

SPIRIT OF FLAME

To
HUGHELL FOSBROKE
FOR
G. T. S.

A TOKEN OF REMEMBRANCE

SPIRIT OF FLAME

A STUDY OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

BY

E. ALLISON PEERS

Juan de la Cruz, espíritu de llama. .

—ANTONIO MACHADO

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Spirit of Flame
A Study of St. John of the Cross
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✠ *Francis Cardinal Spellman*
Archbishop, New York

New York, March 2, 1946

Foreword

THESE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS are meant for readers now meeting St. John of the Cross for the first time. Those who know him already may pass them over.

Who was he? A Spanish Carmelite friar, born just four hundred years ago, an outstanding figure of the Counter-Reformation and companion and fellow-worker to one of the greatest women the world has known, St. Teresa. As well as this, he was a writer of the first rank, both in poetry and in prose. And, most important of all, he was one of Christendom's greatest mystics.

A mystic! It sounds remote and ethereal, I know, but that is the fault of the word, which for some time past has been getting into the wrong company. Disregard the word and think only of what it means, and you will no longer be afraid of St. John of the Cross. A mystic is *a person who has fallen in love with God*. We are not afraid of lovers—no, indeed: "all the world loves a lover." They attract us by their ardour, their single-mindedness, their yearning to be one with the object of their love. It was in just that way that St. John of the Cross thought about God

and strove after God, longing, too, that others should do the same.

That is the whole secret of the amazing power of his life, his character and his writings.

This is not the first attempt I have made to present St. John of the Cross to English readers. Ten years ago, in my Rede Lecture at Cambridge, I drew a picture of him, primarily for a small university circle. Three years later, I had the satisfaction of being able to publish his complete works in English, and in a single edition, for the first time. Now I am trying to introduce him to many who have neither the time nor the training to study the three large volumes of the *Works*.

Not merely to commemorate the quatercentenary of his birth, but because I believe that the world today has the most urgent need of lovers *a lo divino*, I have written this little book in the midst of the preoccupations of the War. Perhaps it is as well that the quatercentenary should have fallen at a time when the bankruptcy of our inadequate application of Christianity has become so evident. If in building our new world we look more closely at the rigid standards shown us by Christ we shall find that we are building upon firmer foundations than before. And those are the standards of St. John of the Cross. Rereading him as I have been in these days of crisis, when the faith of many is burning low and men's hearts are failing them for fear, I have felt more keenly than ever the contrast between the world's

tone and his. More convincingly and more triumphantly he has pointed, beyond our wrecked ambitions, to the King's Highway of the Holy Cross; more vividly has one realized that that is the only way to be trodden by a civilization which has tried every other.

A few passages from this book have appeared, in substance, in the weekly Press—the *Guardian*, the *Church Times*, the *Tablet*, the *Universe* and the *British Weekly*, to the editors of which periodicals I desire to make the usual acknowledgments. The comprehensiveness of the list is one more illustration of the appeal made by the mystics to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity: may this greatest of mystics long continue to play his part in bringing them nearer together.

E. A. P.

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

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To the formal, half-hearted Christian he makes no appeal at all—The genuine follower of Christ is at first repelled by: (i) the divergence of his standards from those of popular Christianity; (ii) his detachment from both material and spiritual things; (iii) his uncompromising conception of supposed insistence on physical penance; (iv) his supposed indifference to the good of others; (v) his teaching on passivity and on the transformation of the soul in God.

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To these objections it may be replied that, if measured by the standards of Holy Scripture, it is popular Christianity, not St. John of the Cross, that will be found wanting—His doctrine of the Being of God; his "hard sayings"; his views on aids to devotion; his language on transformation—His teaching on detachment: not meant for all; detachment is a means to an end; all creature-affections are not condemned.

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Attractiveness of the Saint's teaching to the Christian of today: (i) he restores a sense of Divine transcendence; (ii) he is a realist and presents things as they are; (iii) his severity is wholesome and bracing; (iv) he certifies us of the possibilities of Union; (v) he holds up to us high ideals.

