

Rideo

By R. V. Risley

ON the slope of a little hill, overlooking a quaint old town in Provence, there is an ancient cloistered monastery, surrounded by gardens. The buildings, soft-coloured in their red tiles and creamy stucco, have lain for centuries asleep upon the vineyarded hillside; they are ancient and cracked with the sun, and their gardens are as old as they. In these gardens, which are enclosed by a high white wall, from the gate of which one can look down over the roofs of the village, and see the tower of the little church, calm-faced priests pace in reverie through the long summer afternoons, while the rose leaves fall silently, and the ancient poplars turn up their silvery leaves.

The whole place seems asleep. There is a feeling of being haunted, in the old gardens; and sitting on the smooth stone benches one drowns back into memories. Through the long day the silence is broken only by the faint sound of the bell of the little church, or by the occasional bleating of sheep in the distance.

Some of the priests are young, some are very old. And among these latter is one who sits apart on a great stone seat, under a huge knarled rose tree; sometimes he is found making rude toys for children, with his delicate white hands; sometimes he sits idly, raising his head once or twice during the afternoon, and
gazing

gazing out through the gateway over the roofs of the village ; he never has gone outside since he first came to the monastery, and the others touch their foreheads when they speak of him, and say, "We do not understand."

This is the tale of his coming. Why he told it to me I do not know ; I have thought sometimes it was because he felt the dim need of one outside the monastery, some one who came from the world.

"What man is I do not know ; I think nobody knows. We have no standard, no comparison ; we are too near to ourselves, I think that we are nearer to nature than most of us believe, though why that should make us further from God, as many say, I do not see. We can only wonder how these things are ; how can we expect to do otherwise ?

"I was born in the village here. My father was the owner of many vineyards, and had been a student in his youth. I was brought up for the priesthood. I studied at Avignon with an old curé. I entered the Church, and was sent to be priest here.

"I lived in a little house with a garden, at the edge of the village ; you cannot see it, it is under the hill. In the early morning I would go to the church, then afterwards I would come home to my coffee. Till noon I would sit in my garden and read. In the afternoon I would read, or go to the church, or visit the townsfolk. In the evening, when there was no service, I would sit in my study and pass the hours until bed-time in work, or in conversation with whoever came to see me. It is about myself, pardon then, that I mention it so often. A quiet life, with little of amusement or excitement in it ; yet a peaceful one, with few cares, and much time for study. So the years went on, until I was forty years old.

"Perhaps

"Perhaps you from the world will understand these things, my friends who have passed their lives in the monastery do not."

The old man waved a rose-leaf from the back of his hand, where it had fallen, and glanced kindly at two young brothers of the order who were pacing slowly, with bowed heads and thoughtful faces, down one of the side paths.

"An old man," he continued, turning again to me, "has but one tale worth telling. Hates and successes, failures or honours come to seem small as the shadow of his end grows larger; only kindness stays. I hope," and his voice grew reverent, "that you, from the places that are so far away, will find my meaning. I say this because the story seems angry."

Then raising his head, he told me in a low voice, most straightforwardly, this that follows. Occasionally a priest would pass by and glance at us where we sat, under the shade of the old rose-tree, or sometimes a bird would twitter in the branches somewhere near us. Otherwise there was silence.

"It was when I was forty years old, one morning as I passed down the high street. It was sunny, and the freshness of the open air seemed strange to me, for I had been up all night at my studies. A face looked out at me from the open window of one of the houses, as I passed. Along the window ledge stood a row of little rose-trees in full blossom, and the face that smiled at me from over their branches was half-shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat. Now this was a pretty picture, that I had seen before—Pierre the farmer's daughter watering her roses of a morning. Yet when I had bowed and smiled, and was walking on down the street, the face, and especially the laughter of the eyes, stayed with me. For three days I did not see the face again.

"Then, walking in the afternoon to see some of the townfolk, I met the daughter of Pierre the farmer again. She had a large
basket

basket of green things ; with other people I would have stopped and spoken, and if I had walked with them, carried their basket. I bowed, smiled as one whose thoughts are far away, and passed on.

