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ROBERT HUGH BENSON:
CAPTAIN IN GOD'S ARMY

Lafayette

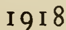
R. H. B.

Robert Hugh Benson: Captain in God's Army

BY

REGINALD J. J. WATT

BURNS & OATES LIMITED
28 ORCHARD STREET
LONDON, W. 1
1918



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TO

ALFRED BRUCE DOUGLAS

WHOSE FRIENDSHIP I VALUE

AS A RICH LEGACY FROM

ROBERT HUGH BENSON

PREFACE

There was much in the life of Robert Hugh Benson that is neither recorded nor hinted at in this book. It is not, and is not meant to be, a biography; it is merely a book of reminiscences, and consequently I make no apology for any omissions.

I have hardly mentioned his family relations, always most affectionate, because I do not know enough about them, and if that be not sufficient reason, because the ground has been covered adequately and most admirably by Mr. A. C. Benson and Father Martindale; there is no reason why I should attempt to do their work over again.

This book was begun with no intention of publication, and it has been written in the strange places and varied circumstances inseparable from the life of an Army Chaplain.

I thank many for the encouragement they have given me, and a few for the patience with which they have listened to the reading of the MS.

I thank also Monsieur Lafayette for the use of his photograph of Monsignor Benson, and two amateur photographers for the other illustrations.

Reginald J. J. Watt.

Aldershot.

February 2nd, 1918.

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INTRODUCTORY

This book is a setting down of my own reminiscences of Monsignor Benson, reminiscences of two years spent with him, and those the last two years of his life, during which we lived together in Hare Street House.

Except for occasional visitors we were alone during that period, and I do not think it can be doubted that they were the two fullest years he lived. Never before had he been so much in demand as a preacher, a novelist, or a journalist; never before had his engagement books been so full; he had become a "power" and was known throughout the world for what he was—a prominent and enthusiastic Catholic priest with a number of well-used talents. It would be unfair to judge him by any one of them, because it is only in their inter-relation that we see the man as he was. There have been greater novelists, more eloquent preachers, and better journalists; but Hugh Benson was all three, and in his versatility lies his bigness.

During those two years we lived the same life; he told me of his work, he was full of it himself and consequently interested everyone to whom

he spoke of it. It was a big world-wide work, but its bigness never interfered with the real and valuable interest he took in my small parochial affairs. I would meet him sometimes on a Monday when he returned from his week-end preaching expeditions, and as we went home from the station—he in his dogcart, or, later, after the death of his horse " Peter," in a queer little hired conveyance known to us as the " pill-box," and I riding alongside on my bicycle—always he asked the same questions : " Well, how did things go yesterday ? " " Were the congregations good ? " " Was it fine enough to have your evening service in the garden ? " " Did your sermon go well ? " "Anybody else under instruction ?" " Has So-and-So come up to the scratch yet ? " And it was not until he had found out all about the parish that he would tell of his own doings : whether he had really "got going" in his sermons, whether the congregations had been responsive —there was never any question as to their size. Then : " I suppose there are thousands of letters ? Well, they'll have to wait 'till after tea; I must carve some more panels this afternoon." Or: " I'm longing to get into the garden."

We lived together, we served each other's Masses, we had our meals together, we played games together, we shot together ; he read his books and articles to me as he wrote them, and usually accused me of sleeping whilst he read. From time to time we differed, sometimes quite

violently, always about things that did not really matter ; we played tricks on each other.

Altogether it was, at any rate for me, a very happy and extremely valuable time ; perhaps not appreciated at its full value while it lasted ; and it is because of that time, and at the instance of many of my most valued friends whose friendship I owe to R.H.B., and a few who owed his friendship to me, that I have undertaken the pleasant task of writing this, and risked the charge of inflicting another Benson book upon the public.

With that I will proceed to write of Robert Hugh Benson, the memoirs of a friend.

PART I

IN TRAINING (R.H.B. THE MAN)

Robert Hugh Benson : Captain in God's Army

CHAPTER I

BARRACKS

I HAVE called this book *Robert Hugh Benson : Captain in God's Army*, and the chapter headings throughout are of a military character; the reason for that is that in all his work—preaching, writing, lecturing, or whatever it may have been, Hugh Benson was always essentially a soldier, and a soldier of the old fire-eating, "longing-for-a-fight" variety. The whole world was his battle-field; every non-Catholic either a foe to be fought and conquered, or a neutral to be won over at once lest the enemy got hold of him; every indifferent or "back-sliding" Catholic was a spy or a "slacker" and a source of danger to his Army. He was a great soldier, and no mean diplomatist. In dealing with the enemy or with his own slack soldiers, he could be, and was quite frequently, stern and commanding, but as often he was persuasive and wheedling, and it would be hard to say in which he was most successful.

Thousands became interested in, and hundreds converted to, Catholicism by his sermons; those

terrific onslaughts upon the Church in which he had been brought up and to the ministry of which he had been ordained; but it was not so much a hatred of Protestantism itself as a great love for "the poor misguided Protestants" that made his attacks so bitter; his one idea was to "show up" Protestantism, to let Protestants see where and how far they were wrong. His one object was that all Anglicans should come to realize what he had realized, should see what he saw, and should enjoy what he enjoyed. One of his greatest sorrows was that he was not allowed to visit his old community at Mirfield after his reception into the Church. On one occasion, when a member of that community wrote and reminded him that he had been one of those who had most strongly advocated a rule to prevent members who might "secede to Rome" visiting Mirfield, he said: "What a fool I must have been! You can't have any idea what splendid people they are, their rule is ideal, and their spirit is grand. I'd re-join them to-morrow if they would only be sensible and come into the Church—they will some day." He retained that affection and esteem for Mirfield all through; and it took a very practical form, for whenever a cheque for royalties on his books came in to him, he always forwarded the amount he received for *The Light Invisible* to the Bursar at Mirfield. He explained that he published the book while a member of the community, and it was a rule that the income

derived from members' books should go to the House.

But just as his fighting qualities—hard and clean, asking no quarter and giving none—had a very far-reaching effect, so, too, had his quieter ones. He could be wonderfully patient, and had a very soothing effect on those who were suffering from hurt pride, who imagined they had, or in some cases quite certainly had, been offended by a priest, and who had decided to stay away from church altogether "just to show him——." They would come to Benson and open the flood-gates of eloquence.

"Oh, Father! You couldn't believe what I've had to put up with. I couldn't tell you or any-body else what Father So-and-So said to me. Just listen to this——"

And he, poor man, would listen, let them blow off steam, and by judicious nursing get them back into a more normal frame of mind and bring them to a proper realization of their own duties, of the absurdity of the position they had taken up, heal those wounded feelings, and reinstate them as valuable soldiers once more.

And always he had before him the fact that the whole population of the world were either soldiers or potential soldiers in the great army of God; and that he was an officer therein, that as such it was his work to understand them, to be often a stern disciplinarian, always a true friend.

Every soldier spends a very considerable part

of his military career in training, not only when he first joins up, but even as an experienced soldier. On Active Service there are periods spent in what are, oddly enough, called "Rest Billets," during which the soldier is kept fit by Barrack Square work; there are again those periods when the wounded or invalided soldier, having been fortunate, or perhaps one ought to say unfortunate, enough to pass his Medical Board, is kept in training to "tune him up" before he joins his comrades "in the line" again. To these training periods we can liken the time spent at home by Hugh Benson.

"Home" was Hare Street House, in the little Hertfordshire village of Hare Street on the Ware-to-Cambridge road which goes through Barkway. The house is about twenty miles south of Cambridge, about two miles east of the nearest railway station at Buntingford, and about nine miles due west of the nearest market-town, Bishop Stortford, on the Hertfordshire and Essex borders.

If the reader really wants to know all about the situation of Hare Street House, he cannot do better than read Father Benson's own book, *Oddsfish*; there he describes it in detail, omitting hardly anything, and even introducing some of his own improvements. The paving stones surrounding the house and extending from the front door to "the finest little gate for ten miles round" were put there in the year 1913, and gave their owner the greatest joy; some of them

"THE FINEST LITTLE GATE FOR TEN MILES ROUND."

had come from the House of Commons. "Just think of it—every one of them hallowed by the feet of Lloyd George" (Mr. George was not so popular then as he is now), he would say when showing his visitors the latest improvements.

It is believed locally that there has been a house on the site of Hare Street House for over 600 years. The present building was originally probably rather a large farmhouse built entirely of timber and plaster, until some owner, more pretentious than those who had gone before, enriched it with a red-brick façade; a lawn runs across the front and round the south side, cut off from the road and a neighbouring cottage by an oak paling and a belt of beautiful lime trees. It was a real sorrow to Father Benson when the county authorities compelled him to cut the upper branches of those limes that overhung the road; they were deemed to be dangerous in storms, and I believe that a top branch had fallen and damaged the telegraph wires; but though he cut those that bordered on the road, when someone suggested that the others should be cut also to get a more symmetrical effect he refused. "Never, never, never, so long as the house is mine—unless they compel me." He held very strong views about cutting trees, and still stronger ones on what he called "mutilating animals." When I asked him, with reference to his Irish terrier "Jack," "Why didn't you have his ears and tail cut?" he gave me the full benefit of those views.

"Why should I? If God had intended Jack to have an absurd little stumpy tail and floppy ears, they would have grown that way; as a matter of fact Jack's tail is long and his ears are pointed, and that is obviously as God intended they should be; and it's no business of mine or anybody else's to interfere with the Almighty's plans."

And thus was Jack immortalized on the tapestry in the parlour, and thus odd-looking but lovable he went to his grave, and R.H.B. lost a dear and devoted friend.

At the south-eastern corner of the house at the edge of the lawn grew the yew trees under which, in fine weather, we had all our meals.

The chapel is behind the house, but connected with it by means of a little cloister, paved with cobble stones, which skirts two sides of a little grass court.

The entrance drive comes up to the house on the north side, passing, from the main road, through wrought iron gates, in which are fashioned the sacred hearts of Jesus and Mary, the gates themselves being surmounted by a priest's hat with tassels. To reach the front door from the drive you must pass through a low ivy-covered door which opens on to the flag-stoned pavement.

Inside, the house is exactly as is described in *Oddsfish*. On the left of the entrance passage is the dining-room, and on the right the library, with a French window opening on to the lawn.

The dining-room "was hung with green, with panels of another colour upon it"; these hangings had been in his room when he was in Cambridge, and had evidently annoyed some good lady, who at once spread a report that "Father Benson had his rooms hung with Gobelins tapestry." As a matter of fact they are made of canvas and only cost a few shillings. The furniture was very plain, the most noteworthy thing being the fireplace of carved oak.

"Isn't that a gorgeous fireplace?" Father Benson asked the first time I dined with him.

I agreed, and admired it.

"Cost just ten shillings," he said with glee, and then went on to explain how his manservant, Reeman, had bought the old oak out of a cottage that was being pulled down, and among it they had found a carved piece, and had at once set to work to carve another like it, and had then built up the fireplace themselves.

The library is the largest room in the house, and was very little used. All the walls were covered with crowded bookshelves, for he had a great number of books of all sorts; in the centre stood an old oak refectory table, and there were two writing desks, a large chesterfield, and some chairs. In one corner was an old and very dilapidated organ, bought for five shillings in a local publichouse, which he declared he was going to repair some day; it was eventually relegated to the attics and its place taken by a slightly less venerable

and not quite so dilapidated harmonium, which we were accustomed to drag out on to the lawn for our open-air services; the only other use it was put to was when occasionally we would go into the library after dinner with the avowed intention of finding some new hymn tunes. What usually happened was that R.H.B. began to play the *Vicar of Bray*; he would play for a while, then:

"W-Watt, come and sing about Pudding-time—I love that verse."

Then I would start, and whatever guests were present would soon join in, R.H.B. singing lustily while he played "with different harmonies every time," and we would go on singing *The Vicar of Bray* till all were hoarse, when we would adjourn, usually to Miss Lyall's house at the end of the garden, for coffee.

The harmonium in turn gave place to a beautiful Bechstein baby grand; he had long wanted a piano—"I had one once, but I had a row with the person who gave it me, so I sent it back"—and his baby grand gave him much joy in the last months of his life.

In the entrance passage were hung a number of oil paintings, prominent among them being a very large, almost if not quite life-size, portrait of himself in his monsignor's robes, the work of his friend Miss Lyall just mentioned above; there were a number of others, among them a boy's face by Herkomer, and also several of his own earliest efforts.

At the end of the passage was another bargain, a grandfather clock ; of course it did not go, except very occasionally, and then only for a very short time, but it had a beautiful face, and if you remarked its obvious faults R.H.B. would simply say :

" Well, in a house like this you ought to have a grandfather clock."

On the ground floor was also the little parlour, where Father Benson wrote, seated at an old oak refectory table. It was a tiny but very charming room, hung with appliqué tapestry, representing the Quest of the Holy Grail. The ordinary characters are depicted and in addition an Archbishop, Benson himself in his monsignorial robes and mounted on his horse Peter, and Dr. Sessions also mounted on a prancing charger. I remember remarking by way of criticism :

" If the Doctor doesn't pull his heels back, he'll slip over that horse's tail."

" Yes," answered R.H.B. " But it's true to life—he probably would."

On foot behind the Doctor was Mr. Gabriel Pippet as an artist, followed by Father Benson's manservant Reeman as an artisan, and the gardener Turner in his customary avocation ; the little terrier Jack was also there. Benson was very proud of this tapestry, and justifiably so, for it was very beautiful, and " no woman ever put a stitch in it." It was almost entirely the work of the Monsignor and his two friends, Dr. Sessions and Mr. Pippet.

The doorway of the room had presented a difficulty in the tapestry, but it was overcome by putting a bridge over it; and the chapel of the Grail, with the rosy red Grail glowing under its canopy, was over the big open fireplace.

He loved that little room, and was never so happy as when he was in it. It used to be referred to by all sorts of names, sitting-room, study, and the like, but R.H.B. had one name, and only one for it.

"I wish to goodness everybody would call the parlour, the Parlour—it is a parlour, and that's what I want it to be called."

