From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

CHAPTER 1

From Childhood to Visitation on the Hill*

Early Images

Sunshine and a garden path . . . flowers . . . the face and neck and bosom of the nurse upon whose heart I lay, and her voice telling me that she must leave me, that we must part, and immediately after anguish—blotting out the sunshine, the flowers, the face, the voice. This is my first recollection of Life—the pain of love. I was two years old.

Nothing more for two years—and then the picture of a pond and my baby brother floating on it, whilst with agonized hands I seized his small white coat and held him fast.

And then a meadow full of long, deep grass and summer flowers, and I—industriously picking buttercups into a tiny petticoat to take to cook, "to make the butter with," I said. And then a table spread for tea. Our nurses, my two brothers, and myself. Angry words and screaming baby voices, a knife thrown by my little brother. Rage and hate.

And then a wedding, and I a bridesmaid, aged five years—the church, the altar, and great awe, and afterwards a long white table, white flowers, and a white Bride. Grown men on either side of me—smilingly delightful, tempting me with sweets and cakes and wine, and a new strange interest rising in me like a little flood of exultation—the joy of the world, and the first faint breath of the mystery of sex.

Then came winters of travel. Sunshine and mimosa, olive trees against an azure sky. Climbing winding, stony paths between green terraces, tulips and anemones and vines; white sunny walls and lizards; green frogs and deep wells fringed around with maidenhair. Mountains and a sea of lapis blue, and early in the mornings from this lapis lake a great red sun would rise upon a sky of molten gold. In the rooms so

* Editor's Note: This and the following three chapters are taken from *The Prodigal Returns.*

near me were my darling brothers, from whom I often had to part. Beauty and Joy, and Love and Pain—these made up life.

Earnest Belief

I believed earnestly in God with the complete and peaceful faith of childhood. I thought of Him, and was afraid: but more afraid of a great Angel who stood with pen and book in hand and wrote down all my sins. This terrible Angel was a great reality to me. I prayed diligently for those I loved. Sometimes I forgot a name: then I would have to get out of bed and add it to my prayer. As I grew older, if the weather were cold I did not pray upon the floor but from my bed, because it was more comfortable. I was not always sure if this were quite right, but I could not concentrate my mind on God if my body was cold, because then I could not forget my body. I saw God very plainly when I shut my eyes! He was a White Figure in white robes on a white throne, amongst the clouds. He heard my prayers as easily as I saw His robes. He was by no means very far away, though sometimes He was further than at others. He took the trouble to make everything very beautiful: and He could not bear sinful children. The Angel with the Book read out to Him my faults in the evenings.

Of Parting and Dreaming

When I was twelve years old my grandmother died, and for three months I was in real grief. All day I mourned for her, and at night I looked out at the stars, and the terrible mystery of death and space and loneliness struck at my childish heart.

After thirteen I could no longer be taken abroad to hotels, for my parents considered that I received too much attention, too many presents, too many chocolates from men. I was educated by a governess, and was often very lonely. My brothers would come back from school; then I overflowed with happiness and sang all day long in my heart with joy. The last night of the holidays was a time of anguish. Upstairs the clothes were packed. Downstairs I helped them pack the "play-boxes," square deal boxes at sight of which tears sprang to my eyes and a dreadful pain gripped my heart. Oh, the pain of love at parting! there never was a pain so terrible as suffering love. The last meal: the last hour: the last look. There are natures which feel this anguish more than others. We are not all alike.

I had been passionately fond of dolls. Now I was too old for such companions, and when my brothers went away I was completely alone with my governess and my lessons. I fell into the habit of dreaming. In these dreams I evolved a companion who was at the same time myself—and yet not an ordinary little girl like myself, but a marvelous creature of unlimited possibilities and virtues. She even had wings and flew with such ease from the tops of the highest buildings, and floated so delightfully over my favorite fields and brooks that I found it hard to believe that I myself did not actually fly. What glorious things we did together, what courage we had, nothing daunted us! I cared very little to read books of adventure, for our own adventures were more wonderful than anything I ever read. Not only had I wings, but when I was my other self I was extremely good, and the Angel with the Book was then never able to make a single adverse record of me. And then how easy it was to be good: how delightful, no difficulties whatever! When, later on, I grew up and my parents allowed me to have as many friends as I wanted, and when I became exceedingly gay, I still retained the habit of this double existence; it remained with me even after my marriage and kept me out of mischief. If I found myself temporarily dull or in some place I did not care for, clothed in the body of my double, like the wind, I went where I listed. I would go to balls and parties, or with equal ease visit the mountains and watch the sunset or the incomparable beauties of dawn, making delicate excursions into the strange, the wonderful, and the sublime. I gathered crystal flowers in invisible worlds, and the scent of those flowers was Romance.