“That night I quarrelled with Aquinus, drank three cups of coffee, which kept me awake, and was cross all the next day—till evening ; then as I came down the steps of the church, she and her father passed by. That evening after I had reached my garden gate, I turned, and instead of going to my books, went down the street again to a neighbour’s, where I stayed till late and talked much. The next morning I took a walk in the fields ; when it came to an hour before noon, at which time I knew she would be in the market, I went across to where I saw some mowers in the distance, and sat with them till the market was over. Then I went back to the town ; and met her by accident, just in front of my own door ; I bowed crossly and went in.

“That night after my dinner, I sat down to my books in my study, with my cup of black coffee by my side on the desk. I opened a book of philosophy, then going to the shelves, I took down some rolls of manuscript, on which I was working, and spread them out by the side of the books and the coffee. Then I settled myself down to work. I had a splendid evening ; my brain was firm and clear ; my thoughts came rapidly, and a fluency of expression followed them that surprised myself. I worked till eleven o’clock, then I laid aside my books ; I sat awhile in my chair. After a short time I dreamily gathered up my manuscripts and carried them towards the shelf. As I lifted them to their place, my eyes fell upon the black sleeve of my cassock. I turned uncertainly, and walked towards the open fire ; hesitating, I slowly threw them into the flames one by one. I watched them burn. Then I went back to my chair and sat down ; my housekeeper found me there when she came to dust my books in the morning.

“For

“For two weeks I saw her face in church ; at the end of that time I went to her father, and offered to teach her Latin. The next morning she came to my house, and took possession of a great arm-chair in my study, and our lessons began. Yes, it was weak. But we have more possibilities in our natures than we think for ; I do not know.

“Sometimes I would sit after she was gone, with my head in my hands, dejectedly, and my very spirit would seem broken within me. I, the priest ! At other times I would pace my study, my hands clenched behind my back, my head sunk on my chest.

“Can I ever forget the morning when I tried to go away ! It was after our lesson was over, I was bundling my papers on my desk. I said suddenly, ‘I am going away !’ Her eyes grew serious in a moment, and her mouth drooped a little.

“I turned my head. ‘I am going away,’ I said again, not looking at her. I heard her feet slip to the floor as she got down from the great chair, on the arm of which she had been sitting. Coming behind me, she put her hand timidly on my shoulder, and said, sadly, ‘I’m so sorry, I was enjoying the lessons so much !’

“That night I lay awake, tormenting myself with doubts, and striving for courage to overcome the excuses that thronged to my bidding, why I should not go on the morrow. All night I lay and struggled with it, and when the night was over at last, I was still uncertain.

“But when in the fresh morning, I, sitting pale at my books, heard her light feet come dancing up the gravelled walk, and when her laughing voice, breathless for haste, greeted me with its happy good-morning, followed on the instant by the anxious question, ‘If I were going to-day, and for how long ?’--well, I turned to her

her with a smile. 'Going to-day? No. It was only a notion; I will tell you before I go.'

"I think it was three days after this that I first noticed Jean. It was in the afternoon, and I was sitting alone in my garden with the gate open, a thing I often did now, for sometimes she would pass by, and seeing me sitting there, come in for a moment. Sitting that afternoon, suddenly I saw her on the other side of the shady road, walking past with a young farmer; he was the son of a neighbour, and an honest straightforward fellow.

"'She would not have passed by with him if she cared for him!' I argued to myself, wiping the sweat from my forehead. Then a little demon would whisper, 'Why?' and then I would wipe the sweat from my forehead again. The next day I did not speak to her about it, nor the next; and after a few weeks the pain grew more distant, and things went on as before.

"At the end of that time she told me in the middle of the lesson, that she and Jean would marry when autumn came—then she laughed shyly.

"I gave her some good advice, and after a few minutes made her return to the lesson. It was a verb we were learning, 'rideo.'

"That night when all were asleep, I walked in my study. Around me rose the faces of my old books that had become stranger-like. On the desk lay scattered the sheets of paper of our work that morning; in the corner her big chair. All this by the light of the great brass lamp hung overhead.