At the bottom of the staircase was a door leading out into the little back hall, and over this was the Priest's hiding hole, designed and executed with great care by Robert Hugh Benson himself in the year 1913; it delighted him, and his imagination weaved all sorts of stories round it.

"Isn't it splendid!" he said. "We could both get into it."

"As many as you like could get into it, but they wouldn't stay there long," said I, looking at the floor of the hole, which was merely the lath and plaster of the hall ceiling. When he grasped my meaning he closed his lips tightly, then snapped:

"I'll tell you what's the matter with you—you've got no imagination."

In the panelling of the staircase he did some charming work, carving the instruments of the Passion, his family arms, various monograms, etc.;

and as nearly all the oak was very old it looked almost genuinely antique. I remember him bringing me out to look at it as soon as it was quite complete. We stood and admired it for some minutes ; then he turned to me, with his quizzical expression.

" I wonder how long I'll be dead before somebody whitewashes it all—to make it look bright and cheerful."

He had a statue ; we were always in doubt as to its identity ; I suggested that it would look well on the pillar half-way up the staircase. I always referred to the statue as " Queen Bess."

" I think Queen Bess would look well there," I said.

" Yes " he said, " I think that's a good idea—but if she does go up she's got to be Our Lady."

Immediately at the head of the staircase is the haunted room. It is the smallest of the bedrooms on the first floor and has a southerly aspect, and is directly above the little parlour. It was rather a pleasant little room, the walls being adorned for the most part with water-colour drawings, many of them the work of Father Benson's sister ; but of course the most interesting thing about the room is its ghost. There are several stories about it, and on the whole it seemed to be a rather nice sort of ghost to have about the place, and in no sense of the word terrifying.

A friend of Benson's, who has attained a certain amount of fame as a portrait artist and as a boxer,

tells how he experienced the ghost one night. It apparently entered the room rattling the rather loose door handle and approached the bed on which he was lying; it gave him the impression of being a tall old woman, and she bent over him and said, either "Who are you?" or "Is that you?" Though he felt no fear at all, it never entered his mind to speak. R.H.B. was once telling this story to a number of people among whom was a man who often stayed at Hare Street House; this was the first time he had heard of the ghost, but it seemed to him to explain something that had occurred on an occasion when he happened to be alone, with the exception of the maids, in the house. He was in the large bedroom over the library and next door to the Ghost-room. About two o'clock one morning, being unable to sleep, he sat up in bed, and was reading and annotating a book; he declares he was very much awake. He distinctly heard a step coming upstairs, and then the door handle of the room next door rattle. He took no notice, however, until several minutes later it dawned upon him that he was alone in a friend's house, and that people did not usually wander about in the middle of the night; immediately he thought of burglars, and jumping out of bed went into the next room and then downstairs, but found nothing. The following morning he asked the maids, who slept in the attics, if either of them had been going round the house during the night; they both said they had

not; so he let the matter drop, and it never entered his mind again until he heard the Monsignor telling the ghost story. R.H.B. firmly believed that this was another ghostly manifestation. Some months later this friend was down at Hare Street again, and we were out shooting. We had arranged to lunch at home, and as he wanted to write some letters he left the party before the last drive and went on ahead to the house. He was washing his hands when he heard footsteps on the stairs; he at once recognized them as being the same as he had heard on the previous occasion. He went to his door, and though he distinctly heard the footsteps ascending the stairs immediately in front of him, and also heard the door handle rattle, he saw nothing, and the door of the Ghost-room did not open.

Of course his experience was the only topic of conversation at lunch, and what struck R.H.B. most was the fact of his remembering the sound of the footsteps; he said it had been quite a distinct sound; so after lunch R.H.B. had us all marching up and down stairs, in shooting boots, and ordinary boots, without boots, in slippers, and with bare feet, but nobody could produce a satisfactory noise.

A few days later one of the floorboards gave way on the landing at the top of the stairs, and when Reeman removed it for the necessary repairs he discovered an oak board underneath; this naturally led to investigations, and we discovered

that the whole of the top flight of the lower staircase was of solid oak covered over with cheap deal boards. These were very quickly removed ; and afterwards the stairs of the lower flight, which were straightforward deal and concealing nothing more valuable, were covered with oak boards so that we should have a complete oak staircase. As might be expected in a ghost story, the difficulty of reproducing the noise of the ghost's footsteps disappeared when the oak staircase was uncovered.

It is not for me to say whether I believe in the ghost or not ; but this I can say—Father Benson certainly believed in it. The story was never well known among the local people at Hare Street, and R.H.B. did not want it talked about.

" Don't for goodness' sake breathe a word about that ghost," he would say. " If the servants get to hear of it they'll leave at once ; and they're much too valuable to lose."

Though the Ghost-room was a guest chamber, and some may consider a rather gruesome one, it was not the principal guest chamber, nor yet the most gruesome. A very important guest would be put in the " Dance of Death " room where, surrounded by all sorts of people tapestried in conversation with Death, and lying on a high four-poster bed (" Isn't it like an enormous catafalque ? " R.H.B. would say on showing his guests their room), he could do his best to enjoy his night's rest ! It was bound to be a conflict between

nerves and the beautiful Hertfordshire air, and the Hertfordshire air usually won.

Though it was very good, R.H.B. himself never liked the Dance of Death tapestry as well as that of the Holy Grail; there was a sameness about the figures that did not please him—it was all too symmetrical. The idea had been to depict a procession of people of every conceivable class, each one accompanied by a figure of Death, the procession being led by Death. The classes depicted varied from a Pope to a woman of the streets and included a child, a burglar, an old man, a young man, and even the Monsignor himself, who walked in heated argument with the grim spectre just in front of a bier on which Death was borne by other Deaths more gruesome than himself. The group around the bier is very fine, and in R.H.B.'s opinion saved the Dance of Death from mediocrity.

Next door to this room was Father Benson's bedroom, a big room over the dining-room, decorated with panelling he had done himself with the aid of Reeman. A small secret chamber with a sliding door had been contrived by the head of the bed. The bed was an ordinary little Tottenham Court Road affair, but he had turned it into a four-poster and hung it with blue Morris linings. The room was very empty, only a round writing-table and two or three chairs furnishing it. The floor was bare and of polished oak, with a few rugs, one of them a deerskin with all the

hair worn off. Everything in the room was old oak. His dressing-table was in a little cupboard, over the door of which was an ancient skull—pre-Christian, he declared.

Re-reading what I have written about his own bedroom and the Dance of Death room, I could understand a reader, who didn't know R.H.B., getting the impression that his mind was morbid. Now that would be a totally wrong impression, and not at all the one I want to give. He was not even remotely so ; his outlook on life was more cheerful, I think, than is usual ; but he always refused to put death and all that is connected with it in the background ; the thought of death to him was always salutary, but never saddening ; he never feared it, but ever kept before himself the fact that it was bound to come. There are those who will assert that such an attitude is bound to breed morbidity ; they might just as well say that a soldier cannot enjoy a few days' leave from the Front because he always has the prospect of the trenches before him ; or a schoolboy cannot enjoy his holidays because he knows he has to go back to school. To Hugh Benson, his life was real and enjoyable ; but he never forgot that its object was that he might fit himself for the hereafter.

HARE STREET HOUSE: R. H. B. AND THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER II

DRILL

In his house at Hare Street, far away from all the bustle of the world in which he played so big a part, R.H.B. lived his life as he loved to live it; he loved his house and all that was in it: it was his very own, and portrayed his character as few, if any, other houses portray the characters of their owners. He was tremendously keen on what he called "just the right environment."

"When you are going about a house, upstairs, and along passages, you want brightening up. I'm convinced that red is the right colour for stairs and passages, it's invigorating." And the walls of the passages, and the staircase, until it was panelled, were red.

And then about rooms.

"Well, when you're in a room, you want to settle down; you're there with an object, you mustn't be disturbed: brown's the only possible colour. You must have your surroundings right, it's the only way." And all the rooms were brown, except the tapestry rooms, and they had a brown groundwork.

And on the whole his colour scheme worked well, though it might have been carried out

better. The red-wash was glaring, and the brown parcel-paper horribly put on; but he didn't seem to mind. The colours alone affected him, and as they were satisfactory he was satisfied.

Apart altogether from his ordinary, or perhaps it would be better to say his recognized, work—I mean his novel writing, sermon preparation, correspondence and the like—his other works (he treated them rather as pleasant duties than as hobbies) would have quite adequately filled the life of a less industrious man without any fear of his getting a reputation for laziness; but R.H.B. was, to use his own pet expression, most "appallingly" industrious. It is said of a great saint that he never wasted a moment of time; I always found it difficult to believe until I came to know R.H.B. intimately, and without for a moment expressing the opinion, which I do not hold, that he was a very great saint (there is often a long distance between a very good man and a very great saint), I think I can safely say that during the two years I knew him he never wasted any time, he rarely had enough sleep, and almost invariably sat up too late working. When he was suffering very great pain shortly before his operation, I had on one occasion literally to carry him upstairs and put him to bed; he argued every inch of the way, and when I got him to his room, sitting on the side of his bed, he looked at me under his brows, and with teeth tightly shut said:

"Perhaps you'll leave me alone now."

"Not until you're undressed and into bed."

He was in great pain, and in no condition for a dispute, so slowly, and with a little assistance, mumbling all the while, he got undressed, and into bed, and as he wriggled down and made himself comfortable, with his old humorous sparkle in his eyes he looked up and shot at me as I turned out the light:

"Your behaviour's positively indecent."

He stayed in bed the following morning, and as I was helping him with his letters he turned to me with a tired sigh:

"I'm sure you were wise to make me come to bed last night, but you have got a nasty way of being nice."

He was always grateful afterwards for anything you did for him, or even for making him do things for his own good; but you often had a rough passage while you were doing it.

But though he never wasted time, he didn't keep his nose to the grindstone always. His activities were divided up into his ordinarily accepted work for which he was in considerable demand and for which, also, he was, as a general rule, highly remunerated; his works in which he indulged solely for his own pleasure, the reward he got from them consisting mainly in the fuller enjoyment of his house and garden; and his amusements, by which I mean games, sports and the like. Every moment of every day was full, and his changes of occupations served for him the

same purpose as rests and holidays do for others. He rarely felt the necessity of rest, but repeatedly felt a desire for some other sort of employment.

He seldom wrote in the afternoons, but whenever possible would get out into the open. He would change after lunch into an old pair of flannel trousers and a shirt he had had at Eton; and then, as often as not, he would go out to his gardener and ask for a job. He knew next to nothing about gardening, though he loved his garden, and would do anything his gardener told him, from weeding to apple-picking, with great thoroughness and pleasure; it would not have mattered so much his not knowing anything about gardening himself if his gardener had been a good one, but alas! Turner, the gardener, though an excellent and most reliable servant in every other way, and painstaking and hard-working to a degree, was not much good as a gardener. I knew even less about the business than R.H.B., and though we all did our best, and got plans for herbaceous borders from our friends, and tips about fruit-growing from our neighbours and read books and periodicals about it, and bought seeds and plants from the best possible seedsmen, our plans as our seeds were one and all unsuccessful. One day at dinner, after a heart-breaking afternoon amongst the weeds, he gazed sadly at the vegetable dish and shaking his head said:

"Here am I with the biggest garden in Hare Street, and I have to buy my cabbages!"

A guest once suggested that the difficulty might be got over by the engagement of another gardener, an obvious solution ; but there was one great difficulty, and that was quite insurmountable. Father Benson's servants were also his friends ; it is one thing to talk of getting a new gardener—when it means getting rid of a friend it is quite another matter. His reply was quite characteristic :

" Yes, it's true that Turner's not much good as a gardener, but he's a splendid and devoted servant, and such a nice chap ; I won't get anybody else for the garden until I get a better job for him, and then he needn't go unless he wants to."

It was not until the following November, when he was preaching in Edinburgh, that he found an ideal position for Turner, who became sacristan at St. Peter's, Morningside, a position for which he was admirably suited and which he filled to everybody's satisfaction.

One day R.H.B. was working in his garden, dressed as I have described, and wearing a pair of sandals that had been given to him in Rome, when Reeman came out to him :

" Monsignor," said Reeman, " the Bishop of —— has called to see you."

" Oh, all right ; I'll come "—then suddenly changing his mind : " No, ask him to come out here."

His Lordship did come out, and stayed in the garden until tea-time.

I was playing football with the village team at the time, and when I came home, as usual without troubling to change or even wash my hands, I walked into the parlour for tea, and there was the Monsignor in his gardening clothes entertaining the Bishop and his secretary.

"Will you have some more tea, my Lord?" said the host, and when he noticed the Bishop looking into his cup: "You might throw the slops out of the window, we haven't got a slop basin."

When the guests were gone, I turned on R.H.B.:

"Why the dickens didn't you get some one to tell me they were here—letting me come into tea with a Bishop like this!"

"Oh no! they caught me, and I was jolly well determined they were going to catch you too."

He loved playing that sort of trick, and still more reminding you of it afterwards.

He spent a holiday, I think it was in 1913, at Killarney with the Kenmares; his was the last name in the guest book when the house was burned down, and during the weeks he was there he had met Sir John Lavery and became greatly interested in his painting. He came back to Hare Street full of it; he had evidently watched the artist at work most carefully while he was painting a landscape of which a tennis-court and players were part.

"It was perfectly wonderful," he said; "just a little white paint and a twist of his brush and

there was a man playing tennis in the far corner—and it all looked so easy ; I'm sure I could paint."

There was a short pause while he helped himself to something else to eat—we were at lunch at the time—then :

" I wonder if Miss Lyall would lend me some things to paint with. I'll go over and ask her after lunch."

He did so, and at tea-time showed me his first picture. Of course it was bristling with faults, but he saw them himself, and had already made up his mind how to overcome them. He was delighted with his first attempt, and as excited about it as a child with a new toy.

" Jolly good, I call it. Never a lesson in my life. Now I'm going to paint everything all round. I'll go over and show this to Miss Lyall ; she'll be able to help me with one or two things, and I'll ask her to get the right painting things for me."

And then we walked out into the passage and looked at the paintings he had there. First we looked at the little face by Herkomer ; he loved that little picture, and as he looked at it and at his own landscape he closed his lips and pursed up his mouth and said :

" I think I'll stick to landscapes."

