

CONTENTS:

Introduction

How Sir John visited Master Hermit: and found him in contemplation

Of the Word from God that came to Master Hermit: and of his setting out

How Master Richard fared: how he heard Mass in Saint Pancras' Church:
how he came to Westminster: and of his colloquy with the Ankret

How Master Richard saw the King in Westminster Hall: and of the Mass
at Saint Edward's Altar

How Master Richard cried out in Westminster Hall: and of his coming
to a Privy Parlour

Of Master Richard's speaking with the King's Grace: and how he was
taken for it

Of Master Richard's second speaking with his Grace: and of his detention

Of the Parson's Disquisition on the whole matter

How Master Richard took his meat: and of Master
Lieutenant's whipping of him

Of the Second Temptation of Master Richard: and how he over-
came it

Of the Dark Night of the Soul

How Sir John went again to the cell: and of what he saw there

How one came to Master Priest: how Master Priest came to the
King's

Bedchamber: and of what he heard of the name of Jesus

Of Sir John's Meditations in Westminster Palace

How Master Richard went to God

Of his Burying

Introduction

In the winter of 1903-4 I had occasion to pass several months in Rome.

Among other Religious Houses, lately bought back from the Government by their proper owners, was one (whose Order, for selfish reasons, I prefer not to specify), situated in the maze of narrow streets between the Piazza Navona and the Piazza Colonna; this, however, may be said of the Order, that it is one which, although little known in Italy, had several houses in England up to the reign of Henry VIII. Like so many other Orders at that time, its members moved first to France and then to Italy, where it has survived in penurious dignity ever since.

The Religious were able to take with them at the time of exodus, three and a half centuries ago, a part of the small library that existed at the English mother-house, and some few of these MSS. have survived to the present day; many others, however, have certainly perished; for in the list of books that I was looking over there one day in March, 1904, I observed several titles, of which, the priest-librarian told me, the corresponding volumes have disappeared. To some half-dozen of these titles, however, there was appended a star, and on enquiring the meaning of this symbol, I was informed that it denoted that a translation had been made into French and preserved in the library.

One of these titles especially attracted my attention. It ran as follows: VITA ET OBITUS DNI RICARDI RAYNAL HEREMITAE.

Upon my asking to see this and its companions, I was conducted to a dusty shelf in the little upstairs book-room, and was informed that I might do as I pleased there for two hours, until the *Ave Maria* rang, and the doors would be locked.

When the librarian had gone with many nods and smiles, I took down these half dozen books and carried them to the table by the window, and until *Ave Maria* rang I turned their pages.

The volume whose title had especially attracted my attention was a quarto MS., written, I should suppose from the caligraphy, about the end of the sixteenth century; a later hand had appended a summary to each chapter with an appropriate quotation from a psalm. But the book was in a shocking condition, without binding, and contained no more than a fragment. The last page was numbered "341," and the first page+ "129." One hundred and twenty-eight pages, therefore, were certainly lost at the beginning, and I know not how many at the end; but what was left was sufficiently engrossing to hold me standing by the window, until the wrinkled face of the priest looked in again to inform me that unless I wished to sleep in the library, I must be gone at once.

On the following morning by nine o'clock I was there again; and, after an interview with the Superior, went up again with the keys in my own possession, a quantity of foolscap and a fountain-pen in my hand, and sandwiches in my pocket, to the dusty little room beneath the roof.

I repeated this series of actions, with the exception of the interview, every day for a fortnight, and when I returned to England in April I took with me a complete re-translation into English of the "*Vita et obitus Dni Ricardi Raynal Heremitae*," and it is this re-translation that is now given to the public, with the correction of many words and the addition of notes, carried out during the last eighteen months.

It is necessary to give some account of the book itself, but I will not trouble my readers with an exhaustive survey of the reasons that have led me to my opinions on the subject: it is enough to say that most of them are to be found in the text.