"'Good God,' I said aloud, 'is a priest not still a man? Do not the ties of human kind apply to him? If Thou art love, or kindness, or anything of good, why is it that the service of Thee should make me desolate of all the best of humanity? I am a priest—a priest—yet more than a priest, a man! Is there anything but man in the world? Is not man sufficient unto himself?'

himself? The universe is but the reflection of what is behind his eyes. If this thing is the work of Thy hands, oh, God, how can it be evil? And if Thou doest unkindness, or evil, knowing all things, then our worship of Thee is devil-worship, not the worship of God!

“Thus I stood in my agony and argued with God.

“‘But,’ said I again, my hands thrust in my robe, ‘if I were a man and not priest, what have I to do with her? What do I know of laughter—I the studious priest! I am a bowed old, book-killed man, twice her age. I have nothing to do with laughter! Circumstance, digger of graves to humanity.’

“I fell on my knees, and lifted my hands in the glare of the lamp-light, I spoke to God.

“‘I am a priest, Thy priest. I am a man, Thy man. Yes, I am an old man. Take me away. What have I left in life? Why should I remain? What is Thy will?’

“My arms sank to my sides; I waited. Then as I waited my eyes rested on the paper-strewn table, and out of the disorder a word in her hand-writing took shape, the word ‘rideo,’ written on an old exercise sheet. I got up from my knees, and leaving the lamp burning went out of the room, shutting the door behind me.

“The next morning when I came down, a little late, to the lesson, for I had over-slept, Jean was sitting on a small stool, where his big bulk looked extremely ridiculous, gazing devotedly at his sweet-heart in her usual place, knitting her brows over a difficult piece of Latin.

“‘Good-morning,’ I said grimly, ‘has he also come to study Latin?’

“She jumped out of her chair. ‘No, of course not! I brought him here to receive your blessing, father. And then afterwards I thought,

thought, if he might stay—I promise he won't be a bit of trouble—and hear me recite.'

"The great bulk precipitated itself on to its knees, at this point, and she taking it for granted that I consented, arranged herself beside it. So I raised my hands and extended them over them, and said, sanctimoniously, 'Bless you—bless you, my children!'

"Then she rose and the bulk erected itself, establishing itself in a comfortable chair, at my invitation, and we began the lesson. That is, we began after she had whispered to him. 'The father is so funny this morning!'

"After this I used to have this pleasant surprise often. Jean would appear to hear her recite—his supervision of her studies was really quite husbandly.

"One morning I was the appreciative listener to a long account of a certain wedding-dress. That night I had a hard struggle to keep to my new lesson of the word. But I conquered at last, and was able to smile as grimly as ever in the morning.

"I think my sermons at this time must have contained some curious theology. I seemed to be possessed by a devil of satire, that never rested from thrusting shafts of the finest ridicule at all religious things. I found matter of ridicule in every sentence of the church-service, and used sometimes to laugh when I was alone at some sacrilegious thought that would come to me. And this tinged my conversation, I know; people who had stopped to speak with me in the street, would turn and look after me when I had gone on. Sometimes I would burst out laughing at the most unlikely moments; at dinner when somebody was telling a serious story, or when alone, walking in my garden.

"I had not prayed, or had recourse to God in any way, since the night when I read the word. In this state I was pacing
one

one afternoon, up and down a path in my garden, chuckling to myself over some irreverent thought, when I saw my old house-keeper pass by, evidently in search of me. A whim brought it into my head to hide myself in the bushes, where I stood laughing, and in a moment here came by Jean—with her. They passed in front of the place where I was hidden, and my insane fit of laughter redoubled as I saw them go. Then having reached the end of the path, they turned back and came past again; this time I heard their words. Jean was speaking, and he was telling her how much he loved her; his quantities were rather vague, in the usual peasantlike style. And she would laugh—I remember—she would laugh and answer him softly. Then my laughter grew even more in its exquisite amusement, as they passed out of sight, and out of hearing. Again they returned, passing by me. They were still talking; this time about their house and how they would live, and again she answered him softly, seeming to take a pride in his very ignorance! This time my laughter was almost audible. Again they passed, talking of themselves, of their love, of their life. Again the inclination to laughter came, but the laughter died away in my throat; the cold sweat was running down my forehead, and I shook as I stood in the bushes.

