On our way down, the bells began to ring again and stopped only after we were seated in the chapel.

I must frankly admit that on this occasion I got one of the sublimest impressions of my life. It was the *Matin Service*. This time the place was lighted with an oil lamp. The whole monastery must have been present. In that bewitched hour, the transported friars broke into a hollow bass chorus which threatened the ceiling of the room. Under the powerful influence of that dignified and massive chorus which with an insistent conviction defied all the laws of man and nature, I could have believed every single affirmation of all the poets and all the saints of all lands; gods, devils, paradises, hells, angels, demons, evil spirits and good spirits of all possible sizes and shapes. Psalms, vocal readings, responses, choruses followed one another. Those monks certainly were not on earth. I was listening with my heart in my ears when a solitary bell hushed their deep voices and after ten seconds this grand choir singing in perfect unison burst into a heavenly chant. It was the *Te Deum*. For the first time in my life I wanted to go to heaven and sing His praises to the unhappy worlds. I was the mystic of the hour and could feel my soul merging into the ocean of infinite bliss. It could not have been an infinity of time or space because I wasn't thinking. It was an infinity of intensity and assurance. There wasn't a problem in the world that could have aroused my mind to its normal functioning. As I write now, I must admit that

it wasn't one of the most fruitful moments in my life but it was a state in which these men lived and were happy. Suddenly I found out that they had stopped singing. The Matin Service was ended and all returned to our rooms. I answered my friend's inquiring glance with a reverent silence.

We slept again and the friar woke me at 6:30 A. M. The bells began to ring and we hurried down to the chapel to hear the Morning Mass. I hadn't slept enough and was tired. Throughout the service I sat down, grim and sulky, thinking or feeling nothing. This was carrying it too far.

After the mass we returned to our rooms and spent the morning reading. He read from the Canonical Hours and I read from an English Bible: "and they took him (Joseph) and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it." The sun's rays came showering in through a small window and the smell of the fig trees filled the air.

About eleven o'clock those accursed bells began to ring again. "We are going to the choir," he said. "You can go, I'm not, was my prepared answer." So he went alone. About noon time he came again and called me to dinner.

This time they served some broiled mutton, lettuce without dressing, a glass of wine, bread and figs. We had had no breakfast, so we devoured everything we could lay our hands on. After the meal, we walked out into the vineyards to spend half an hour's recreation period. For the first time they were talking with each other and chatting was mixed with laughter. My friend presented me to some of his life mates who didn't seem to be overpleased to have met me.

Somebody was telling a story so we all joined the party and listened to the speaker's excited vociferations. "I was reporting the condition of the vineyard," he said, "when Maria Haddad, the girl who married Jani Nassar, came in and told the Abbot that she didn't love the fellow and never would. 'Ehaus Idek,' she said, 'my mother made me marry him because he came back from America and has five hundred gold pounds. It is true, but he is so old, so ugly, so stupid, so bad tempered. I can't stand him. I can't! I am telling you. Must I wash his socks all my life because he has five hundred pounds and came from America? 'Ebaus Idek, holy father, can't you save me?'

"The poor Abbot was so unhappy! He can't bear the sight of a cat falling from a wall. 'No, my child,' he said, with a trembling voice, 'your names are written in Gods' Holy Book. I can't do anything. You will have to go back to him, do your best to love him, and let God take care of the rest.'"

"'But, father,' insisted the poor maid, 'doesn't God ever change what is written in His Holy Book?'"

"'No,' answered the Abbot, and buried his face in his hands.

"She was so lovely, so unhappy, so humble. I could have—" The sentence was left unfinished. The frightened monk crossed himself over and over again and so did the others.

Then we returned to our cell. The friar began to read the breviary as if he were reading Dumas for the first time. I was bored to death.

"What else do you do until evening?" I asked.

"Read and pray," was the answer.

"Then I'm going home," I declared.

"I am sorry you don't like it very much," he said, "I will accompany you."

I took my nightshirt and we stepped out.

As soon as we had crossed the vineyards, I woke up, full of shame and disgust. There I was going back to the world without taking with me a single soul to its labors and its problems. Not only had I failed to convert the solitaires but had also forgotten all my arguments against their way of life. Was it not true that so long as society failed to settle the supreme issues of existence, some souls would choose to desert its halls and withdraw into isolation to ruminate upon the Judgment Day, when all shall be known to everybody? I was experiencing the state of mental confusion in which ideas teem in oceanic profusion, and live upon each other's substance.

After a while, the monk who was my avowed superior both in composure and firmness, broke the intolerable silence.

"Well," he asked, "what did you think of our monastery?"

"Look here," I said, "a man who stays in there a month may be a saint. One who stays a year, surely is a fool, and who spends his life in that hole, is dead, 'dead as a doornail.'"

"I am dead," he answered, "And I am not sorry for it. The holy saints in all ages have found out that the only way to live in

God is to die in the flesh. Didn't Jesus say the same thing? What else did Paul say? You want to enjoy both the life of the flesh and the life of the spirit. It can not be done. To live eternally in spirit with the Lord Jesus, you must stay away from this world and its pleasures, which is the beginning of the torment of hell. The time shall come when we shall see who is right, and who is wrong. When death comes, and thank God it comes to everyone, I shall have nothing to lose, and you, certainly, shall have nothing to gain."

I was lost.

"But what about the rest of the world?" I asked.

"May the plans of the Almighty be fulfilled," was the final and unquestionable answer. The burden of life was thrown upon God's shoulders, and the man was far too contented to listen to anything more. After retracing the steps of the day before, we both were only too glad to find ourselves in front of my door.

"You may come to-morrow, and take your first lesson," I said, and we parted.