It is the story of the life of one of that large body of English hermits who flourished from about the beginning of the fourteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth; and was written, apparently for the sake of the villagers, by his parish-priest, Sir John Chaldfield,

who seems to have been an amiable, devout, and wordy man, who long outlived his spiritual son. Of all the early part of Master Richard Raynal's life we are entirely ignorant, except of the facts that his parents died in his youth, and that he himself was educated at Cambridge. No doubt his early history was recorded in the one hundred and twenty-nine pages that are missing at the beginning. It is annoying also that the last pages are gone, for thereby we have lost what would probably have been a very full and exhaustive list of the funeral furniture of the sixteenth century, as well as an account of the procession into the country and the ceremonies observed at the burial. We might have heard, too, with some exactness (for Sir John resembles a journalist in his love of detail) about the way in which his friend's fame began to spread, and the pilgrims to journey to his shrine. It would have been of interest to trace the first stages in the unauthorised cult of one as yet uncanonised. What is left of the book is the record of only the last week in Master Richard's life and of his death under peculiar circumstances at Westminster in the bed-chamber of the King.

It is impossible to know for certain who was this king, but I am inclined to believe that it was Henry VI., the founder of Eton College and King's College, Cambridge, whose life ended in such tragedy towards the close of the fifteenth century. His Queen is not mentioned from beginning to end, and for this and other reasons I am inclined to particularise still more, and conjecture that the period of which the book treats must be prior to the year 1445 A.D., when the King married at the age of twenty-three.

Supposing that these conjectures are right, the cardinal spoken of in the book would be Cardinal Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, and cousin of the King.

All this, however, must be doubtful, since the translator of the original English or Latin appears to have omitted with scrupulous care the names of all personages occurring in the narrative, with one or two unimportant exceptions. We do not even know in what part of the country Sir John Chaldfield held his living, but it appears to have been within thirty or forty miles of London. We must excuse the foreign scribe, however; probably the English names were unintelligible and barbarous to his perceptions; and appeared unim-

portant, too, compared to the interest of the mystical and spiritual experiences recorded in the book.

Of these experiences it is difficult to write judiciously in this practical age.

Master Richard Raynal appears to have been a very curious young man, of great personal beauty, extreme simplicity, and a certain magnetic attractiveness. He believed himself, further, to be in direct and constant communication with supernatural things, and would be set down now as a religious fanatic, deeply tinged with superstition. His parson, too, in these days, would be thought little better, but at the time in which they lived both would probably be regarded with considerable veneration. We hear, in fact, that a chapel was finally erected over Master Raynal's body, and that pilgrimages were made there; and probably, if the rest of the work had been preserved to us, we should have found a record of miracles wrought at his shrine. All traces, however, of that shrine have now disappeared—most likely under the stern action of Henry VIII.—and Richard's name is unknown to hagiology, in spite of his parson's confidence as regarded his future beatification.

It is, however, interesting to notice that in Master Raynal's religion, as in Richard Rolle's, hermit of Hampole, there appears to have been some of that inchoate Quietism which was apt to tinge the faith of a few of the English solitaries. He was accustomed to attend mass devoutly and to receive the sacraments, and on his death-bed was speeded into the next world, at his own desire, by all the observances prescribed by the Catholic Church. His attitude, too, towards the priesthood, is somewhat uncharacteristic of his fellows, who were apt to boast with apparent complacency that they were neither "monk, friar, nor clerk." In other matters he is a good type of that strange race of solitaries who swarmed in England at that time, who were under no vows, but served God as it pleased them, not hesitating to go among their fellows from time to time if they thought themselves called to it, who were looked upon with veneration or contempt, according to the opinion formed of them by their observers, but who, at any rate, lived a simple and wholesome life, and were to some extent witnesses to the existence of a super-

natural Power at whose bidding (so they believed) they were summoned to celibacy, seclusion, labour, and prayer.

