

The Santa Claus of Loneliness

Christmas at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky

by
Bill Long

The late sixties. Christmas week in New York. Unable to get back to Ireland for the holiday, I was alone in the loneliest city in the world; perfect fodder for the Irish 'party machine.'

But a week of eating, drinking, carousing, listening to interminable, raucous renderings of Galway Bay and Danny Boy, filled me with near-panic. The prospect of the smog-filled streets and the smoke-filled bars, and the tiny apartments overflowing with inebriated expatriates, maudlin and lost in their homesickness, made me look for an alternative.

I rang my friend Thomas Merton, Father Louis, at the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, and asked if I might spend Christmas there. His voice was clear and unequivocal across the hundreds of miles of frost-bound America. 'Of course. Come right on down. Long as you appreciate, see, that a Cistercian monastery is not the most lively of places at Christmas. Far as I know we have only one other guest, see.'

It reassured me to hear the quick, almost staccato, no nonsense voice, interspersing his speech with that little nervous 'see'. Even as I began to assure him that such peace was exactly what I wanted, I was visualising the Guest House parlour with its great log fire. I asked about the Kentucky weather. 'We had a big fall of snow two nights back, see. From where I'm sitting here at the phone I can see the "knobs" out back of the sawmill. Snow's all drifted against them. Funny sculpted effect, see. We've never had snow when you've been here, have we?'

But, before I could answer his question, his infectious enthusiasm had taken over, and he was off on a detailed instruction on how to get there. 'Airport's closed, see. So, come down by rail. Overnight in Cincinnati. You'll love the Ohio countryside, see.'

He didn't mention it on the phone, but that was the route he had once taken himself, when he first visited Gethsemani, seeking an antidote to the hedonism of New York. For him the antidote was to be permanent; for me it could only be temporary.

Two days later, on 22 December, I left New York for Kentucky, to spend Christmas with the Cistercians. I went by train, in the very early morning, from Grand Central station. Driving across town the sad, deserted streets were bandaged in a thick fog; but even the fog could not hide the ugliness of the glass and concrete canyons.

As we cleared the suburbs I could discern the vague bulk of low hills in the pale light. The Ohio countryside was as lovely as Fr Louis had said. In northern Ohio the snow had only just begun to thaw and deep drifts still piled, great white gashes, in the lee of the long, brown, rolling hills. And I began to fear, with an inordinate childish fear, that the Kentucky snow would have thawed before I got there. However, leaving the train at Cincinnati, where, as Father Louis had suggested, I over-nighted, these fears were allayed. I met a man going north for Christmas, who told me all of southern Ohio, right into Kentucky, was still under snow.

Late in the evening of the second day I reached Gethsemani. Daylight had already gone when I left the train at Bardstown Junction and took a taxi to the monastery. A Christmas moon lit the Kentucky countryside. It touched the drifted snow with an ethereal, bluish light, and I thought of a beautiful line from Dylan Thomas, 'Wanton in moonlight, as a dust of pigeons.'

The monks were all in choir when I arrived, singing the last office of the day, Compline. After paying-off my taxi I stood on the moon-drenched snow and watched the warm light spilling from the church windows. It fell in a series of long, yellow bars across the blue-white snow. The sonorous plainchant ceased, and standing in the silence under the great vault of the Kentucky sky, I listened to the thin wind polishing the moon and bright stars. Father Louis' lines, from his poem *Advent*, came to mind:

And intellects are quieter
Than the flocks that feed by starlight . . .
O white, full moon as quiet as Bethlehem.

I was wakened at four o'clock next morning, Christmas Eve, by the great bell of Gethsemani, calling the monks from sleep for the first Office of the day, and all the early Masses. Stumbling down the dark corridor toward the church, I could hear the click of a typewriter in one of the guest-rooms. My fellow-guest, I thought, must be a writer.

That first Office, 'The Night Office' as the Cistercians call it, is one of the most moving moments of the whole Cistercian day. Heightened by the time of day, the dawn breaking on the windows, the birdsong, Merton found the time immediately afterwards a fine time in which to write. In *Elected Silence* he wrote: 'After prayer your mind is saturated with peace and the richness of the liturgy. Whole blocks of imagery seem to crystallise out, as it were, naturally, in the silence and the peace. The lines almost write themselves.'

Lines like the wonderful lines from his poem, *After the Night Office* . . .

We do not see the brothers bearing lanterns
Sink in the quiet mist, as various as the spirits
Who, with lamps, are sent to search
Our souls' Jerusalems . . .

Round about mid-morning, on Christmas Eve, Father Louis and I went for a walk through the woods; he wanted me to see his 'hermitage.' As we walked the slightest touch sent little avalanches of powdered snow cascading from the branches of the trees. Father Louis' white, woollen habit looked a shade of cream against the stark white of the snow. From previous visits I knew he liked to 'sound-off' a bit about James Joyce, so I broached the subject by asking if he'd been reading any Joyce since my last visit. *The Dead*, he answered enthusiastically. 'Been trying to read that, see. But it's a curious story. The writing's so good, see, but the story is so damned dull. And that

speech at the party. That's pure corn, see. The end, I suppose, was kind of pretty, I suppose. So, maybe instead of writing a story, see, Joyce should have written a poem. About the snow falling endlessly through the universe, see. I dunno!'

