

MONSIGNOR RONALD KNOX¹*A Personal Portrait*

G. B. STERN

MANY years ago I was discussing with Father M. a fairly obscure point of Catholic scholarship, and, rather out of my depth, asked him what Ronald Knox had had to say on the subject. 'Ah, well', he replied, 'Ronnie Knox is of course *hors de concours*.'

And something slipshod in my mental French translation left me surprised at hearing Monsignor Knox spoken of as *hors de combat*! Later, amused at my mistake, I passed it on to Monsignor himself, thinking it would amuse him too; and 'I expect I will be *hors de combat* next Wednesday', he remarked; 'I'm flying for the first time, out to Uganda.'

And I have since wondered what his mind did with that description of himself as *hors de concours*, for it was certainly by no visible act of diffidence that his comment had left it discarded on the floor. I was still to learn that this great prelate of modern times, this famous wit and scholar, was celled with humility like honey in the comb; an innate humility; he could no more keep it concealed than some people can conceal their innate arrogance. Yet by some spiritual poise he was likewise immune from having to supply those tiresome protestations of inferiority which Freud forgot to remove sharply into a wholly separate classification; true humility exists in its own air of freedom, and when we are in its presence perhaps we remark 'there must be humility in the room' as we might say 'there must be violets in the room'. . . . But an inferiority complex is a miserable sandwich-man with boards front and back; and if their announcements are blatant, the person has an extrovert inferiority-complex: but if the sandwich boards get lugged about with their message turned inwards so that we cannot see what it is, they have an introvert inferiority-complex, just as tiresome. Nobody ever heard Ronald Knox clamour for attention by falsely asserting that he could not excel where he manifestly could and had; that would be taking up time, and he was always loth to squander time on himself. Is it my

¹ *Blackfriars* is glad to print this very personal tribute to one of its oldest friends.

fancy, or did Max Beerbohm contemplate starting a series of caricatures on 'Unlikely Performances' with one entitled RONNIE KNOX BLOWING HIS OWN TRUMPET?

I first heard Father Knox, as he was then, in 1948, at a church in Kensington, delivering a sermon on the love of God; and because I had only recently become a Catholic and knew little about him, my young godmother and I had decided to go, on a mere we-might-as-well; the theme implicit in the title was promising, if this man could preach at all: Just as we were starting out in plenty of time to get a good front seat, a letter arrived which threw me into a paroxysm of rage: a letter from somebody who had the professional right to pass a verdict on the book which I knew was the best I had ever written or ever likely to write; in his opinion, however, no masterpiece but rather boring. In a fury, therefore, I sat down at once to pour out an answer, page after page. Then, still breathing brimstone, I set out late to hear this sermon by an unknown priest on the love of God; and what with wrath and having to sit crowded in a pew right at the back of the church, nobody could call it an ideal frame of mind for the message to sink in and find a welcome and a home! Nevertheless and to my amazement it did, and when I came back I tore up the unposted letter. Six years afterwards, and already personally acquainted with Monsignor Knox, I wrote to him after my first retreat at the Hampstead Cenacle and told him of this incident, because to my delight one of his meditations had been on the love of God, and this time I was able to assimilate the whole of it. Again however his humility slanted off the point: he wrote back genuinely upset, genuinely contrite that I should have been let in for listening to an old talk and not given an entirely new one:

'I'm afraid you had bad luck over that meditation on the love of God. It *was* the same you had heard six years ago (and others, I fancy, may have heard ten years earlier). It was so yellow and wrinkled into age that I've just written a new one instead—but unfortunately I wrote it for the *next* retreat, not for yours. However, you will get the new one if you are in retreat under me any time in this decade.'

Difficult not to be disrespectful and cry out on reading this: 'Oh, don't be an *ass*!' As if one would care if one had heard it twenty times already, or if he started a retreat on the actual announcement: 'All these talks are going to be old!' As if one