Then he turned his attention to two pictures he had by Miss Lyall : one a quite charming portrait of a mutual friend of theirs, and the other, not so good, of himself.

" You know Miss Lyall is jolly good, but she never knows when she's finished ; she will go finicking on—that's how she spoiled that picture of me ; and in the end I had to do the hand myself. Ha, ha ! me a painter ! "

And off he went to show his picture to Miss Lyall, and incidentally to get a deal of encouragement and some valuable help.

Then began the painting period. Every afternoon, with an easel and his new paints and brushes and other paraphernalia, he would march off to paint something ; he painted the neighbouring duck-pond, he painted his own chapel, he painted the two windmills on the hill behind the house, he painted Miss Lyall's balcony from his garden, he painted his garden from Miss Lyall's balcony ; and each picture pleased him more than the last, and his progress was obviously quite wonderful.

" Just look at them ! " he said, pointing to a whole row of his little canvases. " Averaging more than one a day ! No R.A. could do that."

He gave away quite a number of his pictures, and he was then in doubt as to what to do with the rest.

" Why not stick them up in the passage ? " I suggested.

" Are they good enough ? " He hesitated ; then : " Yes, I will. Now, what about frames ? "

That question had to be discussed with Reeman, and that night he announced that he was going to make the frames himself. He got all the necessary

materials, and succeeded in making one or two, but soon realized that the results did not repay him for his labour, and gave it up.

As with painting so also with music; he had a definite talent for music, which was very much encouraged by his friend Mr. Frank Liebich, from whom he always intended to get some lessons, and who helped him considerably when he was buying his piano; he would have helped him even more if R.H.B. had been more attentive to what he said. He asked Mr. Liebich what sort of a piano he should get, and Mr. Liebich recommended a Blüthner, and it was decided that R.H.B. should go to the shop and choose a number of instruments from which Mr. Liebich was to pick out the most suitable; and this was carried out to the letter except for one small error—the Monsignor went to the Bechstein shop instead of to the Blüthner.

"I was certain you said Bechstein," he declared. "Never mind; it's a charming piano, and I'm going to have such a good time."

I went to him for help one day. I was very keen on congregational singing in church, but had difficulties, as most of the music I had was too high for the people. The organist had excellent intentions but faulty execution, and she point-blank refused even to attempt to transpose; perhaps she was wise, but even so it was not much of a help to me. So one night, at dinner, I placed my difficulty before Father Benson.

"The trouble is," I said, "that I haven't got a single litany that anyone can sing; they're all so high, and Mrs. H—— can't transpose."

"Ooh! can't she? Never mind, I'll transpose 'em. You sing 'em in the key you want, I'll play 'em, and it won't take us long to get them on to paper."

And so it came about, and practically all the music we had was transposed and harmonized by the Monsignor; and not only that, one day when we had finished the transpositions we had set ourselves to do, he suddenly wheeled round on his chair:

"Let's have a brand new litany of our very own."

And then and there he set to and composed a new litany, and very popular it proved. We used it in church more often than any other, and I always arranged on the few Sundays that he was able to spend at Hare Street, when he would play for our evening services, that his litany should be sung. And the little thought was well repaid by the pleasure he got out of it, as he rocked on the chair at the little American organ, the gift of Mr. George Grossmith, Jun., and played his own litany with his own variations, with all the abandon of a world-famed musician, and almost as much noise as a cathedral organ.

His wood-carving, too, was a great pleasure to him; nothing was too great for him to attempt.

"If I can't do it properly, at any rate I can

get the right effect, and that's good enough for me."

He carved, as I have mentioned, the panels on the staircase, and, I believe, aided by Mr. Pippet (perhaps it ought to be put the other way round), started to carve the Stations of the Cross. He never got very far with them ; but in one afternoon he and Dr. Sessions carved the figure for the Rood in the Chapel.

" It's just as well that it is so dark that you can't see it," he said.

He made wine too, on highly scientific principles, and with fair success. He was not much of a judge of wine, and its intoxicating power alone appealed to him. You knew he was satisfied with the wine he had made if he said :

" Yes, a man could get drunk on that all right."

But if the wine he made himself was not very good, it was far better than some that he had bought and had sent in an enormous keg from Spain or Portugal or some country where you are supposed to get wonderful wine for next to nothing. I only tasted it once, and after we had been living together for about six months and were well enough acquainted to say quite brutally what we meant, it suddenly dawned upon him that on the odd occasions we had this strange red wine for meals I never took any.

" Don't you like this wine ? " he asked.

" I can't say I do."

"Oh, it's wonderful value. Did I ever tell you what I paid for it?"

"No, but I bet you were swindled."

"Another word and I'll tell you exactly what I think of that beastly whisky you gave me last night."

And that was the only time he condescended to discuss his cellar with me. It was a poor man's cellar—the famous home-made wine, the infamous red concoction, and about half a dozen bottles of Altar wine constituted its entire stock.

I think with the mention of his tapestry-making, I will have discussed all his less-known occupations. He was extremely and justifiably proud of his tapestries; they were wonderfully effective and very well carried out. He got the idea from a book, by his one-time friend who wrote under the pseudonym of F. Baron Corvo, entitled *In His Own Image*, a book he was never tired of reading, and the author of which had stirred up a very great affection in the heart of R.H.B., but who afterwards kept up, from the farthest ends of the earth, an intermittent fire of insulting postcards. In spite of this, R.H.B.'s deep-rooted affection still lingered. On his reception of the very last of these postcards, sent only a few days before Corvo's death, he said: "The man's a genius, and I love him. If he'll only apologize I'll ask him to come and live with me; he's quite destitute now, but he is welcome to everything I've got."

In one of the stories in *In His Own Image*, Corvo describes the making of appliqué tapestry—St. Gabriel it is who describes it to an ordinary mortal whom he wants to reproduce his portrait. It sounds ingenious but unpractical; but R.H.B. adapted it, and his tapestries are the result.

They were made almost entirely by Dr. Sessions, Mr. Pippet and R.H.B. all working together, either talking as if they all had colds in the head—a great trick of the Monsignor's, and one from which he got any amount of amusement—or listening to dialect stories told by Mr. Pippet. R.H.B. had a way of starting irresponsible and even stupid small talk, which viewed calmly and from a distance seems almost childish; the extraordinary thing was that the personality of the man was such that even the most elderly and prosaic not only joined in, but thoroughly enjoyed it.

In reviewing R.H.B.'s hobbies, one is struck, not so much by the excellence with which he did things that are to others a profession and were to him a pastime, because he never had enough time to do any of them excellently, but by the versatility of the man and his courage. Nothing daunted him; he had two great dicta: "If you want anything enough you'll get it," and "If you really want to do a thing you can do it." However strange and untrue they may seem to some, in his case they certainly worked. He was always the same yet always different, he was never on two occasions exactly alike because there was always

something new about him. He was constantly adding to the fund of information in his brain, and a thing once there was never forgotten, and he was always learning to do something new with his hands, and as he conquered each new thing it was placed away in the storehouse of his memory and when occasion demanded would be brought out again as adequate as when it was put away. He knew he could do things, and this bred a certain confidence ; but it was not only self-confidence, but confidence in others too. He never realized that he was exceptional ; he never thought that others could not do things, but just that they did not want to. Versatile far more than brilliant himself, no power on earth could convince him that nearly everybody else was not equally so.

CHAPTER III

OFF DUTY

As I have said in the previous chapter, Hugh Benson was very much occupied; but, though it sounds paradoxical, it is quite certain that the more you do, the more you have time for, and whereas a private individual with very few calls upon his time can easily convince himself and others that he has no time for anything, can in fact assume the crown of martyrdom of the overworked, it is extraordinary how the busiest of statesmen can not only tear themselves away from their country's affairs to attend to their own professions, but can moreover find time for golf, and they even appear from time to time in the society papers in photographed groups at shooting parties in the country.

And so it was with R.H.B. Turning out usually three books a year; preaching twice nearly every Sunday; travelling not only all over the United Kingdom, but abroad; attending with a startling punctuality to an enormous correspondence; gardening, wood-carving, painting, making tapestries, he still had time for games, sports, and amusements.

If he had been asked, and I have no doubt that

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he was asked very often, to fill in one of those horrible confession books, I do not know at all what he would put down in the space reserved for "favourite pastime," but I am quite certain that nobody who knew him, even slightly, would hesitate for a moment; undoubtedly his favourite pastime was smoking cigarettes. The cigarettes he bought for himself were very cheap and very nasty; but he had no real objection, as the British soldier has, to good ones; all he stipulated was that they should not be American. Turkish were his favourites, but he would smoke Egyptians; no pipes, no cigars, but only cigarettes, cigarettes every day and all day. I think the only times he did not smoke were during meals, though he only interrupted his smoking to eat them, and in the pulpit; he certainly smoked both in his bath and in bed, and over and over again I have known him dash into my room in his dressing-gown on his way to his bath.

"Have you got a decent cigarette?" (What he meant was: "Have you got a cigarette that isn't American?")

"Help yourself, you know where they live."

"Ooh, thanks! I smoked all I brought upstairs last night before I went to sleep."

Then off he would rush, puffing away. No time was too short for a smoke; if he could not fit in a whole cigarette, half would do, but he had to be smoking; and as he worked the haze in the parlour grew thicker and thicker, and the pile of

ash and cigarette-ends in his ash-tray grew higher and higher.

Of course all this smoking was far from being good for him ; in fact I am of opinion that it did much to hasten his end, but it was quite impossible to stop it or even to curtail it. If the little village shop ran out of the stock they kept especially for him, he would rush round to one or two of his friends who usually kept some of his particulars in anticipation of his visits ; and if that failed, sad and dejected he would go about with nothing to do for perhaps half an hour, and then, driven to it by sheer force of circumstances, he would seek consolation in my despised Americans. He borrowed them in tens until he got some of his own, when he would pay them back with characteristically precise honesty, saying :

" I don't see why I should give you these beautiful cigarettes I like so much in exchange for your beastly Americans that never gave me a moment's pleasure."

Needless to say they were kept for a future emergency.

Though these cigarettes were bad for his body, they undoubtedly helped him enormously in his work, and he felt very dependent on them. He wrote to me shortly before he died, telling me that the doctor had " knocked off " his cigarettes.

" I don't think I shall ever be able to work without them," he wrote, " but I suppose I shall have to try ; in any case, I am rapidly becoming

useless as it is, so something will have to be done."

Though cigarette smoking was undoubtedly his favourite pastime, as it had become almost as necessary to him as his meals, it could hardly be called an amusement ; and as it occupied nearly every moment of the day it really has no right to come under the heading of "Off Duty." The only excuse for introducing it here is that it is necessary to the picture of R.H.B.

He was a sportsman at heart, and loved games and outdoor pastimes, and had he given more time to them I think he might have been very successful ; as it was he was erratic. A slight lack of "condition"—it was never more than slight—was more than compensated for by his exceptional keenness ; for in games as in everything else he did, he used every bit of himself ; a game of croquet while he was engaged in it was of paramount importance, and it had to be finished before he would stop ; meals were not allowed to interfere, and a visitor would be dragged out on to the lawn and would have to be a spectator until the game was finished.

Croquet was the only outdoor game he played at all regularly ; it was convenient as he could play on his own lawn, and it did not take up very much time. I often tried to get him to play both tennis and golf, but both were put out of court on account of the time they required. I suggested turning the croquet lawn into a tennis court.

"Never!" he exclaimed. "Just think of all that comes in the wake of tennis. No, you won't get me spilling tea over people at tennis parties."

He affected rather to despise tennis.

"The modern lawn game isn't tennis at all," he said.

"Well," I replied, "it's what nearly everybody means by tennis nowadays."

"That doesn't make it any better. You ought to call it lawn-tennis."

"Why should I? Nobody else does."

"I always do."

And from that day onward he did; though I would not be prepared to declare that he had insisted upon the "lawn" part of the title previously. The evening after this little discussion he introduced a game of "real" tennis into his book *Initiation*.

He played "Squash," very occasionally. A neighbour living a few miles away had a court, and once or twice he went over for a game, and invariably came back delighted with his success.

I think these rare games of "Squash" show more than almost anything how valuable was his keenness and his quite wonderful power of concentration. Though he had not played for years, he would play against quite good players and win; but during a game he was oblivious of everything else in the world, and as quick as lightning. He loved quick things, or games that called for

quickness ; croquet was, I think, the only deliberate game he liked.

Indoors he played cards from time to time with a preference for " poker " and a sort of " patience " game called " Montana." I called it Montreal once.

" Why don't you call it Massachusetts and have done with it," he said.

He was really fond of " Montana," and would shout with delight if he managed, as he often did, to get all his cards out while his opponent still had a handful.

When he came back from Rome in 1913, he asked me one night at dinner :

" Can you play chess ? "

" I think I know the moves, but very little more."

" I've been playing a lot in Rome. I'm rather good. I'll teach you all about it. Shall we have a game after dinner ? "

I asked : " Have you got any men ? "

" Um ! that is rather a drawback, isn't it ? "

But the ever resourceful Reeman came to the rescue and lent us his board and men, and after dinner we settled down to our game in the parlour.

" Now," said R.H.B., " would you like to play by yourself, or shall I help you ? "

" Well," I replied, " if we're going to make a habit of chess you better give me all the lessons you're going to at the beginning."

" Right ho ! Now I think the best way to start

is this"—and off he went, moving the men alternately, and explaining away as hard as he could go all the time; quite suddenly I thought it was about time to put an oar in, so I seized my queen and decided upon a move. As soon as I attempted it, he put out his hand.

"Oh no! don't do that, you'll let me in immediately."

"But I want to do it."

"You'll only spoil the game."

"I want to move that queen."

"Oh, all right, move it if you want to; there's not much point in my teaching you if you insist upon doing what you like."

I moved the queen and got up to get a cigarette, and as I was lighting it there came a shout:

"Do you see what you've done?"

"What's the matter?"

"It's mate!" And sure enough it was; it was quite as great a surprise to me as it was to R.H.B.; but in all my ignorance I had succeeded in checkmating my tutor. It was too good a chance to be lost, and I at once gloated over him.

"Mate in one move," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"That was my very first move."