It is curious also to trace through Sir John's fanciful eyes the parallels between the sufferings of Master Richard and those of Christ. Of course, no irreverence is intended. I should imagine that, if Sir John were put on his defence, he would say that the life of every true Christian must approximate to the life of Christ so far as his spirit is identified with the Divine Spirit, and that this is occasionally fulfilled even in minute details.

It is unnecessary to add much more in this introduction—(for the story will tell its own tale)—beyond saying that the re-translation of the French fragment into English has been to me a source of considerable pleasure. I have done my best to render it into the English of its proper period, including even its alliterations, while avoiding needless archaisms and above all arbitrary spelling. But no doubt I am guilty of many solecisms. I have attempted also to elucidate the text by a number of footnotes, in which I have explained whatever seemed to call for it, and have appended translations to the numerous Latin quotations in which Sir John indulges after the manner of his time. I must apologise for these footnotes—(such are always tiresome)—but I could think of no other way by which the text could be made clear. They can always be omitted without much loss by the reader who has no taste for them.

Sir John's style is a little difficult sometimes, especially when he treats in detail of his friend's mystical experience, but he has a certain power of word-painting (unusual at his date) in matters both of nature and of grace, and it is only when he has been unduly trite or obscure that I have ventured, with a good deal of regret, to omit his observations. All such omissions, however, as well as peculiar difficulties of statement or allusion, have been dealt with in foot-notes.

With regard to the function of the book, at any rate since its first translation into French, it is probably safe to conjecture that it may have been used at one time for reading aloud in the refectory. I am led to make this guess from observing its division into chapters, and the quasi-texts appended to each. These texts are of all sorts, though all are taken from the Book of Psalms; but their application to the

matter that follows is sometimes fanciful, frequently mystical, and occasionally trite.

If the book receives any sympathy from English readers—(an eventuality about which I have my doubts)—I shall hope, at some future date, to edit others of the MSS. still reposing in the little room under the roof between the *Piazza Navona* and the *Piazza Colonna* in Rome, to which I have been generously promised free access.

I must express my gratitude to the Superior of the Order of — — (to whose genius, coupled with that of another, I dedicate this book), for giving me permission to edit his MS.; to Dom Robert Maple, O.S.B., for much useful information and help in regard to the English mystics; and to Mme. Germain who has verified references, interpreted difficulties, and assisted me by her encouragement.

ROBERT BENSON.

Cambridge,
Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, 1905.

How Sir John visited Master Hermit: and found him in contemplation

Protexit me in abscondito tabernaculi sui.

He hath protected me in the secret place of His tabernacle.

—Ps. xxvi. 5.

I

[The Ms. begins abruptly at the top of the page.]

... It was at vespers on the fourth day afterwards, being Corpus Christi, that saint Giles, as I suppose, moved me to visit Master Richard. So I put on my cap again, and took my furred gown, for I thought it would be cold before I came home; and set out through the wood. I was greatly encouraged by the beauty of the light as I went down; the sun shone through the hazels on my right, and the roof of leaves was a fair green over my head; and to right and left lay a carpet of flowers as blue as the Flanders' glass above the altar. I had learnt from Master Richard, though he was thirty years my younger, many beautiful lessons, and one of them that God's Majesty speaks to us by the works of His almighty hands. So when I saw the green light and the gold and the blue, and the little flies that made merry in the way, I took courage.

At the lower end of the wood, as you know, the path falls down steeply towards the stream, and when it has left the wood there are meadows to right and left, that were bright with yellow flowers at this time. In front the stream runs across the road under hazels, and where the chapel is still a-building over his body, on the left side, with its back against the wood stood his little house.

I will tell you of all this, as I saw it then; for the pilgrims have trampled it all about now, and the stream is all befouled and the banks broken, and the trees cut down by the masons that came to make the second chapel where Master Richard was wont to bathe himself, against the fiend's temptations at first, and afterwards for cleanness' sake, too — (for I never heard of a hermit as cleanly as was this young man, soon, and in spite of his washings, by the prayers of our Lady and saint Giles, to be declared among the blessed servants of God.)