All this vivid imagination sometimes made my mind over-active: I could not sleep. "Count sheep jumping over a hurdle," I was advised. But it did not answer. I found the most effective way was to think seriously of my worst sins—my mind immediately slowed down, became a discreet blank—I slept! I grew tall and healthy. At sixteen I received my first offer of marriage and with it my first vision of the love and passion of men. I recoiled from it with great shyness and aversion. Yet I became deeply interested in men, and remained so for very many years. From that time on I never was without a lover till my marriage.

The Glamour of Youth

At seventeen my "lessons" came to an end. I had not learnt much, but I could speak four languages with great fluency. I learnt perhaps

more from listening to the conversation of my father and his friends. He had always been a man of leisure and was acquainted with many of the interesting and celebrated people of the day, both in England and on the Continent. I was devoted to him, and whenever he guided my character he did so with the greatest judgment. He taught me above all things the need of self-control, and never to make a remark of a fellow-creature unless I had something pleasant or kind to say. There was no subject upon which he was unread; and when my brothers, who were both exceedingly clever, returned from college and the University, wonderful and brilliant were the discussions that went on. Both my parents were of Huguenot descent, belonging to the old French noblesse. I think the Latin blood had sharpened their brains, and certainly gave an extra zest to life.

We spent the winter of the year in which I was seventeen in Italy, to which country a near relative was Ambassador, and there I went to my first ball. That night—and how often afterwards!—I knew the surging exultation, the intoxication of the joy of life. How often in social life, in brilliant scenes of light and laughter, music and love, I seemed to ride on the crest of a wave, in the marvelous glamour of youth!

Worship of the Beautiful

This love of the world and of social life was a very strong feeling for many years: at the same time and running, as it were, in double harness with it was a necessity for solitude. My mind imperatively demanded this, and indeed my heart too. It was during this year that I first commenced a new form of mental pleasure through looking at the beautiful in Nature. Not only solitude, but total silence was necessary for this pastime, and, if possible, beauty and a distant view: failing a view I could accomplish it by means of the beauties of the sky. This form of mental pleasure was the exact opposite of my previous dreamings, for all imagination absolutely ceased, all forms, all pictures, all activities disappeared—the very scene at which I looked had to vanish before I could know the pleasure of this occupation in which, in some mysterious manner, I inhaled the very essence of the Beautiful.

At first I was only able to remain in this condition for a few moments at a time, but that satisfied me—or, rather, did not satisfy me, for through it all ran a strange unaccountable anguish—a pain of longing—which, like a high, fine, tremulous nerve, ran through

the joy. What induced me to pursue this habit, I never asked myself. That it was a form of the spirit's struggle towards the Eternal—of the soul's great quest of God—never occurred to me. I was worshipping the Beautiful without giving sufficient thought to Him from Whom all beauty proceeds. Half a lifetime was to go by before I realized to what this habit was leading me—that it was the first step towards the acquirement of that most exquisite of all blessings—the gift of the Contemplation of God. Ah, if anyone knows in his heart the call of the Beautiful, let him use it towards this glorious end! Love, and the Beautiful—these are the twin golden paths that lead us all to God.

A Fight for Faith

Certainly we were not a religious family. One attendance at church upon Sunday—if it did not rain!—and occasionally the Communion, this was the extent of any outward religious feeling. But my father's daily life and acts were full of Christianity. A man of a naturally somewhat violent temper, he had so brought himself under control that towards everyone, high and low, he had become all that was sweet and patient, sympathetic and gentle. About this time a devouring curiosity for knowledge commenced to possess me. What was the truth—what was the truth about every single thing I saw? Astronomy, Biology, Geology—in these things I discovered a new and marvelous interest: here at last I found my natural bent. History had small attraction for me: it spoke of the doings of people mostly vain or cruel, and untruthful. I wanted truth—irrefutable facts! No scientific work seemed too difficult for me; but I never, then or later, read anything upon the subject of religion, philosophy, or psychology. I had a healthy, wholesome young intelligence with a voracious appetite: it would carry me a long way, I thought. It did—it landed me in Atheism.