“Again they passed. I could hear their words; I had never heard them speak so before. I held on to the bushes and groaned with merriment. Again I saw them coming; I could not stand it. I broke through the undergrowth, and, running between the trees, gained the house. I ran up the stairs, avoiding the study, and, rushing into my own room, threw myself on to the bed, and, like a child, stuffing the pillow into my mouth, burst into tears, through which would break spasmodic laughter, occasionally—I, a grown man and a priest!

“Well, the next day, coming down to the lesson, I was just as usual

usual. Now, Jean seemed to have found a particular liking for me, or rather a particular interest in me—probably because of my having told him, one day, some stories of the torments of hell, which impressed him greatly.

“So he would come frequently to ask me questions about the growing of flowers, in which I had taken an interest.

“I never wrote now. My books on the shelves remained where they were. I took one of them down one day aimlessly ; but it was my Aquinas—the one I used on that evening long ago, when I had burned my manuscript ; looking at it, I grew so sad that I put it back on the shelf without reading it.

“I spent my days either sitting in my garden, or walking in the streets of the town or through the fields.

“The months slipped by, and it came time to give up the Latin lessons ; she was busy at home. But Jean came frequently, to console me for her absence, I believe, and, probably with the same intention, told me, in his drawling voice, the details of the preparations and the plans for the ceremony.

“So the time went on, till it was the day before the wedding.

“I was down in the church, superintending its decorations of roses, when one of the farmers came to me, as I stood high upon a ladder, with a request that I would come to bless his fields on the morrow.

“‘But,’ I said, ‘there is this wedding ; I cannot do both ; could I not come the next day?’ But the farmer excused himself. He was going away on a journey the next day ; I could do it late in the afternoon, after the wedding was over ; it was such a magnificent crop, and would the good father be so kind ? I consented. Yes, I would come to bless his fields—after the wedding was over. I do not understand how it was—I felt dull and incapable of sensation.

“It was so the next day. I dimly remember having my coffee in the morning, and some time after my housekeeper bringing me my vestments nicely brushed. Then I remember going to the church, I remember putting on my robes in the little room behind the altar. Of the ceremony itself I can recollect little. There was a great cruel wall of faces between me and the far-away light of the open door. There was a figure in white, in which for some reason or other I felt an interest; and, also, there was a large figure, towards whom I felt dimly friendly. The organ sounded far away; the choir of children’s voices joined in. Then I remember some words, and a short time afterwards the welcome sunlight of the open door, as I passed down the aisle of the deserted church. I went home and drank a cup of coffee, and sat pleasantly by the great front window, drumming on the table where my empty coffee-cup stood. After a while, the people for whom I was waiting appeared—the farmers to conduct me to the fields I was to bless. I got up, and, with one of them before me carrying the bag of my holy robes, I walked forth to bless the fields.

“As we went, I listened to their conversation—of horses, or dogs, and crops: then they began to talk of the wedding; they talked of how pretty she looked, and of Jean, and of how much land and stock his father owned. They all agreed that the marriage was most suitable.

“It was one of those still afternoons in the autumn, when the rife world seemed luxuriant, full of joy and growth. The faint blue sky was cloudless, and the fields of rippling corn shone in the afternoon sunlight.

“A great joyous stillness hung over the maternal earth; as we passed by, gaudy flowers of crimson or yellow nodded to us over the old fences, and by the sides of the winding road trivial weeds flaunted their many colours. The farmers, proud of the honour

of

of escorting their priest, trod along a little in front, their heavy boots crushing the soft clods of earth in the road. Sometimes the shrill voice of a cricket would come from the field we were passing.

“After a time the journey ended; by the edge of the rise of a little hill stood the cottage of the farmer who led us. I was shown into the sitting-room and, with many bows of hospitality, left to put on my robes, while the farmers gathered, waiting about the door outside. On the chimney-piece were arranged flowers in vases and pots, the thought of the daughter of the house, whom I had confirmed. The attention touched me, and I went up and smelled of them. Then, taking the priest’s robes out of the bag, I put them on, and, going to the doorway, called to the farmers that I was ready.