The meadow was a fair circle of grass; with trees on every side but on this where the gate stood. It sloped to the stream that ran shallow over the stones, and down across it from the cell to the pool lay the path trampled hard by Master Richard's feet; for he had lived there four years at this time since his coming from Cambridge. Besides this path there was another that circled the meadow, and it was on this that he walked with God. I have seen him there sometimes from the gate, with his hands clasped, fingers to fingers, and his eyes open but seeing nothing; and if it had not been for the sin in my soul (on which God have pity!) I might have seen, too, the heavenly company that often went with him and of which he told me.

Before the hut lay a long garden-bed, in which the holy youth grew beans in their season, and other vegetables at other times; for it was on these, with nuts from the hazelwood, and grasses of which I know not the names (though he has told me of them many times), with water from the stream, that he sustained his life.

On either side of the hut stood a great may-tree; it was on account of these that he had built his little house here, for he knew the properties and divine significations of such things.

The house itself was of wattles, plastered with mud from the brook, and thatched with straw. There was a door of wood that he leaned against the opening on this side when he prayed, but not when he slept, and a little square window high up upon the other side that looked into the green wood. It is of that same door that saint Giles' new altar was made, for the house fell down after his going, and the wind blew about the mud and the sticks, and the pilgrims have now carried all away. I took the door myself, when I

came back and had seen him go through the heavenly door to our Lord.

The house within was a circle, three strides across, with a domed roof like a bee-hive as high as a man at the sides and half as high again in the centre. On the left lay his straw for a bed, and above it on the wall the little square of linen that he took afterwards with him to London, worked with the five precious wounds of our Saviour. On the right hand side was a wooden stool where he sat sometimes to pray and on the wall against it a little press that held some bottles within, and in another shelf some holy relics that are now in the church, and in another his six books; and above, upon the top, a little cross with our Lord upon it, very rude; for he said that the eyes of the soul should not be hindered by the eyes of the body, and that our Lord showed Himself often to him more clearly and truly than a craftsman could make Him. Above the window was a little figure of the Mother of God, set there, he told me, above the sight of the green wood, because she was the mother of all living, and had restored what Eve had spoiled.

I cannot tell you, my children, of the peace of this place. The little house, and indeed the whole circle of the meadow set about with trees, was always to me as a mansion in paradise. There were no sounds here but the song of the birds and the running of the water and the wind in the trees; and no sight of any other world but this, except in winter when the hill over against the hut showed itself through the branches not three hundred paces away. On all other sides the woods rose to the sky. I think that the beasts knew the peace of the place. I have seen often a stag unafraid watching Master Richard as he dug or walked on his path; the robins would follow him, and the little furry creatures sit round him with ears on end. And he told me, too, that never since he had come to the place had blood fallen on the ground except his own when he scourged himself. The hunting-weasel never came here, though the conies were abundant; the stags never fought here though there was a fair ground for a battlefield. It was a peace that passed understanding, and what that peace is the apostle tells us.

Here I came then on Corpus Christi evening, thirty years ago, as the sun was near its setting behind the gate through which I came, and my shadow lay half-across the meadow before me.

* * * * *

It appeared to me that somewhat was amiss, but I knew not what it was: I was a little afraid. Master Richard was not to be seen, but his door was wide, so I thought he would not be praying. As I came up the path I saw something that astonished me. There was a circle of beasts about the hut, little conies that sat in the sunlight and shadow, without feeding, though it was the time for it; and as I came nearer I saw other beasts. There was a wild cat crouched in the shadow of the hazels moving his tail from side to side; a stag with his two does stood beneath a beech-tree, and a boar looked over the bank against which stood the hut.

They did not move as I came up and looked in at the door.