To a woman Atheism is intolerable pain: her very nature, loving, tender, sensitive, clinging, demands belief in God. The personal reason, the Personal God—these are essential to high virtue. Young as I was, I realized this. Outwardly I was frivolous; inwardly I was no butterfly, the deep things of my nature were by no means unknown to me. I not only became profoundly unrestful at heart but I was fearful for myself, and of where strong forces of which I felt the pull might lead me. I had great power over the emotions of men: moreover, interests and instincts within me corresponded to this dangerous capacity. I felt

that the world held many strange fires: some holy and beautiful; some far otherwise. Without God I knew myself incapable of overcoming the evil of the world, or even of my own petty nature and entanglements. I despaired, for I perceived that God does not reveal Himself because of an imperious demand of the human mind, and I had yet to learn that those mysteries which are under lock and key to the intelligence are open to the heart and soul. But indeed there was no God to reveal Himself. All was a fantastic make-believe! a pitiful childish invention and illusion! My intelligence said, "Resign yourself to what is, after all, the truth: console yourself with the world and material achievements." The heart said, "Resignation is impossible, for there is no consolation to the heart without God." I listened to my heart rather than my intelligence, and for two terrible years I fought for faith.

Towards the end of two years my struggles for faith commenced to find a reward. Little by little a faint hope crept into my mind—fragile, often imperceptible. That winter we again spent in Italy, in continuous gaiety amongst a brilliant cosmopolitan world of men and women who for the most part lived in palaces, surrounded with art and luxury. Here in Rome on every side was to be found the Cult of the Beautiful. Wonderful temples, gems of classical sculpture, masterpieces of color in oil and fresco—the genius and the aspirations of men rendered permanent for us by Art; but the Temples, those silent emblems of man's worship of an Unknown God, with their surroundings of lovely nature, affected me far the most deeply: indeed, I do not pretend that sculptures and pictures affected me at all. I was interested, I greatly admired—they were a part of education, but that was all. But in the vicinity of those Temples what strange echoes awoke in me, what mysterious sadness and longing, what a mystery of pain! Something within me sighed and moaned for God. If I could but find Him—if I could even truly Believe and be at peace! But already I had commenced to Believe.

Encounters with Holiness and Love

During the late winter we went to one of the great ceremonies at the Vatican: we had seats in the Sistine Chapel. It was an especial occasion, and the number of persons present was beyond all seating accommodation. To make way for someone of importance I was asked to give up my seat and go outside into the body of the great Cathedral; here I was hurriedly pushed into the second row of a huge concourse

of waiting and standing people. Already in the distance the Pope* was approaching. Lifted high in his chair on the shoulders of his bearers, he came slowly along in his white robes, his hand raised in a general blessing upon all this multitude. As he came nearer I saw the delicate ivory face—the great dark eyes shining with a fire I had never seen before. For the first time in my life I saw holiness. I was moved to the depths of my being. Something in my gaze arrested his attention; he had his chair stopped immediately above me, and, leaning over me, he blessed me individually—a very great concession during a large public ceremony. I ought to have gone down on my knees—but I had no knees! I no longer had a body! There was no longer anything anywhere in the world but Holiness—and my enraptured soul. Holiness, then, was far beyond the Beautiful. I had not known this till I saw it before me.

Life hurried me on: glowing hours and months succeeded each other. In the autumn I fell in love. I came to the consciousness of this, not gradually, but all in one instant. I had no chance of drawing back, for it was already fully completed before I realized it. I came to the realization of it through a dream (sleep-dreams were always exceedingly rare with me): on this occasion I dreamed a friend showed me the picture of a girl to whom she said this lover (he had been my lover for a year) was engaged. I awoke, sobbing with anguish. I could not disguise from myself the fact that I must be in love. When the time came to speak of it to my parents, my mother would not hear of the marriage—there was no money: I must make another choice. Two brilliant opportunities offered themselves—money—position; but I could not bring myself to think of either. Love was everything: a prolonged secret engagement followed. I went into Society just as before.

Mere Acceptance

The Faith that had been growing up in me was of a very different form from that which I had had before: wider, purer, infinitely more powerful, and, though I did not like to remember the pain of them, I felt that those struggling years of doubt and negation had been worthwhile—without those struggles I felt I never could have had so

* Editor's Note: Pope Leo XIII.

powerful a faith as I now had. God was at an indefinite and infinite distance, but His Existence was a thing of complete certainty for me.