would care! Could it be possible that he did not realize how in literary style and delivery and substance, he was—well, *hors de concours*? Yes, it *was* possible, indeed he did not know and would not have believed it. Strange that ‘meek’ of all words should be one where he failed to give us an inspired translation into modern English. It was in the sacristy of the little church to St Thérèse de Lisieux, an altar in a Sussex field built by Sheila Kaye-Smith and her husband, Penrose Fry, that after Mass we were discussing with a Belgian priest an otherwise excellent sermon on the text: ‘Blessed are the meek’. Father N. had kept on and on repeating ‘meek’ and ‘meekness’, and failed to understand, perhaps because English was not his own language, what I could possibly object to in the word. ‘What is then so wrong with meek?’ he asked. ‘The meaning has deteriorated’, I replied; and attempted to explain by metaphor: ‘It has had its hair parted in the middle and brushed smoothly down on either side!’ Oddly, this was of no assistance to Father N. ‘Humble’, suggested Penrose as an alternative to meek; and even more unhelpfully, Sheila broke in: ‘Oh no, *humble* is too Heepish!’ ‘*Heepish*?’ repeated poor Father N., still pleading in vain for a little sensible elucidation. So I asked: ‘How does Ronald Knox translate it?’ ‘Well, you know, Monsignor Knox is often very vulgar!’ Not unnaturally we yelped in protest: ‘What, *him*? Ronnie Knox *vulgar*?’ It took us a little while to realize that Father N. was thinking in Latin: vulgar, *vulgaris* (*vulgus*, common people). And indeed, Ronald Knox often used the language of common people like ourselves.

There may be, however, no exact rendering of ‘meek’ into modern English; our vulgar Monsignor Knox had translated it as ‘patient’; and patient, I suppose, can be justified where impatience might argue a sort of arrogance, a lack of that humility which will always consent to wait its turn; taking Heep for ever out of humble and putting back what Dickens had withdrawn from it. When you are Ronald Knox, you can be both humble and debonair; *de bon air*, a startling translation of meek, occurs in a French translation published in Geneva about 1775, and sounds surprisingly right in spite of its present-day significance.

His manner was shy but debonair at our first personal encounter, when heaven knows by what small miracle he had consented at the intercession of a mutual friend to come to my home for lunch. Just before he left, I brought him my two most beloved bedside

books for his autograph, *The Mass in Slow Motion* and *The Creed in Slow Motion*. And as he complied I could see what was his inward reaction: 'My dear woman, you're doing this to please me and it doesn't; but never mind'—too courteous to show I was not thereby giving him pleasure; nor did it strike him that 'R. A. Knox' in his handwriting on the fly-leaf would add immeasurably to the value—and not the financial value, either! In a flash it then came to me that his essential humility was only not comical because its origin was so completely reasonable: unlike most of us, he possessed a constant basis for measurement, a clearer vision of what ultimately we were meant to be like; hence his steady accompaniment of *non sum dignus*. And a sentence he wrote in his Preface to *God's Threshold* (a volume of parables, symbolic stories, and fairy-tales) seems to bear this out: 'We are only children, all of us hoping to grow up one day into the stature of the perfect man in Jesus Christ.'

He had a talent which amounted to genius for lapsing almost absent-mindedly into a colloquial style, not only in his books but in his correspondence. I like to re-read an early letter in his scholastic restrained hand-writing, starting off with a formal 'My dear Miss Stern', and going on: 'All right, have it your own silly way!'—an unwilling surrender in our serialized dispute on whether one of my rag-bag autobiographies, touching on many themes, should or should not have been indexed. Ronnie Knox maintained that it should; I argued that where one had meant to give an appearance of spontaneity in this sort of writing, an index would at once destroy the illusion. He continued to disagree—and then yielded: 'All right, have it your own silly way!'—still complaining how he had especially wanted to comment on a certain passage somewhere in the middle of the book, and was baffled for want of an index:

'There's "Green Grow the Rushes oh" for example, on which I'm a leading authority, but I can't find it again. . . . Did you know that there is a variant on No. 8 which reads "Eight for the sable rangers", and a fresh variant of this (presumably), which leads up to today's feast "Eight for the Angel Gabers": A fact.'

Far too rarely he gave a retreat. They meant an outpouring of riches: four meditations a day, and about twice I mooched in to see him between whiles with an air of I-couldn't-care-less, so that

he did actually remark to the nun in charge when she made an appointment for me: 'Oh, so she's not going to cut me dead this time? I was beginning to think she was!' But my pretended attitude was simply to reassure him that I did not intend to consult him deferentially and nervously as to the state of those knobs on my soul—though they could have done with treatment!—for he was never very robust, and retreats were a drain on his nervous energy; so it was a relief, he said, to relax and talk human, and in his characteristic vein, impenitent and mischievous, rag and be ragged and give as good as he got.