This is what I saw within.

The holy youth was seated on his stool with his hands gripping the sides and his eyes open, and he was looking towards the image of our Saviour on the right-hand side.

You have seen his holy and uncorrupt body, but in life he was different to that. He was not above twenty years old at this time, and of a beauty that drew men's eyes to him. [This is the exact phrase used of Richard Rolle, hermit of Hampole.] His hair was as you know it; a straight, tawny, nut-brown head of hair that fell to his shoulders; and he had the cleanest line of face that ever I have seen.

His hair came low upon his straight forehead; his nose was straight, with fine nostrils; he had a little upper lip on which grew no hair, a full lip beneath very short, and a round cleft chin; his eyebrows were dark and arched; his whole face smooth and thin, and of an extraordinary clean paleness; he had a curved throat turned to a pale brown by the sun, though the colour of his body, I have heard it said, was as white as milk. He was dressed always in a white kirtle beneath, and a brown sleeveless frock over it of the colour of his hair, that came to his ankles, and was girt with a leather band. He went barefoot, but carried a great hat on his shoulders

when he walked. He moved slowly at such times, and bore himself upright. His hands were fine and slender, and were burned brown like his face and his throat.

I tell you that I have never seen such a wonderful beauty in mortal man; and his soul was yet more lovely. It is no wonder that God's Majesty delighted in him, and that the saints came to walk with him. He was like neither man nor woman. He had the grey eyes of a woman, the mouth and chin of a man, the hands of a matron, and the figure of a strong virgin. I was always a little man, as you know, and when I walked with him, as I did sometimes, the top of my cap came just beneath his ear.

Master Richard, as I have said, was seated now on his stool, with his knees together, and his hands gripping the sides of his seat. His chin was a little thrust out, and he was as still as a stock. This I knew, was the manner in which sometimes he entered into strong contemplation; and I knew, too, that he would neither hear me nor see me till he moved. So I watched him a moment or two, and I grew yet more afraid as I watched; for this is what I saw:

Down from his temples across his cheeks ran little drops of sweat on to his brown frock, and that though it was a cool evening, and his spade was hung on its peg beneath the window. (It was the spade that you have seen in the church with a cross-handle polished by his holy hands.)

I looked for a while, and I grew yet more afraid. It seemed to me that there was somewhat in the cell that I could not see. I looked up at the window but there was nothing there but the still green hazel leaves; I looked at his bed, at the smooth mud walls and floor, at the domed roof, and, through the hole in the centre, where the smoke escaped when he made a fire, I could see leaves again and the evening sky. Yet the place was full of something; there was something of energy or conflict, I knew not which: some person was striving there.

Then I was suddenly so much afraid that I dared not stay, and I went back again along the path, and walked at the lower end of the meadow beside the stream.

Of the Word from God that came to Master Hermit: and of his setting out

Vias tuas, Domine, demonstra mihi: et semitas tuas educe me.

Shew, O Lord, Thy ways to me: and teach me Thy paths.—*Ps. xxiv. 4.*

II

There are, as you have learned from me, and I from Master Richard Raynal, a trinity of natures in man. There is that by which he has to do with the things of matter—his five wits; that by which he has to do with God Almighty and the saints—his immortal soul and her powers; and, for the last, that by which he has to do with men—his lower understanding, his mind, his power of speech, and the like. Each nature has its proper end, though each ministers to the other. With his ears he hears God's Word, with his immortal soul he perceives God Almighty in what is seen with the eyes; with his understanding he comprehends the nature of flowers and the proper time to sow or reap. This trinity may be devoted to God or the fiend.... It is not true, as some have said, that it is only with the soul that God is perceived or served, and that the other two are unclean. We may serve God by digging with the hands, by talking friendly with our neighbour, and by the highest of all which is contemplation.