Of the mode and means of Connection with Him I had no smallest knowledge or even conception. I addressed Him with words from the brain and the lips. An insuperable wall perpetually separated me from Him. Now my father became ill with heart trouble. Doctors, nurses, all the dreaded paraphernalia of sickness pervaded the house. During two terrible years he lingered on. Heart-broken at the sight of his sufferings, I hardly left his bedside. Finally death released him. But my health, which had always been good, was now completely broken down; I became a semi-invalid, always suffering, too delicate to marry.

Under pressure of this continued wretchedness I sank into a nerveless condition of mere dumb endurance—a passive acceptance of the miseries of life "as willed by God," I assured myself. I entered a stagnant state of *mere* resignation, whereas accompanying the resignation there should have been a forward-piercing endeavor to react 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. I had not obtained this light. 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 endeavor 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.

Married Life Begins

With recovered health, I married, and knew great happiness; but as a bride of four months I had to part from my husband, who went to the South African War.* Always, always this terrible pain of love that must part. Always it was love that seemed to me the most beautiful thing in life, and always it was love that hurt me most. He was away for fifteen months. I made no spiritual advance whatever. Mystified by so much pain, I now began to regard God if not as the actual Author of all pain, at any rate as the Permitter of all pain. More and more I fell back in alarm at the discovery of the depths of my own capacities for suffering. A tremendous fear of God now commenced to grow up in me, which so increased that after a few years I listened with astonishment when I heard people say they were afraid of *any* person, even a burglar! I could no longer understand feeling fear for anyone or anything save God. All my actions were now governed solely by this sense of weighty, immediate fear of Him. This continued for some ten years.

When my husband at last returned from the War we took up again our happy married life, and we lived together without a cross word, in a wonderful world of our own, as lovers do. It is remarkable that we were so happy, for we had no interests in common. My husband loved all sports and all games, whereas interest in those things was frankly incomprehensible to me. In the winter, when he was out in the hunting-field, I spent much time by myself; but I was never dull, for I could walk out amongst Nature and indulge in my pastime, if the weather were fine: and if not, I could observe and admire everything that grew and lived close at hand in the hedgerows and fields, and I would work for hours with my needle, for then I could think. A dreadful question now often presented itself to me: Had I really a soul at all, or was I merely a passing shadow, here momentarily for God's amusement? If I had an eternal soul, where did it live—in my head with my brain as a higher part of my mind?

* Editor's Note: The Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Existence of a Woman-Soul?

Men had souls, I was sure of that; and they asserted the possession of them very positively—but women? I understood Mohammed grudgingly granted them a half-soul, and that only conditionally. Scriptures spoke harshly of women; Paul was bitter against them; all the sins and troubles of the world were laid upon their delicate and beautiful shoulders. In Revelation I found no mention whatever of Woman in the life of the Resurrection. All this hurt me. What profound injustice—to suffer so much and to receive no recognition whatever whilst men walked off with all the joys after leading very questionable lives! Why continue to struggle to please God when His interest in me would so soon be over? I went through very real and great spiritual sufferings, and temptations to throw myself again solely into world-interests, to console myself with the here and now, for I had the means: it was all to my hand. I swayed to and fro: at one time I felt very hard towards God, terribly hurt by this love-betrayal. But when I looked at the beauties of Nature and the glories of that endless sky, ah, my heart melted with tenderness and admiration for the marvelous Maker of it all. Truly, He was worthy of any sacrifice upon my part. After all—for what wretched, ugly, and miserable men women frequently sacrificed themselves without getting any other reward for it than neglect and indifference. How much better to sacrifice oneself to the All-Perfect, All-Beautiful God! I finally resigned myself entirely and completely to this point of view, and, having done so, I thus addressed, in all reverence and earnestness, the Deity: "Almighty God, if it is Thy Will to blot out Woman from Paradise I most humbly assure Thee of this—Man will miss her sorely; and Thou Thyself, Almighty God, when Thou dost visit Paradise, wilt miss her also!"