"Rubbish! You've been playing all the time."

"That was the first move I made." And it was, though he would never believe that he had done all the moving on both sides up to that psychological moment.

We played a few times after that, and he won every game, and after each one I seemed compelled to say:

"Mate in one move."

Thanks principally to the generosity of Sophie, Lady Gifford, we were allowed to shoot over a few hundred acres of rough shooting in the immediate locality, and a great deal of pleasure we got out of it, though our bags were not extraordinarily large. One day when we had really done very badly, in fact we had seen only very few birds, R.H.B. was apologizing for the poorness of the sport.

"I'm awfully sorry we've done so badly," he said.

"Badly, Monsignor?" said one of our guests. "What do you mean—we've shot both the partridges, haven't we?"

Our shoots, even if we didn't get many birds, were always enjoyable, and he looked forward to them with considerable pleasure. Repeatedly, if he had been away for some days, he would write to me: "Do get hold of some people and let's have a shoot on Thursday."

Those shooting-days were always a joy, and R.H.B. was quite at his best on them; he shot only fairly, though sometimes he was surprisingly good. Once when he was staying with a house-party in Sussex, where there were a number of very good shots, they were arranging places for

the best drive, in the hall after breakfast. R.H.B., as he came in, overheard one of them saying:

"Oh, put the parson anywhere."

He was at once on his mettle, and he went out to that shoot determined to do or die. He found that "anywhere" happened to be the extreme left of the line; but as luck would have it, he got far more than his fair share of the birds over him, and he shot as if he did not know what it was to miss; he came home delighted with himself.

"Glorious! Shot like De Grey—couldn't miss. Got the only woodcock that came over; don't think I missed a blessed thing. I'll 'larn' them to put the parson anywhere."

In our own little shoots we had no big drives, and didn't often have any first-class shots, but we got a vast amount of enjoyment out of them. One morning I was having very bad luck, and could not get any birds over me, and R.H.B., who was having rather a "day out," was as usual very sympathetic; at the last drive before lunch, however, I got a covey of very high birds right over me, and was lucky enough to bag a brace. At lunch I got another extremely high partridge—to eat this time. As I disposed of it on a side table, R.H.B. said, with his eyes twinkling:

"Specializing in high birds to-day, eh?"

Most of the guests at that particular shoot were neighbours, and one of them had been mainly instrumental in procuring a new organ for a church

close by; the organ had been formally opened a few days previously, and as I was sitting beside the donor, we naturally talked about it. From that particular organ we got on to organs in general, then by easy stages to Church music, when R.H.B., evidently catching something I had said, chipped in for the benefit of the whole party:

"What a man that is! Shoots nothing but high birds, eats nothing but high birds, and now he's inflicting high talk on a shooting party."

But though we enjoyed our formal shoots, I think R.H.B. got more pleasure out of our little ferreting expeditions.

"Will you be going up to Hormead this morning?" he would ask after breakfast, as I was setting out on my rounds and he was settling down to work, with a box of cigarettes at one side of him and a huge pile of letters at the other.

"Yes, probably," I would say, knowing well what was coming.

"Going to be busy this afternoon?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"Get Baker and the ferrets and we'll shoot rabbits."

"All right. What time will you be ready?"

"Look at this lot"—pointing to his letters and nodding his head; then to himself rather than to me: "Never mind, I'll get through them by lunch time, and we'll go out immediately afterwards. I love ferreting. Such good sport."

He rode a little ; but he was too nervous of his horse, Peter, to ride very well or to get much enjoyment out of it. Peter, who dragged the dog-cart, on one occasion had bolted with him, and he would give a graphic description of Peter careering along the road zig-zagging in a terrifying way, while he and his friend, a Dominican priest, tugged, one on either rein, the one muttering oaths while the other gurgled prayers ; it is not for me to say who did which. When eventually Peter slowed down they led him into a drive in front of a house, and R.H.B. went to the door to apologize and explain. After a while they ventured out again, but a traction-engine was approaching in the distance, so they returned to harbour ; more apologies and explanations ; then when the peril of the traction-engine had passed they set off once more, but after a few yards were driven back again this time by a hay-cart, to which the palpitating Peter took a definite dislike ; again apologies and explanations ; and when eventually they did get away they took a gate-post with them.

" I couldn't explain and apologize any more," he said, " so I came home and sent a carpenter along with a nice letter."

Queer-tempered and plain though Peter was, R.H.B. loved him. He loved any animal very easily. I found him one day gazing at his two pigs and some chickens in the pigsty, my own dog Panky was rubbing himself against his legs

and chewing his fingers, and his little black cat was on his shoulder.

"Falling in love with the pigs now, are you?" I said.

"No, I mustn't get too fond of these creatures or I'll never be able to eat them."

He would never allow a bird to be shot in the garden.

"I want them to look upon it as a haven of refuge and then we'll get thousands of them."

"But what about the fruit and vegetables?"

"If we can't have both birds and vegetables, let's have the birds."

He lived to the full every moment of his life at Hare Street, and every time he left it, if it was only for a week-end, and as he climbed into the dog-cart, he would turn and say:

"I hate to leave this place."

CHAPTER IV

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Though he was a man so much in the public eye, it is almost startling how few people really knew Hugh Benson. He said himself that apart from his own family and those who had known him as a boy, only one person was on sufficiently familiar terms to call him by his Christian name.

In view of this it is rather amusing since his death to notice that quite a number of his acquaintances are claiming intimate friendship, and to show how very intimate that friendship was, they refer to him repeatedly as "Father Hugh," sometimes "poor Father Hugh," more often "dear Father Hugh," but the "Hugh" part always gets in. Now one name he did not allow people to call him in his Catholic days was "Father Hugh." I know that a number of devotees talked thus of him among themselves; but if they had once tried it to his face, they took care afterwards that they kept it strictly amongst themselves. In the early days of our friendship a lady, spiritual dependent and devotee, referred to him, when speaking to me, as "Father Hugh." In conversation with him later in the day, I asked:

"Do you like being called 'Father Hugh?'"

"Who calls me 'Father Hugh?'"

"Mrs. —— referred to you in that way this

morning, and from the glib way it rolled off her tongue, I thought it was her way of addressing you."

"Well, let it roll off her tongue to me, I'll show her!"

A few days later he came to me in my room; he had been receiving visitors; he poked his head round the door, and in his odd deep voice, said:

"It rolled off; but I bet it won't again."

I think, by those who knew him really well, outside his own family circle, he was nearly always called, even after his appointment as Papal Chamberlain, "Father Benson," and quite often "Monsignor." A few very intimate friends, finding Monsignor rather a big mouthful, contracted it to "Mgr," which had to be pronounced as if spelt Mugger. Personally, I invariably spoke of him as "Father Benson," and in conversation with him used his initials "R.H.B."

He always kept a very definite wall of reserve between himself and others—invaluable very often, but not always intentional. His was a definite individuality, in mind really a big man, how big is seldom realized; his thoughts were invariably big ones, and the whole universe could not limit his imaginations; but like nearly all big men, he had a number of irritating little ways which were liable to jar on one. He had to be swallowed whole or not at all, if you nibbled you ran a serious risk of being choked. And just as he had unpleasant little characteristics irritating to others, he him-

self was liable to "see red," as he said himself, about trivialities; he could be relied upon to treat a big thing in a big way, and just as you had decided that he was uniformly a big man, he would give you the surprise of your life by going off into a towering rage over nothing at all, his eyes would flash and his lip quiver, he would say the cruellest things in the cruellest way, and usually finished up by declaring:

"There! I told you I was a scorpion."

But his rages were as short as they were terrible. I will give one instance, and I think it shows better than any incident I know how big he really was.

One day—it was a Saturday—we had just about the biggest row I have ever had with anybody; it is immaterial what it was about, but the reason was so small that we used to laugh about it in a grim sort of way afterwards. I had made the mistake of broaching the unpleasant subject at breakfast, and before there was time to say "Jack Robinson" he was "off." He snapped, I snapped back; he talked, I talked; he talked louder and quicker, I began to get left behind; he got into a regular tirade I jammed in remarks here and there; we talked in the dining-room, continued in the parlour; he said:

"Get out of my parlour!"

I said: "I wish to goodness I'd never seen you or your parlour."

I went out of the parlour and banged the door. He muttered. I went into my own room, and

banged that door. He ran upstairs to his room, still muttering. He was going away on a preaching expedition, and I usually went to see him off at the door; but I did not that day. I heard the dog-cart come out at the big gates, and saw them drive past the front of the house, and breathed more freely.

About five minutes elapsed, then I heard a scampering on the stairs; he rushed into my room, and, with his hand outstretched and very bright eyes, said:

" Look here, you've got to say Mass to-morrow. I want to. Sorry."

I shook hands, without quite understanding what had happened, and before I had got a grip on the facts, he was gone and hurrying along the road to catch up with the dog-cart before it got to the top of the hill out of the village. He was well worth swallowing whole.

He was, as might be expected from a man so highly strung, very sensitive, and frequently took offence where none had been intended; when someone had offended him he would show it as soon as we were alone by saying that So-and-So was a " queer chap "; and then, after becoming silent and thoughtful, he would say suddenly:

"Well, it doesn't matter to me; I'm not going to trouble about it."

And then you would know that he was really hurt, that it did matter, and that he was very much worried.

He dearly loved being "lionized"; he said it was a bore, and he really thought that it did bore him, but he never threw away a chance of going to a place where he knew he was going to be right in the limelight; and yet this love of being "first horse" was not a very unpleasant characteristic in him, it was a definitely boyish failing. He was a boy, and if he had a boy's failings he had a boy's virtues too. He loved being in the limelight, but he loved more to drag others in with him; he liked to hear people praise his work, because he was convinced that it was really good; he put all of himself into everything he did, and he went on at a thing until he was quite satisfied with it, and then, convinced himself of its goodness, he was quite candid in speaking to others about it. But if he said about his own work, as I have often heard him say: "*The Coward's* a jolly good book," that was nothing to the praise he would give to contemporary authors; of Wells's book I have heard him say repeatedly:

"Every time I read it I'm convinced that *Love and Mr. Lewisham* is the best novel ever written."

At times I have heard him say, referring to one or other of his pet novels:

"I wish I could write like that."

And he used to shoot off tags taken from them on the slightest provocation.

With regard to his preaching he was the same, and though he made no secret of the fact of his conviction that he was a really good preacher, he

had the greatest admiration for Father Bernard Vaughan, both as a man and a preacher, and would say of Father Maturin :

"Maturin's a long way the best preacher in England."

And though I suppose one can consider that there was a certain friendly rivalry between these two men, if not in reality at any rate in the minds of their respective admirers, it was Benson who first made Father Maturin known to the rector of Our Lady of Lourdes, New York, and obtained for him what R.H.B. considered the best preaching appointment he had ever had—"a beautiful church, a magnificent congregation, and very satisfactory remuneration." It was while returning from preaching in New York that Father Maturin was drowned in the ill-fated *Lusitania.*

With the clergy as a whole—I mean the Catholic clergy—R.H.B. was not really popular. Of course there were a certain number who really knew him, and if you knew him well you were bound to like him ; but with the large body of the clergy, who knew of him, and perhaps had met him at public functions, or in some cases had got him to come and preach on some great occasion in their churches, the large body who declared loudly that he was a poor novelist, and nevertheless made a point of reading all he wrote, with that great body he was not popular, though he was undoubtedly useful to them. I think generally the reason was to be found in the fact that R.H.B.

was a very shy man; and since the Catholic clergy are a body of shy men, they never succeeded in mixing. Once it happened that a fellow priest, who passed as a friend, was reported to have said and done things definitely unkind about him. He was surprised and momentarily a little bit hurt; he bit his under-lip and after a moment, with a twinkle in his eye, said: "Shall I call upon Father —— and t-talk about the weather?"

He never went quite the right way about getting on good terms with the clergy, and repeatedly threw away excellent opportunities of breaking down the wall of reserve between himself and them. In the circumstances it was perfectly natural, in fact almost inevitable, that such a wall should exist; it was put there by his former position, by the manner of his reception into the Church, by the circumstances surrounding his Theological course and hurried ordination, by the separate sort of life he led as a priest (he was attached to no parish, and though affiliated to the Diocese of Westminster in which he lived, he did considerably more work out of it than in it). Altogether if the wall was to be demolished it was up to him to demolish it; but he was too shy, and so preoccupied with his own work for the conversion of England that he had little time to spare for his fellow converters.

Once when he was to give a lecture in a Lancashire town, the lecture having been organized by the local clergy, he received, as usual, an invitation

to stay at the priest's house. The rector of the parish in sending him the invitation mentioned the fact that a certain family, living in the district, were anxious for him to stay with them, and asked him to choose between the two houses. Later in the day, when we were together, he told me:

"When I go up to —— I'm going to stay with the So-and-So's."

"Oh, are you? I thought you would have stayed with the priest."

"Well, he did invite me; but he told me the other people had given me an invitation too, so I accepted theirs."

"Is the priest likely to be offended?"

"Oh Lor! I never thought of that. But I don't think he will be; he probably didn't want me or he wouldn't have told me about the others; besides, I think I knew some of the ——'s at Eton."

As a matter of fact his action did offend the rector, and poor R.H.B. often offended priests in similar ways. He liked staying in nice country houses, and never got bored by being lionized. Each time he found the limelight full on him he enjoyed it as much as the first time, and as a rule there was not much limelight for him in presbyteries, so he stayed elsewhere, and the clergy were offended. That the offence was unintentional was undoubted, but it is not much consolation to a would-be host to get a vicarious assurance that R.H.B. did not mean it.

CHAPTER V

KNOWLEDGE OF DISTRICT

A SOLDIER's first duty on settling down in his enemy's country is to look round and see how the land lies; he must get to know the district, find out all he can about the people, learn who can be trusted and who are dangerous, make friends if he can, but at any rate get to know the people.