I saw him only seldom, and still want to sue British Railways for depriving me of a certain glorious opportunity when heaven had provided two and a half hours, secure from interruption, with the man whom I would certainly have chosen for such desert-island companionship. For en route to stay with a friend near Frome in Somerset, suddenly Monsignor Knox came along the corridor, and I like to think that his expressions of pleasure at seeing me were not just wishful thinking. He sat down opposite me, no other traveller was attracted by that particular railway carriage before we started non-stop to Frome, and then the wheels began to make more noise than any wheels of any train I have ever known; we shouted louder and louder, trying to make our voices rise above the din; said 'What' more and more frequently; but at last, noticing his expression of agreeable anticipation was gradually succeeded by strained politeness, I suggested that if he had a nice book handy, so had I, and we might as well complete the journey in silence. He admitted that he should be saying his Office, and that was that.

Frome was within driving distance of Mells; and in his first letter of invitation to come to lunch, he added: 'Unless you're staying west of Frome it's rather a long drive, but the place is well worth seeing'. So to appease his humility, I made up a lot of nonsense about having other friends to visit west of Frome, so it would be quite worth my while coming to see the *place*! On a later occasion I remarked that I had noticed Downside on the signposts, so when the car fetched me after lunch I would like to drive over before going home, and pay my respects to the burial place of Baron von Hügel. Apparently Downside was not more than a few miles away, but—score to me!—Monsignor Knox was not aware that von Hügel was buried there: 'If you don't

find him in the Abbey, try the cemetery attached to the Catholic church in the village a little way off', he suggested. Whereupon I asked tentatively: 'Couldn't you leave your work for a little while and drive over with me, just to show me where to look? I'm so bad at finding my way round.' 'Well . . . I think perhaps I might', and his face lit up with that eagerness familiar to most authors when tempted to leave their writing if they can persuade themselves that the request provides a legitimate excuse.

Baron von Hügel and his family had presented a magnificent jewelled monstrance to Downside, and as a matter of course I imagined their tomb would be a noble pile with an elaborately carved description setting forth his less genial virtues. So when Monsignor Knox and I entered the Abbey, shadowy and beautiful, empty even of a zealous sacristan, almost at once we separated and went hunting along the aisles, pausing at every marble monument to scrutinize the inscriptions, mostly in praise of eminent prelates. At last: 'No, he's not here', called out Monsignor, coming, so to speak, to his last tomb, 'so we'll probably find him in the cemetery.' . . . And again I visualized a von Hügel catafalque grandly apart and railed off.

'Do you like the name Benedict?' my companion asked as, side by side again, we strolled towards the west entrance; 'we've chosen it for Julian Oxford's baby.'

I considered Benedict, and said yes, I did like it as a name, not as much as Nicholas or Dominic, but far far better than Gregory in the same group; I couldn't *bear* Gregory.

At which Ronald Knox pulled up, oddly excited by my vehemence:

'Is it because of the two hard G's coming close together like that?'

'No', I replied, finding it easier to feel at home with him in a great Abbey than I would have thought possible with such a renowned dignitary of the Church, or with anyone who might have considered it more fitting and reverent to hush the voice to an unnatural whisper and creep about on tip-toe. 'It's because I was given Gregory Powders when I was a child!'

'*So was I!*' Ronnie exclaimed, betrayed by the coincidence into a very passion of period fellowship; 'so was I. Wasn't it beastly stuff and didn't it smell foul? I believe they forced us to take it on purpose to make us sick!'

Gregory's Powder lasted us as far as the Catholic church in the village, where Monsignor sprang from the car and enquired of the parish priest, who happened to be standing in the porch, if Baron von Hügel were buried there.

'Yes, he is; but you'd better let me come with you because you might find it difficult to pick out the tombstone; I often can't myself.'

This puzzled me till I saw the little graves jostling one another, a hundred or more, most of them with just a plain cross of wood or stone at the head of a narrow mound, and hardly any room between for the grass and daisies. The sun beat down on us and it was very hot; we followed the priest till at last he paused at one of these all but anonymous graves and bent down to read a name.

'Here you are; this is the one.' And we too bent to see if it could really be the tomb of the illustrious Friedrich von Hügel.

. . . 'Rather impressive, wasn't it?' Ronald Knox remarked quietly, as we drove away.