I smiled to myself. His answer proved two things. Father knew his Joyce, and if you didn't want an honest opinion then you shouldn't ever ask him a question. We had reached the little flat-roofed chalet that was his 'hermitage' now. Before going inside we had to kick our boots against the step to knock off the accumulated snow. And we brushed the powdered snow that had fallen from the trees off our shoulders. Father Louis flashed me one of his mischievous, enigmatic smiles and asked me an enigmatic question, to which he knew there was no answer. 'Tell me, Bill, are there still Irish people who think that Shakespeare was a man named O'Neill?'

Before lunch Father Louis introduced me to my fellow-guest; the one I had heard writing in his room that morning. He was indeed a writer; Erskine Caldwell, author of *Tobacco Road*, *God's Little Acre* and *A Lamp for Nightfall*. A Pulitzer Prize winner, he was a simple, affable man, who insisted I call him 'Skinny'. 'Damn sight easier to get your tongue round than Erskine!' he said.

'Skinny' and I got on well. After lunch we went for a long walk across the snow-covered fields in the direction of New Haven. He assured me he had not come to Gethsemani out of some deep spiritual conviction or need. He had come to visit Charlie, an old friend who had worked with him once on the *Atlanta Journal*. Charlie had, some years back, 'got religion', and ended up in Gethsemani as Brother Andrew. The old writer liked to visit him twice a year, and also enjoyed the stimulus of Father Louis' company for a few days. And, he confided, the place helped him forget his loneliness and insomnia for a while.

As we came back, following the footprints from our outward journey, the light had begun to fade, and the monastery buildings bulked huge across the snow-fields. Our warm breath hung, half-frozen, in the below-zero air. The Vesper bell was ringing and monks

were coming in from their various work-places, converging on the church.

I remembered a few lines from another Merton poem, *Evening: Zero Weather*, and recited them aloud for 'Skinny' as we walked.

When all the monks come in with eyes as clear
As the cold sky, and axes under their arms,
Still paying out Ave Marias,
With rosaries between their bleeding fingers.
Clean and whipped, to wait upon your Vespers,
Mother of God!

After Vespers 'Skinny' Caldwell and I sat at the big log fire in the Guest House parlour. We were silent for a long while, watching the flames flicker and flare and die again; each of us with his own thoughts, his own loneliness. 'Skinny' was first to break the silence. 'Ye know, I'm just gettin' over my third divorce,' he said, taking a log from the basket and throwing on the fire. A shower of sparks flew upward. He continued, sadly, 'Lonely business, divorce.'

Just then Father Louis came into the room, and sensing our mood, said: 'Say, what's all this about loneliness, see. Don't talk to me about loneliness. I know all about it. Sometimes, see, I think I'm some kind of Santa Claus of loneliness.'

'That may be,' Skinny said, 'but you've got all this peace and solitude of Gethsemani round you, Father Louis. That must help. Now out there in the world, is very different . . .'

Father Louis, who had been looking out the window, turned slowly to us now, and there were tears in his eyes. His voice was soft, less staccato, as he said: 'But, surely solitude is not something outside you. Not an absence of men or sound, see. Isn't it really a kind of abyss opening up at the centre of your own soul? And the only way I know to find that kind of solitude, see, is by hunger and thirst and sorrow and loneliness. The man who has found such solitude is really empty, see. He has advanced beyond all horizons. There are no

directions left in which he can travel, see. For this is a country whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere. You don't find it by travelling, see, but by standing still.'

We were, all three of us, silent after that for a long time, listening to the fire crackle and the resin hissing, and the thin wind rattling the shutters; each lost in his own separate country of standing still.

Late that night, Christmas night, alone in my room, I stood by the window, looking out at the bright, starred sky, and undulating Kentucky 'knobs', luminous under the moon. The great, sleeping monastery was silent, an island in a sea of snow. There was no movement, no sound. Only, on the virgin snow of the Guest House garden, some small animal in passing, a fox or badger, had left a line of tracks. I thought of 'Skinny' Caldwell, down the corridor, alone with his loneliness and insomnia. And I thought of Father Louis at the far end of the monastery; alone too, and as his friend Daniel Berrigan had said of him, ' . . . Crazed with caring about the human condition.' Before falling asleep, I whispered a few lines of his to the close and holy darkness:

November analysed our bankruptcies, but now
His observations lie knee-deep beneath our
Christmas mercies; while folded in the buried seed,
The virtual Summer lives and sleeps . . .

That was Thomas Merton's last Christmas at Gethsemani, and the last time I was to see him. He died the following year. 'Skinny' Caldwell too, is now dead. He died in 1987.

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