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NICHOLAS VON DER FLUE

ABOUT a quarter of a mile from the lake of Sarnen—which at one time no doubt formed part of the lake of Lucerne but is now separated from it by the swampy valley of the Sarner Aa—lies the village of Sachseln. In these days it is a popular summer resort; visitors to the church are shown the High Altar under which rest the bones of Nicholas von der Flue; his portrait hangs in the Sacristy. Good pedestrians will also climb to the Flühli Ranft and even higher up to the Flühli Inn on a spur of the Sachseler Grat; near which they are shown the house where Nicolas was born. But another spot, a secluded cave in the mountain-side, a little lower down on the slopes of the Ranft, may attract them more. Near it is an inscription in the rock, of a very unusual, indeed unique, character, of which more presently. There may be those who, looking round on the beautiful and wild mountain scenery, may stop to wonder whether the air—or the ether?—is still impregnated with the faith and love of a soul who lived here alone with God five hundred years ago.

He was born on a farm in this mountain region above the beautiful lake in 1417. In childhood and youth he helped in its work and was a lad noted for his courtesy to everyone and for his merry looks. But another trait struck his contemporaries most. When returning with others from the day's work he used to fall behind, and when he believed himself unobserved find a hidden place for prayer, then came home later silently and alone. His parents wisely refrained from asking him questions, they even pretended not to notice his ways so as not to disturb his inner growth.

(A query arises. Reading of their sagacity and willingness

to grant liberty, are we moderns correct in speaking of one's prejudiced parents and elders as "mediaeval"?)

A neighbour, Erni Rover, who was his friend and playmate, spoke in later years of remembering young Claus often leaving him and the other boys and hiding in quiet places. Even fasting he practised as a boy, but tried to keep this hidden from everybody.

His inclinations then evidently were towards the life of a solitary. But his parents thought a man's natural life would be right for him, unless God called him to something else very specially and plainly. Of this Nicholas, whose name was generally shortened to Claus, did not feel sure, while love and filial obedience seemed a plain duty; he followed their advice and married. In course of time he became the father of ten children, five sons and five daughters, whom he brought up with great care and affection, training them in all the ways of godliness.

One of the sons later entered the Church; another, John von der Flue, was elected to the office of Amman in the lifetime of his father.

During these busy years of engrossing family cares and affections, of labour on his farm and of public duties, Nicholas held fast to the practice of prayer. At midnight when he believed all in the house to be asleep he arose and remained until morning in intimate talk with God. One of his favourite oral prayers was the following:

"Lord, take away from me what turns me from Thee!
Lord, give me what furthers me towards Thee!
Lord, take me away from myself and give me to Thee!"

These practices of devotion and inward training of the soul had to be maintained in circumstances often unfavourable. The times were unsettled and threatening. War actually broke out; Claus was called up and had to join in the campaign of his country. The biographer gives no details,

only relates that though Claus was repeatedly forced to take part in fighting he kept to the practice of prayer on active service as in his own home; he also did what he could to prevent plunder and to protect prisoners and widows and orphans.

In civil life he was noticed to possess a special gift for making peace between quarrelling parties; for this reason he was unanimously elected to the office of Councillor, though he greatly disliked all public offices or positions of honour. Only often repeated requests induced him to accept this office. How he filled it one may gather from his words: "I have often been asked for advice in the affairs of my country, and I always gave my opinion. Through the grace of God, I cannot recollect ever having acted against my conscience, I never looked at the person; I never departed from the right." If to-day's language had been in use in his day, he would no doubt have summed up "I never compromised."

But the odds against plain adherence to righteousness became stronger and stronger. Claus saw so much injustice and dishonesty in the political and public life of his time that it seemed impossible to him to remain unspotted from the world if one had part in it. He was repeatedly elected *Landamman*¹ but steadily refused to accept it. To-day we may think that a Christian saint at the head of public affairs would be a splendid thing, and declare it a pity that he refused it—but perhaps reserve of judgment would be wiser. A soul may recognize a path as its own at which the world shakes its head. It is also possible that God may see a man's destiny to be the demonstration of His power in one special way.

Many thoughts must have passed through the mind of this middle-aged man, settled in a happy home, busy with his family and public affairs. Could not a man best serve God where He had put him? That many inward struggles took

¹ *Landamman*, the President of the Council of the Canton, the governing body for all administrative purposes.

place we may infer from a vision he had, and told his intimates of. It happened when he was sitting alone in some Alpine meadow praying. Suddenly he saw by an inward sight the vision of a beautiful lily which was growing from his heart and mouth reaching up to the sky. He was regarding it with joy when cattle came into the field, and with them a fine horse. He looked particularly at the horse, saw the lily bending down towards it; the horse snapped at it and finally devoured it.

What did it mean? Claus asked himself. Perhaps it was a symbol of the love of a creature becoming a danger and causing harm? He resolved to place his whole devotion henceforth on God alone.