Now, in London, Hugh Benson was quite a well-known figure. Walking with him in the streets you would hear from time to time: "There's Monsignor Benson," or occasionally you could notice people nudging each other to call attention to him. He was better known than most people, not perhaps so well known as a society actor, but certainly better than many an illustrious University professor; after all he was constantly on show, either by advertisement on the bookstalls, or in the flesh in pulpits or on platforms; he belonged to the big world, though he was rarely in agreement with it, and it knew him. Most people known in the big world, even by the few, are very well known indeed in the immediate locality in which they live, more especially if they live in the country; William de Morgan was a well-known figure in

Chelsea, if only by reason of the fact that he made a regular practice of going shopping there every morning, and certainly everybody in Beaconsfield knows G. K. Chesterton, and both Chelsea and Beaconsfield are far more than twice the size of Buntingford and Hare Street rolled together. But in spite of the smallness of the local population, in spite of the fact that for ten miles round there dwelt hardly any man better known to the world than he was, R.H.B. was not a familiar figure to the people of the district. I was asked by a Buntingford resident who my friend was, one day when I was seeing him off at the railway station; and a man living in the only other big house in Hare Street, within two hundred yards of R.H.B.'s front gate, who had been there for years before the Monsignor came to live in the district, died in 1913 never having seen the famous novelist.

He had a few acquaintances among the local people, but his unwillingness to entertain, and a detestation of making social calls, effectually prevented any of those acquaintances developing into anything more ; he didn't know the people amongst whom he lived and they didn't know him ; at his funeral it was quite striking that though a fairly considerable number of people came down from London, their number was not more than doubled by the local people present.

He entertained very little, and the coming of a chance visitor for tea was so rare that it assumed

HARE STREET VILLAGE.

the importance of an event; if you except a few close friends who, from time to time, came there to stay, it would be possible to count on the fingers of two hands the number of guests who dined at Hare Street House during two years. He had visits from several of his spiritual dependents, but they hardly counted, as their consultations took place in the chapel, with perhaps a half-hour's interview in the parlour on one morning of their stay in the village.

There were, however, a few who came to stay from time to time, close and valued friends of R.H.B., to whose visits he looked forward with delight and who always did him a world of good. First among them I can place, without fear of any jealousy, Dr. Sessions, a friend who had lived with him some years previously, and whose room, always known as the Doctor's room, was kept as he had left it against his return. R.H.B. always considered Hare Street House as the Doctor's home, and I think always hoped that he would return to live there some day. Another visitor was a fellow-novelist with whom R.H.B.'s friendship waxed great in a very short time—Mr. E. W. Hornung, the creator of *Raffles*. R.H.B. had met him once when in London, and came back home full of him; he was not given to enthusing over people, in a hurry, but what I first heard of Mr. Hornung was:

"He's a dear fellow. He must come down here. You'll love him."

He went on to tell me all about their meeting ; I could see he was leading up to something, and it came when he got to the part where Mr. Hornung handed him his cigarette case. He asked me, pointing :

" What did I say ? "

" I don't know."

" Oh yes, you do, you do, you've read *Raffles* ; there was only one thing to say."

" Well, what was it ? "

" A-a-are they ' Sullivans ' ? He *was* pleased—and they were too."

These two became great friends, and Mr. Hornung was a great help to R.H.B. during his illness. They even exchanged manuscripts later, Mr. Hornung getting, I believe, *The Coward* in exchange for *The Thief in the Night*. R.H.B. showed me the MSS., and referring to the numerous and exceptionally neat corrections and alterations, said :

" Awfully careful writer, isn't he ? I should think he must write about twice as much as he publishes."

" And what about you ? " I asked.

" Ooh !—publish every word I ever write, you bet."

Another guest who came down periodically was Mr. Franz Liebich, the pianist who has done so much to make Debussy known in England, and who helped R.H.B. in the choice of his piano. I can't recall any very definite incidents connected

with the Monsignor in any of Mr. Liebich's visits, perhaps owing to the fact that Mr. Liebich usually came for week-ends, and consequently they had only one, or at the most two, nights together. They were very fond of each other, and R.H.B. would lament that he invariably had to go away at just those times when Mr. Liebich could come down. The picture that presents itself to me is of the three of us playing Montana, and R.H.B. on the one hand and Mr. Liebich on the other, both smoking equally unpleasant cigarettes, though of different kinds.

Of another of his friends I will only record the incident in connection with his first coming after my arrival at Hare Street. R.H.B. came into my room, and announced to me :

" I've just had a telegram. Lord Alfred Douglas is coming down here."

" Oh, is he ? When ? "

" I don't know ; he doesn't say."

" You might tell me when you know definitely. I have no desire to meet Lord Alfred Douglas, and would like to arrange to be away."

R.H.B.'s eyes flashed, he bit his lip, and lashed out at me :

" You can do whatever you like, but Lord Alfred Douglas is my friend, and he'll come down here when he likes." He wheeled round and made for the door. When he reached it he turned, and with trembling lips : " And y-y-you ought to be ashamed of yourself ! "

As it turned out, Lord Alfred Douglas came down for the week-end, just the time when I could not possibly be away; but as Kenneth Dennys, temporarily R.H.B.'s honorary secretary, was in the house at the time, I thought it might be possible for the noble lord's visit to pass without my seeing too much of him.

Speaking of Kenneth Dennys, he was a young man, far from strong, who did a good deal to help R.H.B. for a short time. He had been an actor, and returned to the stage after he left Hare Street. Later he entered the Benedictine Novitiate; but on the outbreak of war with the Abbot's permission he enlisted in the Artists' Rifles, and afterwards got a commission in the Munster Fusiliers. He was killed in an advance at the head of his platoon. He lunched with me the day before his death. I remember asking him:

"I suppose the religious life is at an end now, Kenneth?"

"At an end!" he exclaimed. "I'll be back in my monastery within twenty-four hours of my discharge from the Army,"—and then, wistfully, "if I live to get my discharge."

God rest his soul! He was a fine boy, a gallant soldier and a glorious Catholic.

But to return to the story. It was my intention to shelve Lord Alfred Douglas on to Kenneth Dennys. I tried to do it; but against my will I was drawn towards him, and I can say quite candidly that I have never since done anything but rejoice

that I acted against my will on that occasion. When R.H.B. returned we were on quite good terms, and when Douglas left, the Monsignor, rubbing his hands, said:

"I'm so glad you've got to know him; I think he's one of the nicest men I know. I'm sure you two could be very good friends—it always happens if you make up your mind to dislike anybody."

The dedication of this book shows in how far R.H.B. was a true prophet.

His friends and admirers were many, but they were not local; hardly any of the local people shot with him; he did not know them and they did not know him. He was, it is true, one of several Vice-Presidents of the local cricket and football clubs; but that high office was a matter of subscription rather than of interest, and anyone who might reasonably be expected to give an annual half-guinea would undoubtedly have greatness thrust upon him by the local athletes, ever keen, and always in straitened circumstances.

He might have been well known, and very popular locally; he had charming neighbours only too anxious for him to share the public life of the place, but he had no time for anything exclusively local, and had it not been for the descents made upon him from the outside world he would have lived the life of an extraordinarily busy recluse in Hare Street.

His tiny estate, comprising his house and

chapel, was complete and self-sufficient; the little chapel was the apple of his eye. It is true that he did a certain amount for the foundation of the Buntingford parish; he preached five of the seven sermons during the Motor Chapel mission in 1912, and he interested a number of his friends in the new chapel; but he never forgot that the building of a church at Buntingford would take the pivot of the parish away from Hare Street where the little parish had been cradled, and his own private chapel was ever his first love. Financially he helped the new church by a loan of £400 at 4 per cent., the capital to become a gift on his death. Unfortunately he never drew any interest on his loan; but he was a robust man of forty-two when the offer was made, and its acceptance would have been impossible but for the generosity of fourteen parishioners, only three of whom had private means, who undertook to share the payment of the £16 annual interest during their lives. The assistance he rendered by interesting others in the parish was invaluable, and it was the continued and unostentatious generosity of two ladies, both interested in the parish through R.H.B., that enabled it to come through the first two years of its existence; and while parishioners will always remember the debt of gratitude they owe to Robert Hugh Benson I hope they will never forget what they owe to Sophie Lady Gifford and to Miss Sophie Lyall.

CHAPTER VI

VISIONS OF CONQUEST

To a novelist, his imagination is one of his most valuable assets. It may from time to time be a drawback if it be excessively fertile, and be allowed to run away with its owner, and I have heard it asserted more than once that this is what happened to R.H.B. in writing his book *Lord of the World.* He did not think so himself; in fact he rather liked *Lord of the World*, and it was certainly very remunerative. But whatever may be the case with this particular book, on the whole his imagination was far more practical than imaginations usually are; if an idea at first seemed impossible he would set to work on the details and could soon convince himself and his hearers that it was not only possible but really quite practical. I remember one day the newspapers were full of some recent murder. He said to me:

"Do you think it would be possible for one of us in this house to commit a murder here without being detected?"

"I think it might be possible, but most unlikely."

"How would you set about murdering me?"

I suggested some method, I think it was to poison him.

"That would be no good at all. To begin with, you'd have to get the poison, and that would interest at least a chemist and perhaps a doctor too ; it would have to be so deadly that it would kill me at once, before I could tell anybody how I felt ; if you tried to give it me with my food you'd probably be seen by some of the servants, and you'd have all the difficulties of a post-mortem to face ; you'd almost certainly be caught. Now if I was going to murder you . . ." Then he outlined a most elaborate plan, which you would almost think had been maturing in his mind for months, in which he was to murder me in the night. He set about it in such a way that he could account for every action, even the very blow that was to finish me off, in a way that would satisfy anyone he might chance to meet when going about his nefarious work, and he so arranged it all that at the worst, if he was caught red-handed, he would in all probability be put on trial only for manslaughter, and even then an excellent self-defence case was all ready in his mind for his trial.

His imaginings were not usually of this kind, they were generally far more practical, as is shown in his novels. He realized the value of his imagination, and was quite certain that his novel writing was his greatest as well as, financially, his most valuable talent. We differed about it repeatedly,

as I was, and am, convinced that he was a far greater preacher than a novelist.

"Oh no! no! no!" he would insist. "My novels are far better than my sermons, they reach a far bigger public, they have a much better chance of sinking in, they do far more good."

And he looked forward to a time when he would be able to give up preaching, and spend the remainder of his days at Hare Street, his time being devoted to his books.

"Is that why you work so hard now?" I asked him once.

"Yes and No," he said. "I must strike while the iron is hot, and the public certainly want what I can give them at present. I must provide for a time when they don't want my wares any more; and suppose my health breaks down and a time comes when I can't preach and can't write, what then? You've got to be careful, it's the only way."

He was always interesting when he talked about the possibilities of the future, and I was not the only one of his friends who liked to draw him out.

"How would you like to be a bishop?" I asked.

"Do you think they'll ever 'Bishop' me?" he queried.

"Well to be quite candid, I should think you are much more likely to be made a Cardinal eventually."

"Lor! But I could get a lot of fun out of

being a Bishop. I suppose it would make a difference in my novels, though. I would have to become staid and write about the catacombs or B-Babylon."

But the picture in his imagination would easily become very real to him, and he could discuss himself as a Bishop in as definite a way as if he really had a Bishopric. He was equally convincing when he discussed himself as an exile in Siberia, as a society actor or a criminal under sentence of death.

Most of his imaginings, however, were occupied with the one great object of his life—the conversion of England; they came out strongly when the Bishopric fancy was revived once.

He had just returned from a week-end in London.

"Have you heard that they are going to make a new diocese of Cambridge?" he asked.

There were constant and persistent rumours about various new dioceses at the time, and Cambridge was fairly often mentioned as a probable new See, so I was not surprised and said as much.

"Oh, but that's not the funny part of the rumour; they're going to make me the Bishop."

"Will you have me in your diocese?" I asked.

"Rather, but this place is sure to be in the new diocese."

"Well, you'll have a beautiful cathedral, and no money and no Catholics."

"The cathedral is something to be thankful for at any rate, and we'll soon make the Catholics, and the money will come."

Then I realized that he had entered whole-heartedly into the world of his imagination, and I began to probe about the work of the diocese.

"Well, you want good canons first of all," he said. "I mean real canons, with jobs that they really do. In this country when you've been ordained long enough you're bound to be made a canon, unless you've done an awful lot of harm."

"How would you arrange them ?"

"Well, the best theologian in the diocese would be Canon Theologian, and he would be the Theological consultant of the diocese. I would revive the title of Canon Missioner, and he would have charge of the missions in the diocese. And I'd have a Canon Liturgiologist to control the ceremonies ; and a certain number of canons would always have to be in residence at the cathedral, so that they could be got at."

"And what about a Seminary ?"

"Obviously in Cambridge, close to the cathedral. We'd have our own Theological lecturers and that sort of thing ; but they'd attend the University lectures too." And then he described how he was going to build a house for himself in which he was to reside with his canons, and a seminary, and a clergy house, all in the form of a quadrangle at the back of the cathedral.

"And who will serve the cathedral ?" I asked.

" Benedictines, I think."

" Why not Jesuits ? They have Jesuits at Oxford."

" No, no ; I'll tell you why : Jesuits set out to convince Protestants, and the Cambridge intellectual set are much too stupid to be convinced. Jesuits use Catholicism like a rapier, and the effect on the Protestant, though very unpleasant, isn't lasting. Now Benedictines would begin by taking no notice of Cambridge at all, but would compel attention by their calm, dignified and beautiful ceremonial. With them Catholicism would be like a steam roller and would treat the University like the stones on a road."

" I wonder if they would get many converts ? "

" No ; but they'd prepare the way, and then I'd loose off bare-footed friars—and they'd *have* bare feet too—on them, to preach in the market-place. In a few years you'd do whatever you liked with Cambridge. And wouldn't it be fun ? "

About the intellectual classes as contrasted with the great mass of the people he was very scathing.

" I sometimes think that common sense is a monopoly of the masses, and stupidity of the intellectual class," he said.

" What exactly do you mean ? " I asked.

" In religious matters. Now with your people here, if you preach to them, they believe you, and when they are convinced and they know enough they come into the Church, and everything is all right. But what happens with the so-called intellectual ?

You convince them completely, and just as you think they are going to say: 'Well, I think I'd like to be a Catholic,' they madden you by saying: 'But if all you say is so, why aren't all intellectual people who know it Catholics?' and you start off explaining all over again simply because you can't in common decency give the only true reply, which is 'Because they are all as stupid as you are.'"

