

The Prodigal Returns

Extracts from the book of that title written by Lilian Staveley, who also wrote THE GOLDEN FOUNTAIN, which was reviewed in the Winter-Spring 1983 issue of STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION.

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To a woman atheism is intolerable pain: her very nature, loving, tender, sensitive, clinging, demands belief in God. The high moral standard demanded of her is impossible of fulfilment for mere reasons of race-welfare. The personal reason, the Personal God - these are essential to high virtue. Young as I was, I realised this.

I entered a stagnant state of *mere* resignation, whereas accompanying the resignation there should have been a forward-piercing endeavour to reach out and attain a higher spiritual level through Jesus Christ: a persistent effort to light my lamp at the Spiritual Flame to which each must *bring his own lamp*, for it is not lit for him by the mere outward ceremony of Baptism - that ceremony is but the Invitation to come to the Light: for each one individually, *in full consciousness of desire*, that lighting must be obtained from the Saviour. I had not obtained this light. I did not comprehend that it was necessary. I understood nothing; I was a spiritual savage. Vague, miserable thoughts, gloomy self-introspections, merely fatigue the vitality without assisting the soul. What is required is a persistent endeavour to establish an inwardly felt relationship first to the Man Jesus. His Personality, His Characteristics are to be drawn into the secret places of the heart by means of the natural sympathy which plays between two hearts that both know love and suffering, and hope and dejection. Sympathy established - love will soon follow. Later, an iron energy to overcome will be required. The supreme necessity of the soul before being filled with love is to maintain the will of the whole spiritual being in conformity with the Will of God. In the achievement of this she is under incessant assistance: in fact everything in the spiritual life is a gift - as in the physical: for who can produce his own sight or his own growth? In the physical these are automatic - in the spiritual they are accomplished only, as it were, "by request," and this request a deep all-pervading desire. We cannot of our own will climb the spiritual heights, neither can we climb them without using our will. It is Will flowing towards will which carries us by the power of Jesus Christ to the Goal.

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Slowly I learnt to differentiate degrees of Contemplation, but to my own finding there are two principal forms - Passive and Active (or High) Contemplation.

In meditation is little or no activity, but a sweet quiet thinking and talking with Jesus Christ. In Passive Contemplation is the beginning of real activity; mind and soul without

effort (though in a secret state of great love-activity) raise themselves, focussing themselves upon the all-unseen Godhead: now is no longer any possible picture in the mind, of anyone nor anything, not even of the gracious figure or of the ways of Christ: here, because of love, must begin the sheer straight drive of will and heart, mind and soul, to the Godhead, and here we may be said first to commence to breathe the air of heaven.

There is no prayer, no beseeching, and no asking - there are no words and no thoughts save those that intrude and flash unwanted over the mind, but a great undivided attention and waiting upon God: God near, yet never touching. This state is no ecstasy, but smooth, silent, high living in which we learn heavenly manners. This is Passive or Quiet Contemplation.

High Contemplation ends in Contact with God, in ecstasy and rapture. In it the activity of the soul (though entirely without effort on her part) is immensely increased. It is not to be sought for, and we cannot reach it for ourselves; but it is to be enjoyed when God calls, when He assists the soul, when He energises her.

And then our cry is no more, Oh, that I had wings! but, Oh, that I might fold my wings and stay!

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God says to the aspiring soul: Come, taste of paradise and taste of heaven, and then return thou to the earth and wait, but not in idleness, and suffer many things till thou become perfect.

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Since Contemplation is so necessary for Union with God and for the *soul's enjoyment* of God - is it a capacity common to all persons? Yes, though, like all other capacities, in varying degrees; but few will give themselves up to the difficulties of developing the capacity; and it is easy to know why, for our "natural" state is that we work for that which brings the easiest, most immediate, and most substantially visible reward.

Those who could most easily develop their powers of contemplation are those to whom Beauty speaks, or those who are delicately sensitive to some ideal, nameless, elusive, that draws and then retreats, but in retreating still draws. The poet, the artist, the dreamer *that harnesses his mind* - all can contemplate.

The Thinker, *thinking straight through*, the proficient business man with his powers of concentration, the first-rate organiser, the scientist, the inventor - all these men are contemplatives who do not drive to God, but to the world or to ambition. Taking God as their goal, they could ascend to great heights of happiness; though first they must give up ("sacrifice") all that is unsavoury in thought and in living: yet such is the vast, the boundless Attraction of God that having once (if only for a few moments) retouched this lost Attraction of His, we afterwards are possessed with no other desire so powerful as

the desire to retouch Him again, and "sacrifice" becomes no sacrifice.

Truly, having once known God, we find life without Him to be meaningless and as unbeautiful as a broken stem without its flower: pitiful, naked, and helpless as the body of a butterfly without his wings.