I agreed with his unspoken tribute, that no splendid edifice could have testified more impressively to the author of *The Mystical Element in Religion* than this plot of earth indistinguishable from all the others surrounding it. How . . . gaudy I had been in my expectations!

A small Catholic chapel was attached to the Manor House at Mells, and I remember how, after Mass for the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, I was hospitably bidden to breakfast, and how Monsignor looked up from *The Times* at my emphatic 'Oh no, coffee please' on my hostess asking if I would prefer tea. 'People who drink tea for breakfast instead of coffee should be segregated!' came forth as though he were pronouncing excommunication: a line that since then I have been prone to repeat in the wrong company, not realizing until I saw the hurt expressions of two or three present and watched them apologetically gulp and try to conceal their tea-cups, that it would have been kinder left unquoted.

After breakfast on that particular June 29, my friend's car arrived to fetch me away; and Monsignor Knox came out to see us off. Standing on the steps in the blazing sunlight, he noticed her little dachs on the seat of the car just below him, and put out an affectionate hand to pat his head; the dachs lifted a yard-long

adoring nose towards him, and somehow to an onlooker the tableau was of a blessing spontaneously bestowed at the little creature's dumb request. 'There, Bill', we said after we had driven away—(Bill's full name in the Kennel-book was Sigismund von Rakonitz, one of my Austrian ancestors)—'now you must be an angelic hound all day, and not let down your side!'

The Vicar of Mells, in a moving and intimate valedictory to his old friend and neighbour, recalls how Ronald Knox had informed him that the Manor dog, a somewhat ponderous animal, grew strangely excited if one imitated a cuckoo . . . which he proceeded to show by experiment, only leaving off when it was clear that it might result in considerable damage to furniture.

'He was greatly interested in Mells Church and its doings. When our churchyard wall was in danger, he urged the support of his friends, telling them solemnly that he did not want cows jumping over his grave. And more recently he enlisted the support of John Betjeman at a fête for the church clock and chimes, coming out, though gravely ill, for the opening ceremony in the rain.

'We never discussed religious differences, each recognizing in the other that settled affection for the Church of our allegiance, which makes argument irrelevant and rather tiresome. It was part of his greatness of character that, while hating fuss and pretentiousness, he never made simpler souls feel uncomfortable or inferior.

'His increasing ill-health and his failure to recover after his operation he found irksome, because they interfered with his work, but when he knew there was no hope, he recovered his wonted serenity. When he was near the end he sent me a short note thanking me for a friendship "not bound by the limits of mortality". He has left indeed so abiding a memory that it seems only as if he had gone back for rather longer than usual to his books and his games of patience.'

And linking back to these glimpses of Ronald Knox amiably playing the fool with animals, I remembered hearing, from a friend, of an incident involving his father, the Anglican Bishop of Manchester, which seemed to show that this form of endearing kindness may have been inherited. When she was a little girl, her puppy died; and to assuage her grief, her mother suggested giving

him a funeral, for which she was busily making childish preparations when she saw their neighbour, Bishop Knox, coming along the drive; and her head full of only one possible reason for his presence, ran towards him and called out that he was too early, imagining, of course, that he had come to officiate. A few words aside with her mother enlightened him; he did indeed preside over the puppy's funeral, and she will never forget the appropriate and comforting words he spoke on her 'faithful little friend' before the earth was filled in.

Susan Frankau and I usually planned to go together to the Cenacle Convent, high up on Hampstead Heath, whenever Monsignor Knox was due to give a retreat; and always went through a brief period of panic in case he should be unable to come . . . till we caught our first glimpse of his vivid cyclamen sash between the trees and hedges of the garden, the wearer taking a stroll before we assembled in the chapel for his first meditation on the same evening; then four on Saturday, four on Sunday, four on Monday, and Tuesday morning we dispersed, resigned to being strangely unable to remember a single word of what he had said, till years later the talks were assembled and published for our avid reading and re-reading. I suppose while he was actually speaking, our attention was too securely locked and sealed in a spell for memory to function apart. At a private interview during one of these retreats, Susan reminded him that he had been a Lower Boy at Eton while her husband, Gilbert Frankau, was a lordly senior probably employing him as a fag and sending him hither and thither on errands. Well, the stresses change along the years. . . . I went to the Brompton Oratory once to hear a full Nuptial Mass for one of the erstwhile little Aldenham Park girls from the convent school of the Assumption Sisters where Father Knox had been Domestic Chaplain when during the war they were evacuated from Kensington to Shropshire. It was for these fortunate schoolgirls that every week he had delivered his talks on the Mass in Slow Motion and the Creed in Slow Motion; and if years later any of his ex-pupils could persuade him to come along and perform the marriage ceremony and give a personal Address, no one else would do nearly as well. Once that part of it was over and the priest had taken his place to offer the Nuptial Mass, Monsignor Knox withdrew to a priedieu at the side of the sanctuary, where he knelt alone and apart, his figure in its purple