“Outside the door we formed in procession, the farmer whose fields I was to bless leading with a scythe, to cut away possible brambles. We passed through a place in the fence, and entered on the long swath that had been mown through the fields, to a slight elevation in their centre.

“Now, for the first time that day, I wakened. The scent of the newly cut corn seemed to get in my head, and the wide horizon-line of waving yellow made me angry. All the unreality of the day broke up and disappeared. The pain, the despair, the torture came back again, rushing. For a moment I thought the feeling would smother me; but its first intensity grew less after a little while, and I found myself walking mechanically through the lane of yellow, with the bare-headed farmers behind me. I looked abroad over the far-stretching fields, and the sight of their still joy tormented me. I shut my eyes and strove against the agony. Something repeating in my head, ‘She is sitting at her marriage feast!—She is sitting at her marriage feast!’

“I opened my eyes and looked forth over the fields. Their
happiness

happiness seemed so to torment me. We were pacing stolidly on, and far in front went the figure of the farmer, bending sometimes to brush a thistle or tassel of corn out of the path.

“‘Why,’ I said to myself, ‘should I be so sad, while this torturing corn is so joyous?’ On either side rose the solid wall of straight stalks, surmounted by their full heads, that rustled and bent to our passage. Far away on the horizon the golden fields bent in platoons and squadrons as the breeze touched them. The whole weight of the misery of the past long months broke on me suddenly.

“I tried to laugh, I repeated to myself over and over again, the word ‘rideo,’ but the incessant voice in my head kept repeating, ‘She is sitting at her marriage feast—she is sitting at her marriage feast!’

“‘Why,’ I said again to myself, in a whisper, ‘should these fields be so joyous and I so sad?’

“The farmers thought I was murmuring prayers, and I heard their muttered ‘Amen’ behind me. I pressed my hands hard to my sides. We walked on, the sun was growing low in the West. Soon we had come to the edge of the little rise in the middle of the fields.

“As we mounted towards the cleared circle that had been mown on the summit for my reception, the agony at my heart died down, and a feeling of almost indifference came to me. But in a moment we stood looking out upon the wide-spread corn. The red sun was sinking, by its light the yellow was touched into the colour of flame on the horizon. I stood silent, while the farmers arranged themselves, kneeling behind me. Then slowly I advanced to the centre of the circle.

“The glory of the setting sun was reflected on my embroidered robes, and the fields shimmered below me in a great ocean of crimson

crimson and gold. It was perfectly still. I raised my hands and looked into the fading glory in the West. And somehow the pain came back again, the longing and the agony, the sickness and the despair of soul. Raising my hands high in the air, with the kneeling peasants behind me, and the light of the dying sun reflected on my holy robes, I stood aloft, and I cursed the happy fields! I cursed their light and their planting, I cursed their content and their joy, I cursed the seed from which they had sprung, and I cursed their glory and their fruition. I cursed the light of the sun when it rose upon them in the morning, and I cursed the light of the sun when it shone upon them, when the dusk came. I cursed their sowing and their harvest, I cursed their stalks and their bearded heads. I cursed their growing and their increase, I cursed them through the dark hours of the night. I stood there tall in my holy robes, and I cursed the corn ear by ear!

"The sunset glowed and gathered in the West, and faded away, and I stood there tall in the twilight, cursing.

"Well, the farmers pulled me down at last, and carried me away through the fields. I do not remember how I came here. Only something of a rumbling waggon, and a wild creature who lay still on the straw in the bottom.

"That is all."

The old man ceased speaking, and his head sunk on his breast; then with a slight sigh he took up the child's toy he was making, and worked on it with his white old hands, looking ever out through the gate-way over the village.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"Her children," he answered. Then holding up the small wooden cart, nearly finished, "I am afraid they do not like them much, they are badly finished," he said smiling, "I never see them play with them before the other children."