Though R.H.B. was undoubtedly very imaginative, he was no dreamer; he was out for scalps and he got them. Catholicity oozed out of every pore, and every place was a field of battle; he would roll out Petrine texts in the smoking-room after dinner with the same zest and joy as he would shoot off a witty or topical remark in the pulpit. But with his eye ever on the potential Catholic, he never forgot to be a tradesman too, and he was ever feeling the pulse of his public that he might give them his pill with the particular coating they wanted at the moment. He was a successful man of business, simply because he was devoted to his work and kept at it untiringly. It would be well-nigh impossible for mortal man to occupy his time more fully than R.H.B. did his. From seven in the morning until midnight, every moment had its appointed duty; he was in chapel, usually, at eight, and would devote half an hour either to serving my Mass or to his own devotions, crouching in his home-made choir-stall; he said Mass after me, and usually arrived in the dining-room for

breakfast at about a quarter past nine; he loved a variation of dishes for breakfast, because: "They give me bacon and eggs everywhere, and it does get so dull." His devoted housekeeper saw that he had plenty of change at home. His whole morning was nearly always taken up with his enormous correspondence, save for twenty minutes after eleven which he gave to the *Daily Mail* ("and I deserve a change after two hours of the sort of letters I get," he said), and he would sometimes give half an hour to some caller who had come all the way from London to Hare Street to see him. At half-past twelve he again went to the chapel for more devotions, after which he would allow himself time to "clean up for lunch" at one. Afternoons were usually devoted to amusements which varied from gardening to landscape-painting, from croquet to ferreting. Tea was at four, and then he would settle down to write until dinner at eight, at which meal the one essential was a savoury, the hotter the better. Then, as often as not, we would adjourn to Miss Lyall's house at the bottom of the garden for coffee. If I happened to be a few minutes behind him, he would probably try to frighten me by imitating the garden ghost from behind some tree, but I often did not notice his noises at all, and he gave up the attempt when, once hearing something, I remarked aloud that the garden gate needed oiling.

The garden ghost, I think, was a myth. R.H.B. longed for a manifestation, but it never came, and

his own faith in it was not of the sort to move mountains or even a garden gate.

At Miss Lyall's he would read what he had written that night, and his readings were always interesting in spite of his often very troublesome stammer, which, strange to say, never affected his public utterances. It did certainly affect his reading, and, often exasperated, he would clench his hands and declare through his teeth:

"I w-w-wont stammer, it's all a m-m-matter of the will."

Whatever it was a matter of, made little difference; he went on stammering.

He really enjoyed those evenings, though he did find it necessary from time to time to express annoyance with me for falling asleep, and with Miss Lyall for inattention or for busying herself with something irrelevant and noisy. He was a little bit chary of accusing Miss Lyall of not paying attention, because, as he said:

"You might catch her out five times, but she's so jolly clever that she can make you feel an awful fool on the sixth."

As a critic (as well as for everything else) he had great respect for Miss Lyall, and though he fought every point right up to, and often through, the last ditch, it was noticeable that he usually accepted her suggestions.

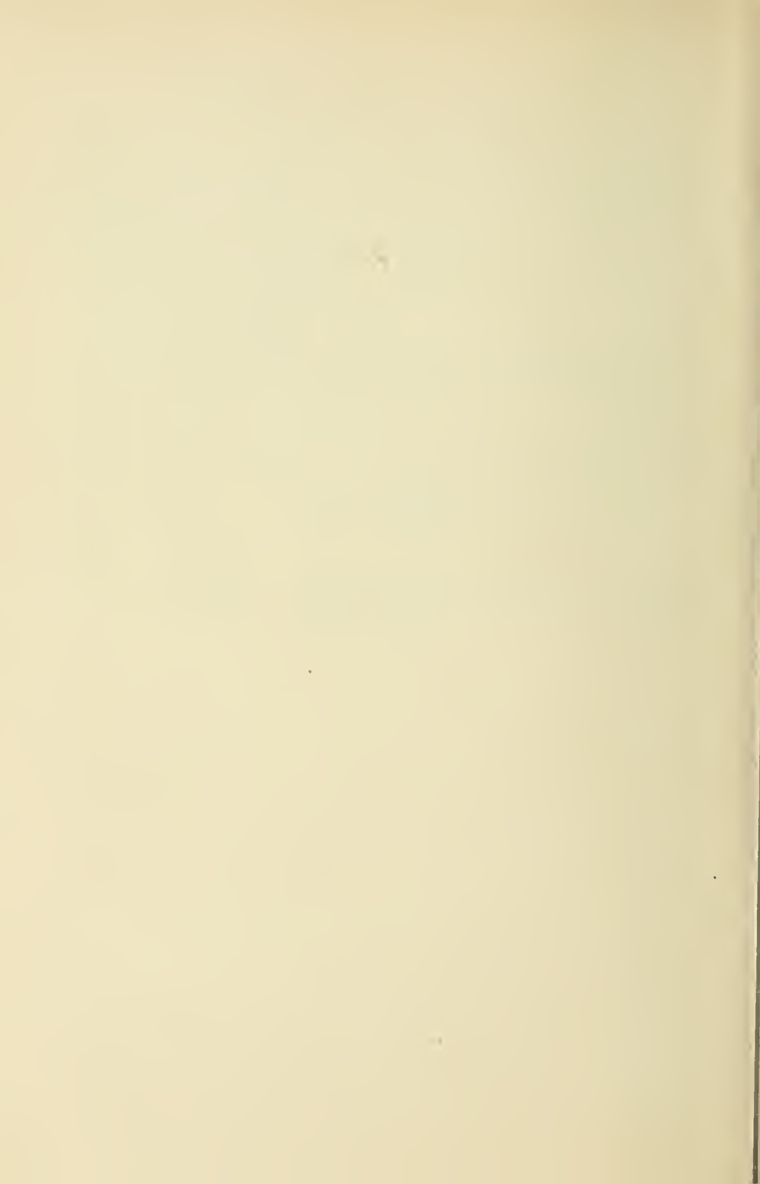
At about half-past nine or ten we had a sort of semi-public Night Prayers in chapel, and then he had usually done a fairly strenuous day's work.

But he was not finished, and would return to his table in the parlour, and I have often heard him, or smelt his cigarette, as he came upstairs after midnight ; for throughout the whole of his carefully-planned day his cigarettes had been his inseparable companions.

He did everything rapidly ; he worked rapidly, played rapidly, spoke rapidly, read rapidly, wrote rapidly, smoked rapidly, and ate at a prodigious rate. And, as a result, in forty-three years he fitted in more than enough work, and not half enough play, to last an average man eighty-six.

PART II

THE THEORY OF WAR. (R.H.B. THE WRITER)



CHAPTER VII

INSINUATING MILITARISM

The soldier of to-day, I mean the leader, is by no means merely a fighter, for like most things war has been converted into a science, and what the world is pleased to consider its greatest brains are conscribed and consecrated at the altar of Mars. Scientists and engineers, artists and statesmen, are all bent upon discovering new or perfecting old methods of taking life ; and the once romantic profession of arms has become dully scientific, and the ordinary soldier sits month after month in a moist ditch while a scientist several miles away takes pot shots at him with a big gun, or another scientist, somewhat nearer, if the wind be in the right direction, annoys him by loosing off vile-smelling gases. There is no romance in all this, and were it not for occasional " pushes " the unfortunate foot-slogging soldier would die of sheer boredom. But romance and science do not seem able to live together, and war has become a science, and as such must be waged by, or at any rate under, scientists ; and the successful officer of the present day must be a scientific soldier. His bravery is in his bones, and he has learned his discipline on the barrack square. He knows how

to obey, and consequently can exact obedience; in many cases he has a personal knowledge of all the men under him, will lead them anywhere and through anything as gladly as they will follow him; all this he has in common with the soldier of Romance, but it will not put those significant crossed swords on his shoulder-straps. The men of to-day who have "got on" are not merely brave men, good disciplinarians, and officers who have gained the respect of the discerning man in the trench; they are men who deserve, if they have not in fact got them, the mysterious little letters *p.s.c.* after their names in the Army List; and those little letters, oddly small, and invariably italicized, stand for the scientific soldier. The man who has "passed staff college" has more behind him than the physical outdoor training so essential to the soldier, he has a period of hard mental training at Camberley to his credit, a time spent in attendance at lectures, and in the study of arms. It is a regular professional training, with its recognized authorities and text-books, and Haking is as much a household name to the student of arms as Lockyer to the astronomer and St. Thomas Aquinas to the theologian. The day is past when personal bravery and a control of men were enough to make an adequate leader, and the man whose chief asset is an unswerving belief that one Britisher is a match for ten Germans is no longer in demand; there are undoubtedly some of the type still in existence, and

perhaps in authority, but their number is becoming gradually and beautifully less. One of them, having attended German manœuvres, declared in the smoking-room of an ocean liner that he could beat the whole German army with a Division of Territorials, and that was a few weeks before the war; in a very short time, commanding more than a Division, he succeeded in getting himself and his force captured, and *not* by the Germans.

The soldier, like the lawyer or the doctor, is a professional man, and, as in all professions, his most valuable asset will ever be his keenness; the true soldier loves his profession as he loves his own son, and dangerous though the profession may be, it is his one ambition that his son should grow up in it; the child is brought up in a military environment, the inevitable boyhood's desire for soldiering is fostered and developed, his first toys are soldiers, his first books battle stories, the tactics learned at Camberley are practised in the nursery, and so the son of a soldier becomes a soldier and the father of a soldier.

It is striking how often the military analogy is used in connection with Religion, it is still more striking how the two things fit into each other, and doubtless the latter accounts for the former. Religion, or perhaps it will be better to narrow it down and say Catholicism, is not merely a state of mind or a respectable, if boring, pastime, it is rather a campaign, fought upon innumerable fronts and lasting as long as the world. And

every Catholic is a soldier, and every priest a leader, and in matters religious as in matters military the successful leader is not merely the devout Catholic who, while assiduous about his own obvious duties, is careful to leave outsiders alone, but in addition to being devout, he must be technical, strategic, tactful, and forceful; in fact he must have all the qualifications necessary for a successful soldier of the present day; for the battle-field is extensive and varied and the enemy is well prepared.

Now, if there was one thing more striking than another about Hugh Benson it was his success as a leader of the Catholic campaign in England. He was not a "Catholic from the cradle" (the phrase is his own, he had decided and obvious objections to talking about "born Catholics"), and it was undoubtedly an advantage to him in his work that he had a splendid tactical knowledge of the stronghold he was attacking, gained on the spot. He knew the enemy he had to fight, and he knew the weapons he had at hand to fight with.

His whole Catholic life was devoted to the campaign, and he was carrying it on in all its phases at once.

"Anglicans are children in religious matters," he would say, "and you must treat them as such."

And he did so; he gave them what they wanted; they cried out for novels from him, and they got them, novels about modern society with country-house and theatre parties, historical novels with

prancing palfreys and the language of Pepys, novels of the future, with airships and the crack of doom, novels dealing with modern fads, spiritualistic séances and the like; he wrote novels of visions and dreams, he wrote of anything the public wanted. For he always had his finger on the pulse of his ever-increasing public, and each new novel, or set of novels—for during his latter years he contracted for novels in batches of three—brought more grist to the mill and had a wider circulation than the last. He was able to give the people what they wanted in the way they wanted it, and in that he was a tradesman, but he never forgot to give them also what he wanted them to have and what he was convinced was good for them, and in that he was a physician, and as often as not he succeeded in making them assimilate what he had given them before they realized that they had got it, and in that he was a tactician, and in the end he invariably succeeded in gaining his objective, in driving his point home, and in that he was a soldier.

Underlying every novel he ever wrote, with possibly one exception, there was an insinuating militarism. They were to his public as battle stories to a little boy; they sowed the seeds of Catholic aspirations, they tickled the palate, created a want in the mind of the reader and unsettled faulty religious foundations.

They were bound to have that effect, because R.H.B. put every bit of himself into everything

he wrote ; he lived in his characters and felt with them. I remember his coming into my room one night on his way to bed. He was writing *Come Rack ! Come Rope !* at the time.

" My fingers are tingling with pleasant pain," he said.

" What have you been doing to yourself ? " I asked.

" Only writing a gorgeous description of a man on the rack."

He really did feel a definite pain in his fingers ; for a few moments he was mentally in the position of the racked man, and he felt with him, and wrote, as it were, from inside. He was lost in his subject as he wrote, just as he was lost in his subject as he preached, and as his thoughts rushed on, his pen sped over the pages in pursuit ; never a second did he stop ; quite regardless of time on rushed his thoughts. He was Chris, or Ralph, or Nevill, or even the uninspiring Mr. Mayne, and Robert Hugh Benson was only a stenographer writing the thoughts, words and actions of these real people who had for the moment filled his life. On with their doings he rushed, there was no time for careful writing, they could not wait for that, still less could they wait for revision ; punctuation was perhaps becoming faulty—what of it ? it was the story that mattered, they were not thinking in commas. Off he would go into a parenthesis, and when he came to the end of it a new thought was waiting for expression, and so

the principal sentence was left hanging in the air; but in real life principal sentences have a habit of getting left in the air, as we wander off into the pleasanter by-paths of imagination. Quicker and quicker would fly his thoughts, faster and faster sped his pen, cigarettes were lit and smoked automatically, the thoughts were rushing away from the words, he could never keep pace, he was losing ground, he had lost—but no, he would take refuge in a series of dots, and start afresh on a new paragraph.

As literary productions his novels are unpolished; but they are undoubtedly readable; the story is always good, and your interest is always held, you are interested because the writer was; you may be in violent disagreement with what you are reading but you are interested in it, possibly more so than you would have been had it been a masterpiece of English literature. He could write well, and often did, but far more often his English was subordinated to his story, and his object, invariably achieved, was to get that story over. He was a teller of stories rather than a writer of fiction, and the ancient art of the story-teller is far nobler, grander, more inspiring and more useful than the modern art of fiction. His books were never meant, by him, to be merely a means of passing an idle hour, they were not written as time-killers; they were, and are, like all the best of the old-time stories, a by-product of propaganda; they have a definite object, they

always point a moral, but unlike most stories with a moral they are never dull.