and white robes and trailing mantle evocative of a great churchman of medieval days. . . . And on a perverse slant of memory against which one is helpless, I suddenly had to recall a small ridiculous episode told of young Father Knox up to tricks, by a nurse working years ago at St John's and St Elizabeth's Hospital: A short while after he had been ordained, he was visiting another priest convalescent from a serious illness, and she found the two chuckling like schoolboys over the havoc they had wrought on the nervous system of the little ward-maid who came to fetch away the tea-tray; Ronnie having secretly placed under it one of those rubber gadgets that caused it to wobble and jump up at her when he squeezed a bulb at the other end!

Back in the Oratory with a silent apology for having let my attention wander so deplorably from the business in hand, I remembered—(yes, here was the link, and here distractions might have started)—that no saint was more addicted to practical joking than St Philip Neri, Patron Saint of all Oratorians, who had invented endless merry tricks to play on his friends and penitents. And there on my right and over the sanctuary was a huge painted panel depicting this same St Philip Neri; how comforting were these discoveries that total irrelevance need hardly exist within the Catholic Church.

The wedding over, and now not quite in the mood for a crowded reception, I asked my escort to deliver a message to Monsignor, who might like to hear that Gilbert Frankau had just been received into the Church. Two days later I had a note from Ronald Knox asking if it were true. If true, would I forward Gilbert the enclosed letter? Curiosity could hardly bear not to be in on what one Old Etonian had found to say to another; and recently Susan allowed me to share the delicious irony of this heavenly doodle traced by the years.

(‘I can’t see anything *ironic* about it’, Ronald Knox would no doubt have remarked at this juncture, his understanding always so quick and sensitive to take a point unless it happened to redound to his own aggrandisement!)

‘Dear Frankau,

I hope this address is not unsuitable, as coming from a school-fellow, and a reader, in its day, of the X. I got a message on Saturday as from G. B. Stern, to tell me that you have at last stepped under the ropes into the enclosure. I hope this is true.

It's odd how easy it seems, *being* a Catholic, when it seemed so hard to *become* one; how even the late-comer feels as if he'd been there all his life. But it's a bit lonely for some people. I said Mass for you this morning, and will go on remembering your intentions. Don't answer this.

Your sincerely,

R. A. KNOX.

'*Dear Frankau*' and (in spite of 'don't answer this') '*Dear Knox*'; again and again Gilbert could have been heard proudly boasting 'As my friend Monsignor Ronald Knox said to me in a personal letter . . .', profoundly honoured at the notice taken of him by a small and presumably grubby junior who used to scamper about to do his bidding.

But like Gilbert, I too have been given something to boast about, and find it difficult not to linger on the accolade: 'You always put me on to things I'd never run into before' in a letter thanking me for a book of mine. He went on with a wonderful description of a dream he had had, with all the Lewis Carroll properties:

'Don't you think this would make rather a good dream!—

You are waiting on a platform at Paddington, and it's past time for the train to start, but it hasn't even come into the station.

Then the Archbishop of Canterbury comes up, and explains that it can't get out of its siding, because an engine has run off the lines just in front of it. The odd thing is that that is what happened to me in real life, the day before yesterday.'

And he ended with:

'It was very good of you to send me the book, and I won't defend myself about the sunbeam.'

