

THE APOLOGIA OF GERDIBERT OF MAYENCE

THE *Ordo Vagorum* was already cutting its teeth when Gerdibert was born. But the infant was precocious and caught up with the vagabonds in the second lap; by his majority he was well apace with them. Not officially one of their number, their spirit was his, their doctrine his creed. He was not one of them because circumstances against which his character—more ready to smile winsomely on adversity than to attack it—could not compete, thrust him early into a very different environment. Thanks to the pious impatience of a romantic and rather erratic mother he was clapped into a cloister, *sicut denarium furatum in bursam* as he said, and hidden with a like despatch from the curious gaze of the world. Gerdibert was certainly in those early years too soft and submitting to be entirely lovable. Yet lovable he was even then, with his mane of fair hair that was always unruly, his brilliant eyes, his chiselled nose, his full yet delicate lips which tempted many a maid and matron, his ready amenity. Perhaps at first he found the cloistral solitude soothing, for it freed him from the matrons with marriageable daughters, a pest by no means confined to our later ages, who pursued him, as he said, *sicut leonissae quaerentes quem devorent*. His friend Philibert had capped the quotation: '*quibus resiste fortis in coelibatu,*' adding the *Tu autem Domine miserere mihi*, for he himself was wed some fourteen years and had spent thirteen and three-quarters regretting it. Soon, however, the cloister became unbearable to Gerdibert. With urgent piety he penned his doggerel:

· Pater in coelestibus,
 Quando resurgemus?
 Angelicis cum testibus
 Cutem colligemus?
Da, Pater mitissime,
 Preces non sint vanae:
Tubae sonum ultimae
 Non sit summo manel'

He had read and absorbed the wisdom of the *Vagantes*; he had learnt from them the great lesson, the first rule of holy conduct which the aspirant must follow: 'He shall never be up for Matins, for there are phantasmata abroad in the early morning, which is the reason why early risers are never quite sane.' Alas! his superiors did not understand. They thought that if there were danger of phantoms he should face it as well as they. For some time Gerdibert fought manfully against the growing weight of somnolence and the corrosion of the abstinence with which the life in the cloister harassed him. But sleep conquered at last. Gerdibert gave in; he curled himself up like a tired cat and, in his own phrase, finally and irrevocably *obdormivit in Domino*. Apart from the time spent on his *Apologia* and his few short incursions into the soothing consolations of the world he slept for the remainder of his earthly pilgrimage.

Removing himself from the monastery he joined his friend Philibert at Anjou (Philibert's wife had by this time been mercifully translated to a better life), and in this cosy bachelor retreat he began the *Apologia Pro Somno Suo*. A great part of it concerns his early years; the actual *apologia* comes at the end. As far as they may be put into English these are his words.

There was little in the monastery which did not offend the man of sensibility: the coarse food, the cold and discomfort of the cells, the seclusion, the ceaseless chanting of psalms till one's voice ran down like an hour-glass, the lack of Nature's beauty—for the garden of the monastery was planted not with sweet smelling flowers and herbs but with endless and monotonous rows of cabbages. . . . But above all things else burdensome to the spirit was the custom therein observed of rising at midnight for matins, when the tired limbs were scarce able to stagger to the choir-stalls and the voice, hoarse from the previous day's exertions, had to make agonized efforts to produce the slightest sound, while the eyes, bleared with somnolence, could hardly make out the characters in the antiphonaries. The

elder monks (he adds rather pathetically) were in better case, for knowing the psalmody, through constant repetition, by heart they were not obliged to use their eyes, but sang as though mechanically, habit having made possible a task which Nature alone was incompetent to perform. For scarcely had we laid ourselves down on our hard and chilly beds and were struggling for a little sleep against the ill effects of the indigestible fare with which we had maltreated our bellies, than the clang of the cloister bell would rudely awaken us, and stumbling from our couches we would betake us gropingly to our duty, so spent and as though dead with fatigue that I once saw a monk felled by a single inadvertent swing of a censor; while another I beheld enter the choir with his cowl unwittingly set back to front upon his head so that it completely shrouded his countenance, nor was it until a violent sneeze stung him to consciousness that he discovered the mistake.

What then do these superiors think of the injunction to the disciples: 'Sleep' etc., when they thus effectually preclude all possibility of repose? What respect have they for the authority of the saintly Fathers of the Church when they thus ignore their writings? (He then gives numerous passages, in favour of a due proportion of sleep, from Basil, Chrysostom, Tertullian, Bede and others, which space forbids us to insert.)