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PRINCIPAL ABBREVIATIONS

- Baruzi: Jean Baruzi: *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*. Paris, 1924.
- P. Bruno: P. Fr. Bruno de Jésus-Marie, C.D.: *Saint John of the Cross*. London, 1932. (Reference is given to the English translation: where the original text [Paris, 1929] is referred to, this is explicitly stated.)
- P. Crisógono: P. Fr. Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, C.D.: *San Juan de la Cruz, su obra científica y su obra literaria*. Madrid, 1929. 2 vols.
- Frost: Bede Frost: *Saint John of the Cross*. London, 1937.
- P. Silverio: *Obras completas de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. P. Fr. Silverio de Santa Teresa, C.D. Burgos, 1929-31. 5 vols.
- R.L.: E. Allison Peers: *Saint John of the Cross*. The Rede Lecture for 1932. Cambridge, 1932.
- Studies*: E. Allison Peers: *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*. London, 1927-30. 2 vols.
- Works*: *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church*. Translated and edited by E. Allison Peers. London, 1934-5. 3 vols.

It should be noted that where a commentary is referred to, its title is given in italics (e.g., *Living Flame of Love*); where the corresponding poem is meant, it is placed between quotation marks (e.g., "Living Flame of Love"). In Part II the titles of the commentaries as given in footnotes are abbreviated.

References to the *Letters* of St. Teresa are to P. Silverio's edition (Burgos, 1922-4). All passages translated from St. Teresa are taken from my forthcoming edition of her *Complete Works*.

PART I

THE MYSTIC IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

CHAPTER I

Early Life

ON AN UNKNOWN DAY of the year 1542,¹ in the village of Fontiveros, some thirty miles north-west of St. Teresa's native city of Ávila, was born a child destined to become a Doctor of the Church Universal and one of the greatest Christian mystics who have ever lived.

That humble village stands on the lofty, wind-swept plateau of Castile; and it is both appropriate and stimulating to associate a Saint whose teaching, uncompromising and austere, was always so sharply outlined, and whose whole life was directed towards so clearly envisaged a goal, with the keenness and purity of that mountain climate. Beneath the incredible blue of the Castilian sky, and the unearthly stillness of that desert-like plain, one seems immeasurably nearer the things of Heaven than in crowded city streets or in the fog and cloud of a northern climate. In that diaphanous atmosphere, illumined by the most brilliant sunshine, one has the illusion of being able to see, not only to the distant

¹ Perhaps on Midsummer Day. The parish registers were destroyed by a fire four years after his birth and the only serious evidence as to the day is an inscription on the font, which is dated 1689. Midsummer Day being also the Feast of St. John Baptist, however, this attribution may well have been a pure conjecture.

horizon, but to the very end of the world. Just so, as the reader of St. John of the Cross becomes gradually transformed into the disciple, the busy present seems to fall away from him, the stillness of the desert to enfold him, the life of the Spirit to become more real, and the sun, even as it relentlessly picks out his imperfections, to clothe him with a new warmth and radiance.

From the day when I first experienced the stern but thrilling beauty of Castile, I was glad that St. John of the Cross had been born there. Now, after a quarter of a century spent in ever-increasing intimacy with his thought, it seems impossible that he could have been born anywhere else.

His family name was Juan de Yepes. On his father's side he was well descended; on his mother's, less so. The father had displeased his family by marrying out of his class; and, having as a result of this to earn his own livelihood, had learned his wife's accomplishment of weaving. At the best, their circumstances would seem to have been humble.

When Juan was about seven years of age, his father died, and soon afterwards the mother and her two sons (a third had died young) removed to Arévalo—probably their nearest town—which lies on the main road from Madrid to the north-west, and later to what in the sixteenth century was a large city, a busy centre of international trade and a royal residence, Medina del Campo. Juan's mother had

taken up her weaving again and there would have been more custom for her in Medina than in a smaller town, besides more opportunity for promising children to get a good education. Young Juan, who had been sent in turn by his persevering mother to a carpenter, a tailor, a sculptor and a painter, but showed less aptitude for these trades than for study, was put to school in the College of the Children of Doctrine.

He must have done well there, for he quickly found the patron so necessary in those days to academic success. Don Antonio Álvarez de Toledo was a devout man who had retired from whatever his business may have been, in order, not to enjoy his leisure, but to take up social work as warden of a hospital. He adopted Juan, then aged about fourteen, and, in return for services of the kind a boy could render, provided for his education, with the idea that he should in due course train for Holy Orders and come back to him again as hospital chaplain.

So, between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, Juan worked in the hospital and studied at a school newly founded by the Society of Jesus, which at that time had been in existence for only about twenty years. How complete an education he gained there it is difficult to say. Documentary testimony suggests that it was limited to "grammar lessons," which would occupy hardly more than two hours daily, and no doubt his work in the hospital was exacting. If this was so, his later academic record suggests that he

must have worked hard in his leisure. We know that he came under the influence of a brilliant young master called P. Bonifacio, and such influence of a master on a boy is seldom restricted to class-hours. Possibly it was some enthusiasm fanned by this young Father which lay beneath an episode narrated by his brother. "And our mother used to say that they once went to look for him at midnight and found him studying among the faggots."