For according to his essay on St Chad, this was the only saint known to have used a sunbeam as a clothes-horse; yet in those enchanting chronicles of the saints where simple idiocy combines with a fully integrated quality which in the radiance of pure white contains all the colours of the spectrum, I had discovered that St Bridget of Kildare was also said to have flung her cloak over a ray of sunlight when she had just been drenched in a shower of rain. When I first broke it to him, after a moment's stunned silence he took refuge in a typical defence: 'Oh, she was just a woman; they'd hang their clothes anywhere!' And though he wrote 'I won't defend myself about the sunbeam' he had not

quite surrendered priority, for in a postscript he continued the argument:

'But saints *do* duplicate one another's performances. I observed the other day that when Gerard Groote (author of the *Imitation*) was dying, he told his religious it was a good thing he should die, because then he would be able to shower roses on them.'

Fortunately the question-marks did not puzzle me to the verge of begging for elucidation: Nevertheless I had become acclimatized to Thomas à Kempis as the original author of the *Imitation*, and perhaps in the same unenterprising spirit by which I had become acclimatized to Purcell as the composer of the Trumpet Voluntary whereas it was really Jeremiah Clarke, I was pleased to interpret Ronald Knox's two question-marks as a sign that he too stood out for the claims of Thomas à Kempis; though doubtless on a more scholarly basis of argument than my own indolent 'You see, I've got so used to the name!' As for his reference to St Thérèse and her shower of roses, I shall always treasure an allusion to the young Carmelite nun, when he was defining the adjective 'simple' as 'perfectly integrated': St Thérèse, he remarked, had not wasted her energy as most of us do, exploring along a hundred tracks with self blocking the vista at the end of each; all she thought and said and did was gathered in towards one end and purpose; people were wont to say a little contemptuously: 'Oh, she's just a *child*, you know!'—Just a child, harmlessly pleased with her babyish playthings, her little simple rubrics . . . and then he added with a side-long glance at his audience: 'Have you ever known a *child* like St Thérèse?' And chapel or no chapel—(for his talk took place at the convent retreat)—everyone burst out laughing. No, we had never known a child like St Thérèse!

In a preface to a special edition of Father Brown, Monsignor Knox spoke of G. K. Chesterton as likewise 'perfectly integrated, having a philosophy of life, and not of this life only, which was all of a piece'. It may be that the physical difference between Chesterton and St Thérèse had prevented him from noticing the double significance of this illustration which he introduced in different essays at different times; for if he *had* noticed how he was accidentally proving their essential resemblance, the writer in him must have sat up and with an exultant whoop given

thanks for treasure-trove, as writers (and converts) sometimes do find treasure when they are not looking for it. No one in their senses could possibly suspect such a brilliant wit and *savant* and satirist as Monsignor Ronald Knox of being duped by the merely chocolate-box appeal of those ubiquitous statues where a young nun holds in her hand a trail of roses, symbolic of her intention to let them fall to earth in a pretty shower of scent and petals; yet he had chosen to re-translate her *Histoire d'une Ame* for his last task on earth; and at the annual Romanes Lecture at Oxford in 1957, he mentioned that it had not been altogether easy to imagine himself into the mind and heart and soul of the little Carmelite and to achieve by empathy her true intentions.

Nor are we surprised that under her protection he was able to achieve the translation; not surprised, but exultant at such a lenient working-out of the usually inexorable pattern of life and death.

I went to bed early on the night of August 24, 1957, tired out from a day of wild gales; it did not matter that the electricity had failed, because wanting to listen to Brahms' Fourth Symphony to be relayed from Edinburgh after the nine-o'clock news on the Home Service, a soft night-light was all the illumination I needed. To be certain of not missing one note of it, I turned on my battery set a few minutes early, just in time to hear an impersonal voice state that the death had occurred of Monsignor Ronald Knox. . . .

Hors de concours. Hors de combat.

Had I thus arranged to be alone in a setting of dim light and the perfect Requiem music to follow the announcement, had it been within one's power to devise such appropriate incidentals, they would have been of course an intolerable affectation; yet happening to receive the benison thus fortuitously, I accepted it gratefully.

After the Slow Movement, I switched off. And discovered that meanwhile the electricity had returned as though adapting itself to my need of reading Ronald Knox's own reactions to the subject of death and the fear of death in his *Retreat for Lay People*. I reached out for it, and found:

"This separating of soul and body is the nearest thing to annihilation which it is ours to give. Let us look forward, then, to death, as the moment at which we shall make to God the supreme confession of our creatureliness; when we shall

immolate, in honour of Him, this candle to be blown out. The dearer a thing life seems to you, the harder it seems to relinquish, the more motive for generosity in offering it.'