After this I seldom said any private prayers, for I was not of the Acceptable Sex. But I paid a public respect to God in the church, where I worshipped Him with profound reverence and great sadness. But I thought of Him in my heart constantly, with all those tender, loving, longing thoughts which are the heart's bouquet held out to God. Happiness for me, then, must be found entirely in this world, and I found it in my love for my husband. Happiness was that which the whole world was looking for; but I could not fail to notice more and more the ridiculous picture presented by Society in its pretences of being the means of finding this happiness. None of its ardent devotees were "happy" people; they were excited, egotistical, intensely

vain and selfish, often bitter and disappointed, filled with a demon of competition, jealous, and full of empty, insincere smiles. I perceived the chagrins from which they secretly suffered—the tears behind the laughter. I was not in the least deceived or impressed by any of them, but wondered how they managed to hang together and deceive each other.

More and more I looked for purely mental pleasures. Mind was everything. I now began to despise my body—I almost hated it as an incubus! Social successes or failures grew to be a matter of complete indifference to me, and social life resolved itself into being solely the means of bringing mind into contact with mind. The question of fashionable environment ceased to exist for me, but the question of how and where to meet with thinking minds was what concerned me: it was not an easy one to solve in the usual conditions of country life, with its sports and its human-animal interests. Finally, total mental solitude closed around me. In spite of my doubt as to the existence of a woman-soul, I still felt the same piercing desire and need for God—the acquisition of knowledge in no way lessened this pain. What, after all, is knowledge by itself? The light of the highest human intelligence seems hardly greater than the wan lamp of a diminutive glow-worm, surrounded by the vastness of the night. In sorrow, in trouble, in pain, could knowledge or the mind do so much more for me than the despised body? No, something more than the intelligence was needed to give life any sense of adequacy: even human love was insufficient. God Himself was needed, and the ever-recurring necessity would force itself upon me of the need for a personal direct connection with God.

I continued to find it utterly impossible to achieve this. Mere faith by no means fulfilled my requirements. God, then, remained inaccessible—the mind fell back from every attempt to reach Him. He was unknowable, yet not unthinkable—that is to say, He was not unthinkable as Being, but only in particularization and in realization. I could know Him to Be; but in that alone where was any consolation?—I found it totally inadequate. It was some form of personal Contact that was needed; but if my mind failed to reach this, with what else should I reach it? Ah, I was infinitely too small for this terrible mystery; but, small as I was, how I could suffer! Why this suffering? Why would He not show Himself? Harsh, rebellious, criticizing thoughts frequently

invaded me: the whole scheme of Nature and of life at times appeared cruel, unreasonably so.

Bitterness and Disappointment

All the old ever-to-be-repeated cycle of bitter human thoughts had to be gone through again in my own individual atom. Here and there the bitterness might vary: as, for instance, the collapse and corruption of the body with its hideous finale never caused me distress. I had become too indifferent to the body; but I found that most persons clung to it with extraordinary tenacity, indeed appeared to regard it as their most valuable possession! What I did resent, and was deeply mystified by, was the capacity for suffering and pain which had no balance in any corresponding joy. It was idle to say that the joy of festivities, even of human love, equaled the anguish of grief over others, or the sufferings of physical ill-health. They did not counterbalance it; sorrow was more weighty than joy, and far more durable. Later I became convinced that there did exist a full equivalent of joy, as against pain, and that I merely had no knowledge of how to find it. Years succeeded each other in this way, bringing greater loosening of earth-ties, more abstraction, certainly no improvement of character.

My husband's duties as a soldier took us to many parts of the world. During a visit to Africa I was struck by lightning, and for ten days my sufferings were almost unendurable; every nerve seemed electrocuted. It was long before I quite recovered. Whilst this illness lasted, though it caused him no inconvenience and he led his life exactly as usual, I yet noticed a change in my husband's love. I was deeply pained, almost horrified, by this revelation of the natural imperfection of human love: profoundly saddened, I asked myself was it nothing but lust which had inspired and dictated all the poems of the world? I thought more and more of Jesus' love; I began to know that nothing less than His perfect love could satisfy me. In this illness I was tremendously alone.

My Jesus

I commenced to meditate upon the life and the character and the love of Jesus Christ. I was now about thirty-six. Gradually He became for me a secret Mind-Companion. I began to rely upon this companionship—though it appeared intensely one-sided, for at first it seemed always to be I who gave! Nevertheless I found a growing calm arising

from this apparently so one-sided friendship. A subtle assistance and comfort came to me, it was impossible to say how, yet it came from this companionship as it came from nothing else.