Have they not read in history how so many, such vast and diabolical crimes would never have been committed had the delinquents been reposing peacefully, as they should have been, in their beds? How many of those evils which only the covering of the night makes possible would have been avoided, how many deeds of darkness would have been averted, had only their miserable perpetrators devoted the hours of the night to that purpose for which the Creator designed them! But indeed, is it not plain to see that if Eve, the common mother and origin of us all, had been peacefully sunk in postprandial slumber instead of wantonly gallivanting in search of some feminine

BLACKFRIARS

mischievous when Satan was abroad, we should never have come to the sorry pass in which now, alas, the race of man is held captive?

What above all amazed me (Gerdibert's digression here seems rather to spoil the force and flow of his argument, but we give it since it appears in the MS.), what above all amazed me, what I ever found quite beyond rational explanation, nay, what defied even the most hazardous feat of the imagination to take count of, was the manner in which the older monks, who had long lived in the shadow of the cloister, could have so far flourished on such a fare as was there afforded them as to have become the portly, plump, sleek, well-furnished and contented carcasses they so plainly were. The Abbot in particular ever filled me with wonder, portraying, as he did, in his person that *mons coagulatus*, *mons pinguis* of which the Psalmist speaks, so that indeed one wondered how the frail locomotory powers of merely human members were sufficient to move the vast and ponderous organism which the circumambient contours of this mountain enclosed. For myself, if my legs refused their service, insufficient to carry the weight of my sorry flesh, it was their own capacity which was at fault, and not the weight of what was imposed upon them, for I doubt whether they would in the end have sufficed to uphold the body of the minutest insect. But what filled me with the very bitterest pang of despair was to see, what was indeed a diurnal spectacle, the Abbot's lap-dog, a circular hummock in the wake of this parent mountain, waddling self-complacently about the cloister, its rotund little belly stretched to the uttermost limit, its eyes fixed in an arrogant bulge on the starveling monks who passed hither and thither, their belts drawn tightly in about their bodies to abate somewhat the sting of starvation.

(Having expressed himself on this obviously exacerbating business and concluded to his satisfaction the flank attack, Gerdibert returns to the main issue.)

Dormiam et requiescam. What religion is this, to flout the most ardent aspirations which the prayer of Mother Church expresses? But it is not merely in the matter of adherence to the spirit of our holy faith that such proceedings are to be deplored. Let us abstract from all considerations of a purely supernatural sort, let us concentrate our attention only upon that idea of law and of truth which our reason, weak as it is and obscured by the incessant hebetude of the senses, can attain. What do we find? Is it not plain that the most cursory and rude investigation, the most obvious and elementary notion of our state, of the government and controlling of the universe, force us to the conclusion that such a course of action is to be unequivocally deprecated? Alas, that the minds of men could be so warped and crooked, so tortuous and diseased, as to countenance a rule of conduct so plainly opposed to the dictates of that faculty which a benevolent Providence implanted within them to be their guide. Nor can it be for one moment imagined that our nature, fashioned by an omniscient and benevolent First Mover, should be so nugatory, so basely infested with falsity, as to dictate to us what in fact is alien to our human lot. But what says Nature? what says our kind and sapient instructress, our faithful nurse and prudent counsellor? what is it that she tells us, if we do but listen to her cry, if we do but refrain from stopping our ears against her appeals, what is it, I say, that she declares to us, that over and over again with endless patience and untiring reiteration she protests to us in tones of urgent and maternal anxiety, what, if not that man must needs take his due repose and resign his mortal flesh to slumber even as the brute creation, that his energies may be restored, his faculties refreshed, his humours purged, his organs infused with new vigour, his mind refurbished, his soul solaced, his courage reanimated, his powers rejuvenated, his devotion rekindled, his virtue revived, his passions stilled, his

BLACKFRIARS

Alas! the passionate crescendo breaks off abruptly; the pen falls, the hand is still. The head with its mane of fair hair, always unruly, droops and lies motionless, the chiselled nose is buried in the mass of unfinished manuscript, the brilliant eyes are closed. Gerdibert has fallen asleep. This time it is for ever. They tell us, the chroniclers of this sad story, that after that last fury of the divine afflatus Gerdibert slept a deep sleep for many days; but he did not awake. They found him at last, still in the same too peaceful posture—the heart was silent and stilled. They sang him a requiem, it seemed so peculiarly fitting. Gerdibert went to finish his apologia before a different tribunal. How it was to have continued, to what peerless pitch of inspired rhetoric it was to climb, we shall never know. We have the first movements, the adagios and the scherzos; we have the opening of what was obviously to be the transitional crescendo to the final crashing chords, but those chords we shall now never hear.

They adapted, for his epitaph, a phrase he himself had used:

In pace, they wrote, domiebat; in idipsum requiescat. There was, indeed, for poor Gerdibert, nothing more to be said.

T. L. MARSHALL.