R.H.B. was a soldier, and he never forgot his campaign; he looked upon his novels as his big guns, it was for them to clear the way; they were aimed from afar off, and they dropped their shells right into the enemy's camp. It is necessary in modern warfare to conceal your guns, the enemy's eyes are in the skies, your guns are gazed upon from above, and it is "up to you" to make sure that he does not see what really is there, so you camouflage your batteries as copses, as country cottages, as rhododendron bushes—in fact, you make them fit into their environment, to deceive your enemy in the distance. And when you have successfully deceived him and made him prisoner, your feelings are not really hurt if, on being brought close to your batteries, he says: "I don't think much of that as a copse, or a cottage." What really matters is that it is a jolly good gun emplacement.

And so it is with Benson's novels. You may go picking your way through each book, finding grammatical errors and errors of fact, and criticize them as being in indifferent English or showing an ignorance of medical science, but they were not written as manuals of English literature, or text-books on Medicine; you are forgetting that they are gun emplacements, they have done their work without your knowing it; you have been assimilating all-important Catholicity while you

have been quibbling about such unimportant things as English and Medicine.

Hugh Benson, in addition to being a great, could also have been a first-class, novelist. I mean he was capable of writing beautiful English, and incapable of telling any but good stories ; but he never had time. Writing beautiful English is to most people laborious work ; you must write, and revise, and cross out, and put in, and re-write, and mess about with the manuscript until you are very nearly sick of the sight of it—unless of course you are one of those natural geniuses who cannot help writing perfect English, and who fill in income-tax forms with the wording of a Newman and the periods of a Burke. Benson was not such a genius, and thanks to the demands of his Church and his public, he never had time for polishing up his MSS., and they were allowed to reach the world with all their imperfections on their bodies ; their souls were all right ; their Catholicity was ever glittering.

He drew word-pictures as well as any man, you could always see the place he was writing about ; his characters, except his women, were alive ; you might not like them, he was sometimes unkind to types, but they are real. He wrote once in answer to the letter of a critic, who complained of his treatment of women in one of his books :

" I'm so sorry you feel the way you do about the book. Of course, I think you are entirely wrong ! Certainly I have criticized both sexes as

sharply as I know how, weakness on one side, stupidity on the other. I honestly do not think I am unfair, though I may, of course, be quite wrong. Does it not shed some light upon the situation when I say that I do not know one class of person about whom I write who does not think that I am too sharp—priests, laymen, Anglicans, women and saints? However, I daresay I am all wrong."*

The whole answer shows that he was not much perturbed about the criticism, though I know he had the greatest respect for the critic; an answer was necessary, so he gave it. But had it been a criticism of the Catholicity of the book, the flood-gates would have opened and he would have replied in the best Benson strain. But a mere criticism of characters, even important ones, did not matter very much. The environment was adequate, but it was the gun and its emplacement that really mattered.

* This letter was dictated by R.H.B. in New York.

CHAPTER VIII

REFERENCE WORK

OTHER people's novels are the text-books and authorities of the novelist ; he owes it to his public that he should have a knowledge of modern fiction ; at any rate, that was Hugh Benson's idea, and it seems very reasonable. In any other profession such knowledge is necessary ; a lawyer or doctor who did not keep pace with the times and who was not *au courant* with recent developments in his profession would rapidly lose his practice, a soldier who was not well versed in modern military tactics would be more dangerous than the enemy. Every war has proved the futility of out-of-date generals, and because lawyers and doctors and soldiers deal with physical rather than spiritual things, the really important things of life according to present-day attitudes, the " here " rather than the " hereafter," their public take care that they shall be up to date. Now, a novelist with a true realization of the importance of his position, as one who is going to approach people through their pleasures, ought to take a view at least equally as serious as that of the lawyer, the doctor, or the soldier, and reference work is as essential to him as it is to them.

Hugh Benson had a definitely acute perception of the dignity of the novel-writer. He set out to influence opinions; his readers read him for pleasure, and it is a platitude to speak of the seriousness of people's pleasures in England. All our greatest novelists—I might even say nearly all our most widely read novelists (and to be widely read is by no means the same as being great)—are preachers; they all have an axe to grind; they may preach Catholicism or Spiritualism, Socialism or Patriotism, they may even preach simply filthiness, and call their publications "problem novels," they all have a gospel, and the success of their preaching is going to depend on their adequacy for their task. If they are to preach in favour of one thing it becomes at once necessary to preach against another, and it is essential for them to know their subject from both points of view. It may be regrettable, but it is undeniable that the spiritual opinions of the present day are influenced far more by novelists than by preachers in pulpits, and the work of fiction is considerably more far-reaching in its effects than the theological tome.

In his novels, as in his life, R.H.B. preached Catholicism, and he wanted, and succeeded in getting, a huge public to read them. If he had merely wanted a large Sunday School circulation of fat and heavily-gilded volumes, perhaps he would himself have been contented to possess a library of Catholic reference works, but he wanted to appeal to the non-Catholic world outside, and

to do so he had to be up to date. Consequently his consumption of all the "best authors" was prodigious. I do not profess to know how he did it, but he read everything even remotely worth reading in the world of modern fiction, publishers and authors were generous in the books they sent him, and he was conscientious in the way he read them. His knowledge of modern writers and their work was very nearly as complete as it is possible for one man's knowledge to be. I once knew him to be caught over a prominent modern novelist, whose rise to fame had been recent and meteoric. He had given a lecture on "The Modern Novel." As usual, he had asked for questions at the end. The following morning he asked me:

"Do you know anything about —— ?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, neither do I, and I was asked about him last night; it was a stumper."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, I hedged; but I won't be caught by him again."

I fancy this was a unique happening. He could tear the heart out of a novel in half an hour, and know all about it at the end; but if he criticized at all, as he often did not, it was invariably the good points of the book that he mentioned. He was uniformly charitable to the less well-known members of his craft, definitely enthusiastic over a few who were great, and to a very few, and a detestable few at that, he was

bitter and scathing. He "saw red" over a certain popular type of sex novel, and his criticisms of such were short and damning. He was accustomed to dismiss them in his lectures on the novel with about one sentence. I remember him discussing this habit with a friend who was anxious that he should attack this type of novel either in a lecture or a book.

"What's the good?" he asked. "I can say all I have to say about the books in one sentence. What I have to say about the writers is libellous."

"But how are you going to fight them?"

"Obviously by educating public taste; they're rotten books from every point of view, and they pander to rotten tastes. What's the good of trying to get the books of one or two lewd women condemned? As likely as not you'd fail, and that would only advertise the muck."

"But something must be done."

"Give the public thousands of good books, in cheap editions"—adding, with his humorous twinkle: "Not too cheap at first."

He felt very bitterly on this, he called it "the prostitution of the novelist's art"; but he had not much that was good to say for those who tried to fight the vice portrayed in the sex novel by writing highly moral books about it—books which revel in true instances often filthier than the fictional ones.

"The Catholic Church has had a lot of experience," he would say, "and she advises you to

put unclean thoughts and temptations away, to say your prayers, and think about something else."

But that was the only sort of book I ever heard him say unkind things about. If his criticisms erred, they erred on the side of generosity; he would often recommend people to read young and almost unknown authors, and if a book by such a one came into his hands, and he liked it, he felt it his duty to write and congratulate the author. I criticized him once for this, and pointed out several what I considered glaring faults, such as mixed metaphors and split infinitives, in a book to the author of which he had written a congratulatory letter.

"Why don't you read the way the public do? You've been reading like a reviewer," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, look here, it's a good story, a new idea, there's lots of power in the writing, that's what the public likes; but a professional reviewer sets out to find fault with a new man, he looks for mixed metaphors and split infinitives; and this chap will probably get a whole lot of bad reviews. Reviews are never charitable."

"But do you really think it's a good book?"

"Yes, I do; I'll tell you what I think. I think if I wrote that book now it would be hailed as 'another masterpiece by Mgr. Benson,' and if I'd written it twelve years ago I'd have got the sort of reviews he'll get; I do hope it won't stop him writing, though."

He was always full of encouragement, he never found a fault without pointing out half a dozen good things to counteract it. " Anybody can write, if he wants to ; but you've got to want hard ; it's the desire that makes the work." If he could find no good points in a book, he would put it quietly on a shelf and say nothing about it.

Of the great writers of the past he had read rather more than most people, and his memory being quite exceptional his knowledge was invaluable. He knew his Shakespeare really well, and of Ruskin, Newman and Stevenson he had perhaps more than average knowledge ; but they were not his daily companions, they were good enough to shoot off at literary aspirants who wrote for advice. But he himself was essentially modern. He was sure of his own foundations in literature, and in orthodoxy he had the cast-iron framework of Catholicism to build on ; so he read modern novelists for their style and the entertainment, even if he could not always agree with their ethics. Undoubtedly his favourite modern novelist was H. G. Wells, and though he could not stand certain of his books, others were his constant companions, always near at hand, constantly in his thoughts. *Kipps* he loved. " With those gorgeous slippers," you might hear him muttering ecstatically at odd moments. " Bolls, fighting with bolls ! I'll show 'im fightin' with bolls ! "—which speaks for itself of his regard for *Mr. Polly* ; but his favourite of all the Wells

books was *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, which he read over and over again, and each time he read it the verdict was the same: "A gorgeous book! Every time I read it I think it's the best book written."

Mary Cholmondeley, too, gave him great pleasure, and he would always recommend her books to his friends. And though he would constantly reiterate: "You must distinguish between a short story writer and a novelist, and he's a short story writer, and a jolly good one," W. Pett Ridge had a fervent admirer in R.H.B.

Convinced of his own ability, and the merit of his own novels, he could and would criticize them quite frankly.

"*Lord of the World* is a first-class book, it's an artistic whole," he would say. "But *The Dawn of All*—no; it's poor stuff, I'm afraid, though I didn't think so when I published it"—but that information was unnecessary. Hugh Benson may have been and was a tradesman, but he was a good one, and never sold anything that he was not convinced was the best he could do. He kept his *Charles II* novel waiting for years because he "couldn't get going"; his hardest critic had to be satisfied first, and that critic was himself.

Encouraging almost to a fault, if that be possible, to the young writer just beginning, appreciative of his equals, frankly admiring of the masters of the art, never condemning except in extreme cases, in literature, as in Religion, Robert Hugh Benson's one striking characteristic was generosity.

CHAPTER IX

BROKEN IN THE WARS

HUGH BENSON could not be called a very strong man, but he was not often ill, and during the time I was intimate with him he was never laid up except by his one long-neglected malady, which caused him extreme pain for months before his operation, and the effects of which remained with him to the end.

Before his operation he behaved towards his ailment as an unbeaten fighter ; the pains came oftener, the periods of freedom became shorter and less frequent, but always he fought, and fought with the intention of winning. At first he was convinced of his own ultimate victory ; but gradually, bit by bit, the ailment got the upper hand ; and still he fought. It was quite obvious to his friends that an operation would be necessary, long before he gave in.

Perhaps if he had not fought quite so hard he might have overcome it by natural means ; but his very confidence was his worst enemy, because it led him to despise his pains and neglect the cause ; and in the end the bill for neglect came in and he paid it characteristically.

He stayed in bed one morning, and after breakfast I went in to see him.

"I can't stand this any longer; I'm going to have that operation," he said.

I was glad and said as much; but I was none too sanguine; I had seen him almost at that stage before.

"How long do you think I ought to knock off work?" was his next query.

"Hadn't you better leave that to your doctor?"

"Oh no; I must arrange it all now. Suppose I knock off for a month?"

"That will be much too short a time."

"Too short! Not at all; I'll be quite all right a fortnight after the operation."

I was quite certain that a month would not be enough; but after all, the chief thing was the operation; once that was all arranged, then he would have to do as he was told; so I let well alone, and, at his request, wrote to the rectors of the churches in which he had engaged to preach during January and cancelled his engagements; a few lectures also had to be cancelled. As luck would have it, he was not as busy as usual that month, and consequently there were not so many people to be disappointed. He was always very conscientious about fulfilling his engagements, and it was a real sorrow to him now to have to cancel them, a sorrow mitigated somewhat by the way the news was received by the disappointed ones. In answer to every letter, the reply came,

full of regret and disappointment ; but in each case there was a note of joy that he had at last consented to have proper treatment.

A few days after he came to this decision he went up to London as usual for the week-end, and on his return announced that he had made all preparations for the operation ; he had interviewed the surgeon, and had called at the nursing home in which it was to be done, and all was arranged for a few days after Christmas. Christmas day he was to spend at home ; after that, on Boxing Day, he was to go to his mother's house in Sussex ; and then he had a preaching engagement for the last Sunday in December in London, after which he was to go into the nursing home on January 1st, and his operation was to be on the 2nd. Everything was cut and dried, the arrangements being all made by himself and entered up in his engagement book, sermons, operation, and trip to Tremans all treated in exactly the same way. But "the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley," and though R.H.B. carried out every item, or at any rate every public item, on his programme, he had over-estimated his strength by exactly twenty-four hours and, completely overcome by pain, he entered his nursing home a day before he had intended—a small thing, it is true, but it shows how long he had let things go, and also how absolutely necessary his operation had become. But to return to Christmas Day.

It was the one of the greater feasts of the Church that he was accustomed to spend at Hare Street, and he loved being able to make it ecclesiastically and socially memorable for the district. He had mapped out his day as he wished to spend it; he was to sing Midnight Mass, and say his other two Masses at half-past eight and nine, and play the organ and preach at eleven. At the children's service in the afternoon he was to play the organ again. He came to me with his suggestions (he was always most particular not to appear to be taking anything upon himself). I suggested that considering the state of his health it would perhaps be better if he went to bed early, had a good night's rest, and said his three Masses at a reasonable hour in the morning and leave the Midnight Mass to me. He was almost like a child in his retort:

"If you don't let me sing the Midnight Mass I won't preach for you."

Eventually he won, or almost won, his point, and it was decided that we should not have the Midnight Mass sung, but that he should say it, and that we should have some carols before and after. That arrangement satisfied him, and he went off at once to practise carols.

On Christmas Eve, a mutual friend, Mr. Joe Rooney, came to stay over Christmas with us and help with the singing and in the entertainment of the children.