That Jesus Christ was God I knew to be the faith of the Church, but that He actually was so I felt no conviction of whatever: indeed, it was incomprehensible to me. I thought of Him as a Perfect Man, with divine powers. He was my Jesus. I denied nothing, for I was far too small and ignorant to venture to do so: I kept a perfectly open mind and loved Him for Himself, as the Man Jesus. This went on for some years. In all my spiritual advancement I was incredibly slow! What had delayed me in progress was lack of using the right Procedure and the right Prayer. I sought for God with persistence and great longing; but I sought Him as the Father, and Godhead is inaccessible to the creature. On becoming truly desirous of finding God it is necessary that with great persistence we pray to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ that He will give us to Jesus Christ and fill the heart and mind with love for Christ. Only through Jesus Christ can we find the Godhead, and we cannot be satisfied with less than the Godhead. With the creature we cannot come into contact with the Godhead—but with the soul only. The soul is awakened, revived, re-glorified by Grace of Jesus Christ; and the Holy Spirit effects the repentance and conversion of the heart and mind, for without this conversion towards a spiritual life the soul remains in bondage to the unconverted creature.

Visitations and the Pain of Repentance

One day I returned from a walk, and hardly had I entered my room when I commenced thinking with great nearness and intimacy of Jesus; and suddenly, with the most intense vividness, He presented Himself before my consciousness so that I inwardly perceived Him, and at once I was overcome by a great agony of remorse for my unworthiness: it was as though my heart and mind broke in pieces and melted in the stress of this fearful pain, which continued—increased—became unendurable, and lasted altogether an hour. Too ignorant to know that this was the pain of Repentance, I did not understand what had happened to me; but now indeed at least I knew beyond a doubt that I had a soul! My wonderful Lord had come to pay me a visit, and I was not fit to receive Him—hence my agony. I would try with all my strength to improve myself for Him. I was at first at a standstill to know even where to commence in this improvement, for words

fail to describe what I now saw in myself! Up till now I had publicly confessed myself a sinner, and privately calmly thought of myself as a sinner, but without being disturbed by it or perceiving how I was one! I kept the commandments in the usual degree and way, and was conscientious in my dealings with others. Now all at once—by this Presentment of Himself before my soul—I suddenly, and with terrible clearness, saw the whole insufferable offensiveness of myself.

For some time, even for some weeks, I remained like a person half-stunned with astonishment. Then I determined to try to become less selfish, less irritable and impatient, to show far more consideration for everyone else, to be rigidly truthful: in fact, try to commence an alteration. And whatever my difficulties, I had always this immense incentive—to please my Jesus, tender and wonderful, my Perfect Friend.

Two years went by, and on Easter morning, at the close of the service as I knelt in prayer in the church, He suddenly presented Himself again before my soul, and again I saw myself, and again I went down and down into those terrible abysses of spiritual pain; and I suffered more than I suffered the first time: indeed, I have never had the courage to quite fully recall the depths of this anguish to mind. After this my soul knew Jesus as Christ the Son of God, and my heart and my mind accepted this without any further wonder or question, and entirely without knowing how this knowledge had been given, for it came as a gift.

A great repose now commenced to fill me, and the world and all its interests and ways seemed softly and gently blown out of my heart by the wings of a great new love, my love for the Risen Christ. Though outwardly my friends saw no change, yet inwardly I was secretly changing month by month. Even the great love I had for my husband began to fade: this caused me distress; I thought I was growing heartless, and yet it was rather that my heart had grown so large that no man could fill it! I felt within me an immense, incomprehensible capacity for love, and the whole world with all its contents seemed totally, even absolutely, inadequate to satisfy this great capacity. I suffered over it without understanding it.

A Gentle Song to God

I had a garden full of old-fashioned flowers, surrounded by high walls with thatch. As I grew in my heart more and more away from the

world, I worked more in the garden, and whilst I worked I thought mostly about God—God so far away and hidden, and yet so near my heart.