If I were only allowed one word to summarize the value to me of six or seven bedside volumes by Ronald Knox—and in the cause of austerity it might be a good notion if indeed only one word were allowed for describing the books we care for most!—I should choose *indispensable*, instead of enlarging on them in more glowing, less pedestrian terms. His thoughts illumine the darkness, and he might have sent me in a steep bill for spiritual repairs and renewals engendered by my constant insatiable re-reading of *Retreat for Lay People* and (perhaps astonishingly) *Retreat for Priests*, and of the three 'Slow Motion' books: *The Mass in Slow Motion*, *The Creed in Slow Motion*, *The Gospel in Slow Motion*; and of *The Window in the Wall*, and *Heaven and Charing Cross*. He himself looked on *Enthusiasm* as his best work, but so far I have eyed it respectfully and left it at a safe distance from my bedside, as no tender companion for one's slowed-up hours; but I should certainly have included in my *desiderata* to be labelled 'Wanted on Voyage', the *Selection from the occasional Sermons of the Right Reverend Monsignor Ronald Arbuthnott Knox; sometime Scholar of Balliol College and Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford; Domestic Prelate to His Holiness the Pope. Edited by Evelyn Waugh and published in a limited edition by the Dropmore Press*, if all this magnificence could come down in the world and be re-issued small and modest and light for bedside handling. For years we speak of our 'bedside books' meaning just a hand lazily stretched out in the early morning or for half-an-hour's browsing before going to sleep. . . . It is only when we are quietly nearing our end that they must come to be accepted as bedside for both day and night, allied no less reassuringly than sleep and death.

And I recalled a phrase peculiar to him and recurring over and over again in his letters: 'Don't forget to signal when you come to these parts'. 'Remember you must signal when you come down.' One's personal reactions to grief are often foolish and inexplicable, or why should it now strike me so poignantly when, after all, it was quite an ordinary variation on 'Mind you let me know', only become haunting when echoed from distances inaccessible: 'Don't forget to signal. . . .'

The last time I had seen him was towards the end of one of his

Cenacle retreats. I forget why I thought I had to leave before supper on the Monday evening and so miss his final talk, instead of letting the retreat complete itself and depart with the others on Tuesday morning after breakfast. I hope at least it may have been for a fairly adequate reason, say of sparing someone a disappointment by cancelling a date made a long time previously, and not merely a monstrous failure of my sense of proportion in deliberately precipitating a loss which no prayer to St Antony—'Cher St Antoine de Pavia, rends moi ce que j'ai perdu'—could ever recover.

Monsignor's arrival in the chapel to give us his four o'clock meditation had been preceded by an unusually long delay; we wondered anxiously what had happened, whether he were suddenly taken ill, and if so, why had not one of the nuns come to tell us? Then at last he did appear, apologetic and out of breath, and explained how the door and window of his study had been accidentally left wide open and a high wind blown in, so that returning to fetch the MS. of the talk he intended to give us, he had found all his papers whirling round the floor in a wild saraband instead of as he had left them, neatly prepared on his desk; they were in such confusion that after trying to chase and re-assemble them, he had had to abandon the attempt, and would therefore substitute a talk that perhaps some of us had heard before at some earlier retreat, an old meditation, not the one freshly minted which he had planned to give us.

Our relief at seeing him well and on his feet naturally could not find vent by any burst of applause, so in attentive silence we settled down to listen.

Later, while I was standing in the entrance hall saying good-bye to the nuns and leaving a message for Monsignor Knox, he passed through the hall himself, and halted on seeing my suitcase:

'You're not going?'

'Yes, I'm afraid I have to; I do wish I needn't, but I promised—' and so forth.

'But I'll be giving you a *new* talk tonight', Ronnie explained, terribly remorseful at his flagrant misdemeanour, 'not one that you've heard already;' conceding as a matter of course that it was so dreadful of him just once to have robbed us of our due, that it would have been natural for me in consequence to have

left the retreat before the end; and he repeated in mounting distress: 'It won't be another old one tonight.' No trace of resentment or wounded pride, but as though for this service and no other, he existed.

Yet though I have lost for ever an hour of treasure irreplaceable, I recognized even then that contracted to the size of a pocket dictionary definition, small and clear, I had been given treasure in a different idiom: a glimpse of humility come true. And in his own words when we came away from Baron von Hügel's almost anonymous little grave, it was rather impressive.