Day by day this temper of mind strengthened. He felt inwardly driven to a life of complete seclusion. How to effect this in the circumstances in which he found himself was puzzling; earnestly and fervently he sought guidance in prayer. Then he heard clearly the inner command in response to his prayer: Be careful for nothing. You are resolved to seek only God; then be without any other care. Forsake all you love; you will find that God cares for you.

He now told his wife of his resolution and asked her, for the love of God, to give him her consent and to help him carry out the divine will. He explained that his home and farm and worldly affairs would not suffer through his absence, for even if he remained he intended to delegate them to others. But without her consent he had no liberty to carry out his purpose. After many talks together, and after she had asked counsel of her relations she consented to his following the inner call. Nicholas now put all his affairs in order as if he were about to leave them by death. He sent for his children and his relations and told them of his unshakable resolve, thanked them for their love and friendship, admonished them with many words to hold fast to God, "also he comforted them all, especially his wife and

children, by reminding them of their meeting again in heaven, kissed them, gave his children his fatherly blessing, commended them all to God and asked them to remember him in their prayers, and thus parted from them."

Who can relive in thought that heart-rending scene without being moved? And to how many then, as to us now, did it seem unnecessary and fantastic?

Clad as a poor pilgrim he left his home, barefooted, bare-headed, carrying no bundle and without any money.

First he wandered in the direction of Basel. But a peasant with whom he fell into conversation advised strongly against his settling in that region. After asking God to lead him where He would have him, he returned to his own canton of Unterwalden, to the Melchtal, a valley not far from his home, and there hid for eight days in a thorn thicket, absorbed in prayer and meditation. But a hunter discovered him and told others; soon the recluse was disturbed in his solitude by many who came to gaze on him from curiosity. He sought the greater loneliness at the very end of the valley, doubtless wild and lonely in those days, and there built himself by a cave a little dwelling where he remained until his death nearly twenty years later.

The greater part of the night and the whole morning he spent in prayer and meditation and would not see anyone. In the afternoon he walked about a little in the valley and saw visitors. For as soon as his peculiar way of living and the holy manner of his thought and speech became known, people flocked to see him from all parts, the learned and the simple, married folk, working men, children, officials, came to him; to all he spoke with love, save to those who came from mere curiosity or even the idea of tempting him. Such as these he refused to see. But to others he gave unstintedly of his inward treasures; none went away un comforted or unhelped; scholars were astonished at his wisdom, though unlearned himself—it is uncertain whether he ever learned

to read—he solved their doubts and uncovered to them their ignorance in spiritual things. The mere sight of him inspired reverence; he was of tall and dignified appearance, but so lean that his bones could be seen through his skin. His voice was strong and manly, he spoke slowly and distinctly; a greyish brown coat reaching to his feet was all the clothing he wore, head and feet were always uncovered. His face had a radiant look; the peace of God deep within him shone from his eyes. To everyone he said at parting, “my son, my daughter, pray to God for me.” His wife and children were allowed to come and see him at intervals; he encouraged them to walk in the love and fear of God. But of temporal things he spoke with them no more.

From the day that he went into the wilderness he took neither food nor drink save the host for nineteen and a half years.

Reading this statement we instantly find it incredible. So did his contemporaries. When the rumour of his perpetual fast got about all were offended, both temporal and religious authorities.

The civil authorities took it upon themselves to unmask this cheating anchorite. Unknown to him they had him watched day and night for a month. Finding rumour had spoken the truth they confirmed it publicly.

Then the bishop of Constance took the matter up, visited the recluse himself and ordered him to take food. But when he saw that in obeying his order Nicholas had to suffer unbearable pain, indeed wellnigh died, he left him to his special way of life. Nicholas himself always asserted that partaking of the body and blood of Christ preserved and strengthened him sufficiently. He must have descended for this to the church at Sachseln where later he was to rest.

In old-fashioned German spelling the inscription over his rock cell runs thus:

“*Bruder Claus von Flü ist gangen von Wyb und Kinder in die Wilde, Gott dient zwanzighalb Fahr ohne libliche Spys, ist gestorben 21. Merz 1487.*”

“Brother Claus von Flue went from wife and children into the wilderness and served God for nineteen and a half years without bodily food and died 21 March, 1487.”¹

In the year 1481 the Swiss Cantons were at loggerheads among themselves. The Diet was held at Stans in the Canton of Unterwalden. Many struggled to preserve peace, but every proposal of conciliation was rejected by the assembly; tempers hardened and became heated, obstinacy held sway; one attempt after another to avert disaster and still find unity failed; civil war was imminent. In anger and despair the delegates parted in the evening, the morrow was to see the declaration of the end of union and of peace; civil war and with it the ruin of all Switzerland could no longer be averted.