It may well have been during the time spent with the Jesuits that Juan found his vocation. That he did not join the Society is quite understandable. The system of St. Ignatius, as we have it in the *Spiritual Exercises*, is, in its constant use of meditation and imagery, so unlike the type of contemplation which attracted the Carmelite Saint that one would hardly deduce any great similarity of thought between them. Evidently the ideals of the life of contemplation had made their appeal to him while he was still in his teens; for, a year after leaving the hospital, instead of becoming a Jesuit or (as his patron would have liked) deciding to train for the secular priesthood, he took the habit of the Order of Carmel.

There was a house of that Order at Medina, dedicated to St. Anne, and this he entered in 1563. It is generally asserted that he took the habit on the Feast of St. Matthias (February 24), and it is true that the new name he assumed was John of St. Matthias, but there is also ground for believing that the date was in August or September. In the following year—at

some time between May and October—he was professed, and in November 1564 he entered the University of Salamanca, where he took a three-year Arts course, residing at St. Andrew's, the College of his Order in Salamanca, which was affiliated to the University.

It will not be easy for the traveller in Spain to visit all the places associated with the life of the Carmelite Saint: many of them are far from the beaten track and entirely without facilities for lodging. But Salamanca, like Ávila, is accessible, hospitable and rich in mediaeval memories. The once great University of Salamanca, now a shell of its former self, comes to life as one walks in it, and it is easy to picture the days when its lecture rooms, with their rough benches and tall hooded pulpits, were thronged with cassocked students drawn from all parts of Spain and indeed of Europe. For Salamanca was one of the four leading universities in Europe; and as Fray Luis de León, a professor there in John's time, succinctly put it, "the light of Spain and of Christendom."

Besides reading Arts at the University of Salamanca, John studied Theology at St. Andrew's:² his course must therefore have been a very full one, and, if he had in addition to make up any deficiencies in his earlier education, he would have needed to work at great pressure. This, however, would be no trouble to the youth who had begun his studies at dead of night among the faggots. His University and College

² Baruzi, p. 122; P. Crisógono, I, 25-6.

courses completed, he was ordained to the priesthood in the summer of 1567, intending, perhaps—for there is some doubt here—to return to Salamanca, and begin a year's Theology at the University in the autumn. It must have been almost immediately after his ordination that the nature and extent of his life's work were revealed to him.

The revelation came, not by some supernatural manifestation, nor even in a dream so vivid that the pious might interpret it as a Divine vision, but in the most ordinary and practical way possible. Even to-day, religiously minded young people are apt to expect God to send them, not only opportunities for discovering their life's work, but clear indications as to whether they should reject them, defer their acceptance or embrace them immediately. In real life God seldom works in that way. He gives us certain good desires, and a certain degree of ability and intelligence, and leaves us to look out for opportunities of putting our ability to the best use and to be guided by our intelligence as to the acceptance or the rejection of them when they arise.

So it was with Fray John of St. Matthias. Not that he was a stranger to visions. As a child of four or five, he had fallen into a pond, and had believed he saw a "beautiful lady" whom his upbringing prompted him to suppose to be the Queen of Heaven. It was not the beautiful apparition, however, but a conveniently passing workman, who had pulled him out. A similar process took place with regard to his

vocation. One day, when he was still a youth, there came to him some words which seemed to have been spoken by God. "Thou shalt serve Me," they ran, "in an Order whose former perfection thou shalt help to restore." At the time the words were meaningless to him and he could only store them up in his memory and hope that some day they would be made plain. He was not disappointed; though the interpretation, when it came, was supplied by no supernatural visitant but by a middle-aged lady.

The lady was, of course, St. Teresa. When he first met her, in 1567, probably early in September, he was twenty-five, and she fifty-two. It is strange to reflect that for the whole of his life the two had lived only a few miles apart and yet that in all probability neither had ever heard of the other. Strange, for that matter, to us who think so little of travelling half across Europe, that John's twenty-five years should have been spent within an area forming an irregularly shaped square, the longest side of which measured barely fifty miles. But now they were both to travel up and down Spain and to remain in the closest contact until the elder died, nine years before the younger.

St. Teresa (Teresa of Jesus, to give her the name by which she was known during her lifetime) had spent nearly thirty years, from the time when she entered the Carmelite Order at the age of about eighteen down to the year in which John left his hospital, as a simple nun in the Convent of the In-