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Sins are all imperfections, thickenings of the soul from self-will: pure soul is necessary for the *happy* reception of this celestial activity, and because impurities are automatically dissipated by this activity, and the dissipation or dispersion of them *is the most awful agony conceivable* when too suddenly done, what is bliss to the saint is the extremity of torture to the sinner. Now we come very fearfully and dreadfully to understand something more of the meanings, the happenings, of the Judgment Day. Christ will inflict no direct wilful punishment on any soul; but when He presents Himself before all souls and they behold His Face, immediately they will receive the terrible might of the activity of celestial joy. The regenerated will endure and rejoice; the unrepentant sinner will agonise, and he must flee from before the Face of Christ, because the agony that he feels is the dispersal of his imperfect soul; and where shall the sinner flee, where shall he go to find happiness? For saint and sinner alike desire happiness, and there is in Spirit-life only one happiness - the Bliss of God. So then let us be careful to prepare ourselves to be able to receive and endure this happiness, even if it can at first be only in a small degree, so that we shall not be condemned *by our own pain* to leave the Presence of God altogether and consequently lose Celestial Pleasures; let us at least prepare ourselves to remain near enough to know something of this tremendous living.

The more we experience God, the more we are forced to comprehend that we have in us an especial organ in this spirit with which we can communicate with God and by which we can receive Him without the mind or body being destroyed. For when God takes up His abode with a man He will communicate Himself to this loving Spirit-Will or Intelligence in ecstasies. And through His Son He will communicate Himself in another manner, to the heart and mind, so graciously, with such a tender care, that without the stress of ecstasy we are kept in a delicate and most blessed Awareness of God. In these ways we can know, even in flesh, the beginnings of the true love-stage, the beginnings of the angelic state, which is this same love-state brought to completion by Beholding God.

Although this blessed, condition of Awareness of God is a gift, and at first the mind and soul are maintained in it without effort on their part, it being accomplished for them solely by the power of the Grace of God, yet later — and somewhat to their dismay after receiving such favours — they discover that it must be worked for in order to be maintained. The heart must give, the mind must give, the soul must give: when they neither work nor give they may find themselves receiving nothing: God ceases to be present to them. Generosity on our part is required. It works out in experience to be always the same thing that is needed for our perfect health and happiness — reciprocity. Without we maintain this reciprocity we shall experience *extraordinary disappointment*.

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We hope for much from "education"; but what education is it that will be of enduring value to us? Is it the education which teaches us the grammars of foreign languages, scientific facts, the dates when wars were won, when kings ascended their thrones, princes died, artists painted their masterpieces, that will bring us to our finest opportunities of success? To the soul there is little greater or less chance of success offered by the degree of "polish" in the education we have the money to procure: the peasant who cannot read or write may achieve the purpose of life before the savant: we know it without caring to acknowledge it to ourselves: the education that we really require is the education of daily conduct, the education of character, the education by which we say to Self-Will, to Pride, and to Lusts, "Lie down!" — and they do it!

When a soul knows herself, has repented and become redeemed, she knows all other souls, good or bad: there are no longer any secrets for her, no one can hide himself from her: she sees all these open and living books, reads them, and avoids judging and bitterness in spite of the selfishness, stupidity, and frailty revealed on every page: she finds the same faults in herself; selfishness, stupidity, and weakness are engraven upon herself; the redeemed and enlightened soul with tears perpetually corrects these faults: the unenlightened soul does not — this is the difference between them.

Like knows like: it does not "know" its opposite, but is drawn towards its opposite before and without "knowing" it: here we have the cause of the condescension of the Good towards the imperfect, and of the aspiration of the imperfect to the perfect long before it can "know" the perfect. Without this attraction of like to opposite the imperfect could not become the perfect (we desire, are drawn to God, long before we are able to know Him). The imperfect is able to become the perfect by continually aspiring to it: it gradually becomes "like". There are no barriers in spirit-living, therefore there is nothing to prevent the soul becoming perfect, save its own will-failure. The barrier existing between material- or physical-living and spirit-living can only be overcome in and by a man's own soul: in the soul these two forms of living can meet and become known by the one individual, who can live alternately in the two modes, but it is necessary that the will and preference shall be continually given and bent towards spiritual-living, physical-living being accepted patiently and as a cross. Then flesh ceases to be a barrier to spiritual-living. This is the work of Christ and of the Holy Ghost. Because the soul has recaptured the knowledge of this rapturous living we are not to suppose that it is possible to continually enjoy it here or introduce its glories into social and worldly living: it is between the soul and God only; but earth-life can and should by this knowledge be entirely readjusted.

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We have a Critical Faculty. It is above Reason, because it sifts and judges the findings of Reason, throwing out or retaining what Reason has deduced. This is a Higher-Soul faculty: it concerns itself solely with knowing Perfection. Reason is not occupied

with knowing Perfection, but in analysing and digesting all alike that is brought to it.

It is to the Critical Faculty that art, poetry, and music appeals, and make their thought-suggestions. We do not enjoy music because of the noise, but because of the thoughts suggested by it - we float upon these motion-thoughts (we may float low, we may float high, and do not know to where; but it is somewhere where we cannot get without the music), so we say we love the music; but it is the emotion-thoughts we love. The sound and the thoughts suggested by it appeal to the Critical Faculty of the Soul, and, if it is perfect enough to be accepted by this faculty, we may pass, for the time being, into soul-living, but only very delicately, tentatively, and nothing to be compared to the soul-living, produced by the Touch of God. When God communicates Himself to the soul, she lives in a manner never previously conceived of, reaching an experience of living in which every perfection is present to her as Being there in such unlimited abundance that the soul is overwhelmed by it and must fall back to less, because of insupportable excess of Perfections.