There were many different song-birds in the garden, and one robin. I loved the robin best of all. His song was not so beautiful as the blackbird's or so mellow as the thrush's; but they hid and ran away from me, whilst the robin sought me out and stayed with me and sang to me, all by myself, a little, tiny, gentle song of which I never grew tired. If I stayed quite still, he came so close he almost touched me; but if I moved towards him, he flew away in a great fright. It seemed to me I was like that robin, and I wanted to come close, close to the feet of God. But He would not let me find Him. He would not make me any sign. He would not let me feel I knew Him. Did He in His wisdom know that if He showed Himself too openly I should go mad with fear or joy? I could not tell. But every day as the robin sang to me in the garden I sang to God a little gentle song out of my heart—a song to the hidden God Who called me, and when I answered Him would not be found, and, still remaining hidden, called and called till I was dumb with the pain and wonder of this mystery.

A Pain-Song to God

Then suddenly came the Great War. My husband was amongst the first to have to go. All my love for him which I had thought to be fading now rose up again to its full strength: it was no mere weakly sentiment, but a powerful type of human love which had been able to carry me through fifteen years of married life without one hour of quarreling; its roots were deep into my heart and mind: the very strength and perfection of it but made of it a greater instrument for torture. Why should this most beautiful of all human emotions carry with it so heavy a penalty, for which no remedy appeared to exist? It had not then been made clear to me that all human loves must first be offered up and ascend into the love of God: then only are they freed from this Pain-Tax. God must first be All in All to us before we can enter amongst the number who are all in all to Him—constantly consoled by Him.

This condition of being all in all is demanded as a right by all men and women in mutual love, yet we deny this right to God: we are not even willing to attempt it! This failure to be willing is the grave error we make. Our attitude to God is not one of love, but of an expectancy

of favors. An identical sacrifice is demanded of us in marriage—father, mother, brothers, sisters, friends: all these loves must become subservient to the new love, and with what willingness and smiles this sacrifice is usually made! Not so with our sacrifices to God—we make them with bitter tears, hard hearts, long faces. Is He never hurt by this perpetual grudgingness of love? But I had not yet learnt any of this, and I could not accept, I could not swallow this terrible cup. At least I was not so foolish as to attribute all this horror that was closing in upon the world to the direct Will of God: I could perceive that, on the contrary, it was the spirit of Anti-Christ, it was the will of Man with his greeds, his cruelty, his self-sufficient pride, together with a host of other evils, which had brought all this to pass. But could not—would not—God deliver the innocent; must all alike descend into pit? I tried to obtain relief by casting this burden on to Christ, and was not able to accomplish it. I tried to draw the succor of God down into my heart, I tried to throw myself out and up to Him—I could do neither: the vast barrier remained; Faith could not take me through it.

A horrible kind of second sight now possessed me, so that, although I never heard one word from my husband, I became aware of much that was happening to him—knew him pressed perpetually backwards, fighting for his life, knew him at times lying exhausted out in the open fields at night. At last I began to fear for my reason; I became afraid of the torture of the nights and sat up reading, forcing my mind to concentrate itself upon the book—the near-to-hand help of the book was more effective than the spiritual help in which something altogether vital was still missing. Relief only came when after a month a letter reached me from my husband, saying that the terrible retreat was over and he safe. Months and years dragged by. Sometimes the pain of it all was eased; sometimes it increased.

As grass mown down and withered in the fields gives out the pleasant scent of hay, so in her laceration and her anguish did the soul, I wondered, give off some Pain-Song pleasing to Almighty God. At first I recoiled with terror from this thought; finally love overcame the terror—I was willing to have it so, if it pleased Him. My soul reached down into great and fearful depths. I envied the soldiers dying upon the battlefields; life was become far more terrible to me than death. Looking back upon my struggles, I see with profound astonishment how unaware I was of my impudence to God in attributing to Him qualities of cruelty and callousness, such as are to be found only

amongst the lowest men! Yet good was permitted to come out of this evil; for where I attributed to God a callousness and even an enjoyment of my sufferings, I learnt self-sacrifice, the effacement of all personal gain, total submission for love's sake to His Will, cruel though I imagined it to be. With what tears does the heart afterwards address itself in awed repentance to its Beloved and Gentle God!

God's Answer on the Hill

A painful illness came and lasted for months. Having no home, I was obliged to endure the misery of it as best I could among strangers. At this time I touched perhaps the very lowest depths. How often I longed that I might never wake in the morning! I loathed my life.