A local pastor, Heinrich von Grundt, hearing of the imminence of the danger, arose and ran in haste through the night to Brother Claus (as he was by then universally called), represented to him the impending ruin of their fatherland and implored him to come to Stans with him forthwith. Nicholas heard in this the call of God; the two walked back together through darkness and dawn and reached Stans on the lake by morning. They went straight to the Council Hall where the delegates were about to break up the Assembly and with it a united Switzerland. All gazed in astonishment and awe deepening into reverence at the

¹ There are other instances of prolonged fasts. There is now living in a Bavarian mountain village a peasant girl who is stated to have taken no solid food since December 1922. Till September 1927 a little water was taken. Since then, neither food nor drink. The episcopal authorities of the diocese sent a commission of four nuns who were qualified nurses, to examine whether the fast was authentic. They watched uninterruptedly for fifteen days under the directions of the doctor in charge of the health bureau who came any time day or night without warning. Then an episcopal report was published to the effect that the fast was a proved fact.—Roy and Joyce, *Theresa Neumann of Konnersreuth*.

strange figure standing suddenly in their midst, and waited silently for him to speak.

“Gentlemen,” he began simply, “love for the welfare of our country and anxiety over the impending rupture and ruin into which your lack of union is about to plunge it, has brought me here from my solitude in the wilderness. I am wholly unfit to speak to a wise Council of State, for I possess no wisdom whatever. But what God has taught me, that I may tell you. Gentlemen, you who have yourselves received many benefits from God ought you not to show gratitude towards Him by serving your brethren and being at peace with them?” The historian does not record his further words—indeed they matter little. It was the effect of his speech that was so extraordinary. Like an audience of old who was smitten to the heart by the words of an unlearned man, the hearts of this Assembly were changed. Themselves, their country, the issues at stake, appeared in a new light. Humbly they asked Brother Claus’s advice. A pact embodying his suggestions was drawn up on the spot and signed by all the Cantons without exception. The country was saved.

It is for this service to his nation that his name is held in honour in Swiss history. (Discerning readers of a modern Swiss Baedeker will not withhold their tribute when they see his “honourable mention.”)

Was it for this act of preserving peace that he—not knowing to what end—was called to live apart? By the time this event took place he had spent about fourteen years in his hermitage. During them, did he, by entirely subduing the life of the body and keeping his spirit in hourly living contact with God Himself, grow to the stature of a spiritual giant, so filled with power from on high that he easily handled and transformed dangerous and perplexing earthly situations which to men’s reason and sight seemed impossible to solve and to save?

Little indeed do we know of what one man can do who

boldly plunges for a life in a higher order, who "seeks God only and lets life go."

That he must have felt his life to be exceedingly rich, and that of ordinary people to be limited and poor, we may deduce from a vision he told of.

"I saw in my spirit a clear spring, from which waters flowed abundantly in three rivers, surrounded by a crowd of men working incessantly. To my astonishment they remained poor, in spite of their hard labour. Still less could I understand why they, poor and needy as they were, never went to draw from that spring which would have been so easy. I looked more closely at what they were doing and found that numbers of people in a vast field were running about among themselves like ants, loaded with cares and work. I saw one man putting up a fence; everyone climbing over it had to pay him a penny. One was building a bridge over water; everyone crossing it had to pay him toll. Some went about piping and singing, some were playing childish games. But all wanted only the penny. I saw shoemakers, tailors and other workers, all keen on the penny. Yet all remained poor. And no one came to the spring to drink from it."

"They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. ii. 13) was perhaps the basis of this vision. We do not know if Brother Claus could read, he is stated to have been unable to write, so must have dictated the few letters and short treatises ascribed to him, from which a few quotations may be made witnessing to his spiritual insight.

"Thy failings are due to thy desires ever driving thee outside thyself. Return into thyself and bear thy shortcomings unmoved. Learn to have patience with thyself, then thou wilt have it with others.

"No one can harm thee, except thyself. Therefore fear none but thyself, and never trust thyself. . . . Hold on to

this ground truth that of thyself thou art nothing and canst make progress only if God enters into thee and orders thy life. But to receive this life thy will must be growing into His will, and thou must willingly accept all He lets happen to thee.

“Observe thyself if thou wouldst know what parts thee from God. It is sin. That stands ever in the way of union with God. The soul lacks but one thing—God. What separates thee from Him and Him from thee and prevents Him from doing His work in thee is this, that thou desirest to be something of thyself, and to please God through thy works. God does not want thy works, but His work. Hence all thy fears and troubles.”

The quiet years passed. Eight days before his end great bodily pains befell the hermit; he “laid him down with a will.” Thanking and praising God for His many mercies, he passed on in the seventieth year of his life. Nearly two hundred years later he was beatified by the Church.

To us who live in softer times of constantly rising standards of living, his story seems almost harsh and alien. We could not conceive of its repetition as a practical possibility. Very probably, for us, it may not be.

But the threatening circumstances of disruption, disunion, inflamed national passions, we see repeated in our time, enhanced a thousandfold. Thoughts, efforts, longings are concentrated against the foe. But sheer spiritual strength, authority learned from direct contact with God, and built up by years of entire selflessness and conquest of the lower nature, does not this remain a desperate need of our day?