This is what Master Richard did, following the Victorines but not altogether. He strove to serve God alike in all, and I count his life, therefore, the highest that I have ever known. He said that to dig, to talk over the gate with a neighbour, and to contemplate the Divine Essence, were all alike to serve God. He counted none wasted, for God Almighty had made the trinity of natures in His own image, and intended, therefore, a proper occupation for each. To refuse to dig or to talk was not to honour contemplation; and this he said, though he said besides that some could not do this through reason of finding that one distracted the other. I count, however, that his

own life was the hardest, for he did all three, and did not suffer one to distract another.

The most difficulty of such a life is to know when to follow one and when the other, when to dig, when to speak, and when to contemplate; and he would tell me that for this there are two guides that God Almighty sends—the one is that of exterior circumstance, and the other that of an interior knowledge, and he would follow that which cried the louder. If he desired to contemplate and a neighbour came to talk with him; if he perceived the neighbour clearly he would give over his contemplation; if not he would continue to contemplate. Again, if the imagination of a spade came mightily before him, or if he remembered that the sun would soon be up and his beans not watered, again he would give over his contemplation and dig or carry water.

For this there is needed one thing, and that a firm and quiet simplicity. He would do nothing till his mind was quiet. The friend of God must be as a little child, as the gospel tells us, and when the soul is quiet there is no difficulty in knowing what must be done. The first business then of a solitary's life is to preserve this quiet against the fiend's assaults and disquiet. And, I think, of all that I have ever known, Master Richard's soul was the most quiet, and most like to the soul of a little child.

As I walked now beside the stream I knew very well that it was for this that he was striving in contemplation: the sweat that ran down his cheeks was the sign of the fiend's assault, and I knew that I had done well to come. I had followed, as Master Richard himself had taught me, that loud interior voice.

So I strove to become quiet myself; I signed myself with the cross, and cried softly upon saint Giles to pray for me to God's Majesty that I might know what to say and do. Then I placed myself, as I had learned, at the divine feet; I looked at the yellow flowers and the clear running water and the open sky, and presently I was aware that all was silence within and without me. So I waited and walked softly to and fro, until Master Richard came to the door of his hut.

He stood there for a full minute, I suppose, with the sun on his face and his brown frock and broad white sleeves, before he saw

me; for I was in the shadow of the hazels. Then he waved his hands a little, and came slowly and very upright down the path in the middle, and as I went towards him I saw the beasts had gone. They were content, I suppose, now that their master was come out.

He came down the path, very pale and grave, and knelt as usual for my blessing, which I gave; then he kissed my skirt as he always did with a priest, and stood up.

Now I will try to tell you all that he said as he said it.

We went together without speaking, to the hut, and he brought out the stool into the sunlight and made me sit upon it, and sat himself upon the ground beneath me, with his hands clasped about his knee, and his bare feet drawn beneath him. I could see no more of him but his brown hair and his throat, and his strong shoulders bent forward. Then he began to speak. His voice was always grave and steady.

"I am glad you are come, Sir John; I have something to ask you. I do not know what to do. I will tell you all."

I said nothing, for I knew what he wished; so I looked down across the meadow at the hazels and the pigeons that were coming down to the wood, and desired saint Giles to tell me what to say.

"It is this," he said. "Four days ago I was in contemplation, down there by the stream. The sensible warmth of which I have told you was in my heart; as it has been for over one year now, ever since I passed from the way of illumination. I think that it had never been so clear and strong. It was our Lord who was with me, and I perceived Him within as He always shows Himself to me; I cannot tell you what He is like, but there were roses on His hands and feet, and above His heart and about His head. I have not often perceived Him so clearly. His Mother, I knew, was a little distance away, behind me, and I wondered why it was so, and the divine John was with her. Then I understood that He was lonely, but no more than that: I did not know why. I said what I could, and then I listened, but He said nothing to me, and then, after a while, I understood that it was under another aspect that He was there; that there was one in his place, crowned with gold instead of roses, and I could not under-