During this illness I came exceedingly near to Christ, so much so that I am not able to describe the vividness of it. What I learned out of this time of suffering I do not know—save complete submission. I became like wax—wax which was asked to take only one impression, and that pain. I was too dumb; I should have remembered those words, that "men ought not to faint, but to pray." Bewildered, and mystified by my own unhappiness and that of so many others all around me, I sank in my submission too much into a state of lethargic resignation, whereas an onward-driving resolution to win through, a powerful determination to seek and obtain the immediate protection and assistance of God, a standing before God, and a claiming of His help—these things are required of the soul: in fact that importunity is necessary of which Jesus spoke (Luke 11:7-9): "And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Such times of distress are storms, fearful battles of the soul in which she must not faint but rise up and walk towards God and clamor for help; and she will receive it. In His own good time He will give her all that she asks and more even than she dreamed of.

It was summer-time: a great battle was raging in France. A friend wrote me that my husband was up in the very foremost part of it. I heard no word from my husband; weeks passed, and still the same ominous silence. At last the day came when the shadow of these two fearful years rose up and overwhelmed me altogether. I went up on to the wild lonely hill where I so often walked, and there I contended with God for His help. For the first time in my life there was nothing between God and myself—this had *continually* happened with Jesus

Christ, but not with God the Father, Who remained totally inaccessible to me. Now, like a man standing in a very dark place and seeing nothing but knowing himself immediately near to another—so I knew myself in very great nearness to God. I had no need for eyes to see outwardly, because of the immense magnetism of this inward Awareness. At the moment my heart and mind ran like water before Him—praying Him, beseeching Him for His help; at another my soul stood straight up before Him, contending and claiming because she could bear no more: and it felt as though the Spirit of God stood over against my spirit, and my spirit wrestled with God's Spirit for more than an hour. But He gave me no answer, no sign, no help. He gave me nothing but that awful silence which seems to hang forever between God and Man. And I became exhausted, and turned away in despair from God, and from supplication, and from striving, and from contending, and, very quiet and profoundly sad, I stood looking out across the hills to the distant view—how gentle and lovely this peace of the evening sky, whilst on earth all the nations of the world were fighting together in blood and fury and pain!

I had stood there for perhaps ten minutes, mutely and sadly wondering at the meaning of it all, and was commencing to walk away when suddenly I was surrounded by a great whiteness which blotted out from me all my surroundings. It was like a great light or white cloud which hid all my surroundings from me, though I stood there with my eyes wide open: so that I said to myself, "It is an electric cloud," and it pricked me from my head down to my elbows, but no further. I felt no fear whatever, but a very great wonder, and stood there all quite simple and placid, feeling very quiet. Then there began to be poured into me an indescribably great vitality, so that I said to myself, "I am being filled with some marvelous Elixir." And it filled me from the feet up, gently and slowly, so that I could notice every advance of it. As it rose higher in me so I grew to feel freed: that is to say, I had within me the astounding sensation of having the capacity to pass where or how I would—which is to say I felt freed of the law of gravity. I was like a free spirit—I felt and knew myself this glorious freedom! I tasted for some moments a new form of living! Words are unable to convey the splendor of it, the boundless joy, the liberty, the glory of it. And the incomprehensible Power rose and rose in me until it reached the very crown of my head, and immediately it had quite filled me a marvelous thing happened—the Wall, the dreadful Barrier

between God and me, came down entirely, and immediately I loved Him. I was so filled with love that I had to cry aloud my love, so great was the force and the wonder and the delight and the might of it.

And now, slowly, the vivid whiteness melted away so that I saw everything around me once more just as before; but for a little while I continued to stand there very still and thoughtful, because I was filled with wonder and great peace. Then I turned to walk home, but I walked as a New Creature in a New World—my heart felt like the heart of an angel, glowing white-hot with the love for God, and all my sorrows fled away in a vast joy! This was His answer, this was His help. After years and years of wrestling and struggling, in one moment of time He had let me find Him, He had poured His Paradise into my soul! Never was such inconceivable joy—never was such gladness! My griefs and pains and woes were wiped away—totally effaced as though they had never existed!

Oh, the magnificence of such splendid joy! The whole of space could scarcely now be large enough to hold me! I needed all of it—I welcomed immensity as once I was oppressed by it. God and my Soul, and Love, and Space!

"*From Childhood to Visitation on the Hill*"

Features in

A Christian Woman's Secret: A Modern-Day Journey to God

© 2009 World Wisdom, INC.

by Lilian Staveley

Edited by Joseph A. Fitzgerald, Foreword by Philip Zaleski

All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com