After dinner I went to my room to prepare my

sermon, as I was to preach at the Midnight Mass. Shortly after ten R.H.B. came slowly upstairs—he was in no condition to run—and poked his head round my door.

"They're coming already. Shall I go into church and play for them?" And then, as he noticed that I was preparing my sermon: "Sorry; hope I didn't disturb you."

I dissuaded him from his generous desire to play the organ for two hours; and he returned to the parlour.

Shortly before midnight I looked in on him; he was arranging with Mr. Rooney what was to be done at the children's party. I announced:

"The chapel is full, we needn't ring the bell; it'll only disturb the neighbours." I knew well what the effect of my statement would be, and I wasn't disappointed.

"Disturb them!" he cried. "I should think we will disturb them; they'll kick up enough row with their old bells next week just because it's New Year's Day; it's a jolly good thing to remind them that a Saviour was born at Christmas."

The man was in agony all through that Midnight Mass. I suggested to him at the Credo that he should go straight on and that we would cut the sermon.

"Oh no, no!" he said, "you've cut quite enough already."

And after Mass he toiled up the rickety stairs to the organ gallery to play for the carols.

On Christmas morning I went into the dining-room before my Masses. He was having breakfast. For the first time he showed the "white feather."

"I can't preach to-day," he said, "I really can't. I'm awfully sorry; but I'll give you all the points of a first-class sermon if you like."

I was sorry, too, both for my own sake and for that of the congregation; but R.H.B. was in no condition to preach, and it was quite obvious that he ought to have been in bed. I thought perhaps he would lie down, and mentioned it.

"Oh no!" he said. "I must play the organ."

And he did; though at the times during Mass that he was not playing, as I learnt afterwards, he was lying on the floor in acute pain.

All the children, even from the uttermost ends of a very far-reaching parish, were collected in chapel on Christmas afternoon, where they had a service all to themselves, after which they were entertained to tea in Hare Street House. After tea each child received a present from Saint Nicholas (Mr. Rooney in all the Christmassy raiment of Santa Claus), and so we concluded our parochial Christmas. The mixing of all the children, rich and poor alike, at this Christmas party, was a very happy and a truly Catholic sight. The children enjoyed it immensely, and I imagine the "grown-ups" who had succeeded in getting in on one pretext or another, enjoyed it as much; but nobody enjoyed it more than did the invalid host.

The following day R.H.B. left for Tremans to see his mother, and I did not see him again until two days after his operation, when I visited him in a nursing home in Mayfair.

It was a bitterly cold day, and I had climbed what seemed interminable stairs, and in a room at the top of the house, assigned to him because it was quiet, was R.H.B., a little pale, obviously nervy, but smoking a cigarette. I went towards his bed with outstretched hand, only to be greeted with :

" No ! Do you mind not shaking hands with me ? Give me your hand " ; and taking my hand in his left, he pressed it against the fingers of his right hand. " You see," he said, " I'm feeling all outside myself at present ; my nervous system is extended quite a foot all round me ; it's all most interesting. I'll love talking to my mother about it ; she understands these things so well. Shall I tell you about it ? "

Then he went off and described all he knew about his operation, his eyes were all over the place as usual, and his mind was as obviously alert as ever ; but his body was strangely still—I say " strangely " because normally R.H.B. used every bit of himself to talk with. He described his feelings on going into the operating-room, on being given the anæsthetic—how he thought it was never going to act, and the next thing he knew was that someone was stroking his hand, and just as he realized it the stroking

stopped; the stopping he had looked upon as a legitimate grievance. "Go on, go on!" he had said. "And it was all over then and I was back in this bed; but it was wonderful—it's all going into a book."

"But how do you feel now?" I asked.

"Oh! the pain's pretty beastly; but it's a blue pain, not the red one, thank goodness." Then in explanation: "You see, the blue pain is a dull one, and the red one is piercing and hot."

"Are you quite happy and comfortable?"

"Yes, rather! Everybody's awfully kind and nice, and I'm to be allowed visitors from now on, but not too many. My mother will come, and Hornung, I hope—he's been asking about me."

And then the door opened, and the original of "Miss Brance's delicate voice" (cfr. *Initiation*) said:

"Now don't you think that's enough conversation for the first time, Monsignor?"

"Yes, yes, Sister." And then to me: "Don't forget to tell all the Buntingford people how grateful I am for their prayers, and come again soon."

It is in no way disparaging to R.H.B. to say that he did not bear pain well, and in saying that I do not mean that he was not patient—he was. But he allowed his pains to get on his nerves more than perhaps most people would have done, and, after all, that was part of the man's character. When

he undertook to do a thing he gave himself heart and soul to it, and having decided that the time had come to take notice of an old enemy, he gave himself over to being ill whole-heartedly, and he was never at any pains to distract himself from his sufferings. Patient he certainly was, and very obedient; unquestioningly he accepted remedies and medicines, he was never difficult, and always grateful; much had to be done for him, and it is much to his credit that his nurses were devoted not only from a sense of duty but because he was a nice man to do things for, and strikingly and invariably polite. He had the best care and attention procurable in London, and was treated with a kindness of which he had never dreamt in his wildest imaginings about nursing homes.*

During his illness and early convalescence there were, as might have been expected, a very large number of inquiries made both by letter and at the door of the nursing-home, and since I have heard it stated that the Hugh Benson *clientèle* was composed principally of women, it is perhaps well to put it on record that a good two-thirds of these inquirers were men. Of course it was impossible to admit all who wished to see him, and those whose duty it was to make him well again

* The author has pleasure in recording Monsignor Benson's gratitude to the three directors and to the staff of this nursing home, and in joining in its expression, because he too, eighteen months later, was the recipient of equal care and attention. And his gratitude, though perhaps as great as R.H.B.'s, can never be an adequate recompense for the generous kindness received.

did not always find it easy to guard him from his importunate if devoted friends—the sort who would say :

" I know Father Benson would give me a few moments, if you would only tell him I'm here."

And of course he would have done so, if he had been told, because he was incapable of refusing such a request if he could possibly grant it ; but luckily for him the guardians of his convalescence had the inestimable blessing of tact and were able to give a refusal as definite as it was polite.

His mother saw him often, but not often enough to satisfy him ; he was glad, however, that she could come as often as she did.

" You know," he said to me once, " I could never express all my gratitude to these people ; but I'll dedicate my operation book to them. But my mother's awfully good at that sort of thing, much better than I am."

Another regular visitor was Mr. Hornung, who, at the end of his period in the nursing home, took R.H.B. to his mother's house at Horsted Keynes ; this illness cemented a great friendship between these two writers.

During this period R.H.B got a great deal of pleasure out of a gramophone. He never seemed to tire of it, and the rather mournful strains of *El Dorado* were invariably soothing to him.

The month he had allowed himself in the *schema* he had drawn up for his illness was, of

course, extended ; and it was not until Lent that he did any more work. During Lent he had undertaken to preach in the church of San Silvestro in Capite, Rome; and though all his friends tried to dissuade him he insisted upon making the journey and preaching the sermons, though to preach he had to sit on a chair in the pulpit. He went to Rome a sick man, and he worked hard in a climate that never agreed with him. After each sermon he wrote down all that he had said, and the result can be found in his book *Paradoxes of Catholicism*. He came back apparently a fit man ; he was in harness again, and in the best of spirits ; but there was something different. Before his operation he had been working no harder than he did afterwards ; before, we saw him careering along, as one nearing a mountain top, in the full gaze of the world, and his tendency was ever upward, the man had not reached his physical prime ; great though he was, Benson, like all great men, ever gave promise of even greater things to come. Afterwards, he still careered along at the same pace ; he worked as hard, he wrote at least as well—*Oddsfish* and *Initiation* are as good as anything he has written—but the tendency was no longer upward. Hugh Benson had reached the summit of physical fitness and was beginning the descent ; and, by an odd coincidence, just as the beginning of this descent was when preaching, far away from home, in Rome, so too the beginning of the end was when preaching twelve months

later in New York. Truly, R.H.B. was broken in the wars.

His residence in the nursing home was instrumental, at a later date, in bringing about a meeting, strange only in that it had not come about before, between Father Bernard Vaughan and Hugh Benson. Some months after R.H.B. had left, Father Bernard Vaughan went to the same home to do a rest cure, and one of the Directors (the Miss Brance of *Initiation*) conceived the idea that these two would be good for each other. Never was a happier meeting arranged. When R.H.B. got the invitation to come and see Father Vaughan he was absolutely delighted; at first he would not tell me anything, then only that he was going to the home to see a patient, then that the patient was illustrious, then that he was a preacher, then:

"Oh! why don't you guess?"

And I guessed and guessed right, and helped to hurry R.H.B. to catch his train.

I do not know how Father Vaughan regarded R.H.B.—I have heard, and I believe, with the greatest affection and respect. Certainly his affection and respect for R.H.B. were no greater than R.H.B.'s for him; R.H.B. looked on him as one might expect a young brave to look on an old chief, as a brilliant young officer on a great old general, as a young colt on an old war-horse. It is in no way an exaggeration to say his affectionate regard was as that of a son to his father. For

a long time Hugh Benson had reverenced Father Bernard Vaughan from afar, and in the last year of his life they met, these two great men, both doing so well the supreme work of their vocation, the two English Catholic priests best known to their Protestant countrymen. One might have expected the mantle of the old man to fall on to the shoulders of the young one; no one would have thought that the old man would have to pick up that of his younger colleague, but the young colt is dead, and the old war-horse is still "carrying on."

CHAPTER X

TEXT-BOOKS

In the choice of a profession there are, as a rule, several stages to be passed through; I do not mean that a boy is attracted by several walks of life before he finally decides upon what he is to be, but I mean that there are various phases of his attraction to the profession to which he will ultimately devote his life.

The average boy is attracted from time to time during his boyhood to the career of a soldier, a pirate, a bushranger and a sailor ; but such are childish attractions and the desire for them rarely materializes. As he grows older he will probably and very naturally be drawn towards his father's profession, and, I suppose, as often as not it is to his father's profession that he devotes his life; it is in his blood, it is just exactly what you might expect.

Say the father is a soldier ; the whole of the son's childhood is spent in a military environment. It is true that he will possibly lead an ordinary civilian life at school ; but even there the soldier in him will be manifest ; he will take more kindly to discipline than the ordinary boy, his cubicle will be adorned with the portraits of soldiers

instead of those of cricketers. So much for the natural inclination. If, however, the father wants his boy to follow in his footsteps, and to adopt a military career, he will not be content with the child's natural leaning towards things military; but he will foster the inclination, watch over it, and help it to grow. The first toys will be soldiers and model fortresses, the father playing with the child will instruct him in the use of toy sandbags, the relative position of artillery, cavalry and infantry, show him where his tin machine-guns can do most damage to his leaden "enemy," and by all sorts of unconsciously insinuating and artificial means cherish the young shoots that have sprung from the naturally-sown seeds of militarism.

As the child grows he listens with open lips and glowing eyes to Henty stories, his dreams take him with Moore to Corunna, or in his nursery cot he struggles in Canadian snows under Wolfe. At school he joins, of course, the O.T.C., and receives a valuable and simply technical instruction in military training. He is no longer absorbed in Henty's heroes; though the Henty books are still his most treasured possessions, he no longer usurps in his imagination a character created by another man. His imagination still runs riot, for he is still a boy, but the marvellous adventures and the hairbreadth escapes are of his own manufacture, for he is beginning to think for himself on the definitely technical but carefully chosen lines retailed to him through his O.T.C. commander.

By this time he has come through two stages, the stage of fostered attraction, and that of elementary application ; but he is not yet committed to the profession of arms. What training he has received will be of undoubted benefit to him as a soldier, and would also be extremely valuable to him in any other profession. His real soldier training begins when he himself begins to act, or perhaps it would be better to say to react, to the treatment he has received ; when he begins to be interested, not in the "suits and trappings" of militarism, but in the dry bones of the profession on its technical side ; when he begins to read military text-books instead of military novels; when the histories of campaigns begin to interest him rather than the stories of imaginary heroes in one or other of them ; when, in fact, he begins to study the profession of the soldier.

It is needless to say that no matter how much military blood a child may have in his veins, no matter how military the environment of his upbringing, no matter how ardent the desire of his father, if you had presented him in his days before he went to school, or when he was at school, with a collection of technical books on military training and insisted upon his studying them, you would have at once extinguished any spark of military fire that might have been enkindled in him. Before he becomes a soldier he has to pass through four very important stages, and at each stage he has to be guided by a specialist in that particular

period. The paternal influence, affectionate and insinuating, of the soldier-father is followed by the attractive talent of the military novelist, which in its turn is followed by the elastic instructive talent of a commander of an O.T.C.—in all of which the military pill is sugar-coated. It is only in the hands of the military professor that the sugar-coating disappears, and what has hitherto been an inclination becomes a profession, the serious side of which is to interest the boy for the rest of his life.

The analogy between the upbringing of a soldier and the development of a soul is obvious; the progress of a soul towards Catholicity, or even in Catholicism, is through almost identical stages, and at each stage the soul has to be handled in a different way. To the beginner, be he child in years or in the faith, abstruse theology and sublime mysticism are equally out of place, and no priest would dream of introducing a soul to them before it had gone through all the preliminary stages.

Now the average Catholic priest is a sort of general practitioner in the medicine of the soul, he has a working knowledge of all the branches of his profession and he can deal with any ordinary matter; but from time to time "cases" come to his notice that need special treatment, and then the services of a specialist are called in, and in each of the stages of a soul's progress there are to be found, in varying numbers, priests who are eminently suited for that particular stage—not

that they are especially set aside for that purpose, either by their superiors or by themselves, but it becomes manifest to the man himself and to those around him that So-and-So is admirably suited to, and more than ordinarily successful in, a particular type of case. Father A. may be wonderfully successful with children, while Father B., who cannot control children at all, may be able to manage neurotic women. Father C. may have a particularly sympathetic understanding of the difficulties of Anglicans, whereas the obvious man for a Nonconformist to submit his difficulties to is Father D.; and any one of these, or innumerable other works, together with his ordinary "general practice," fills up the life of a priest.

It is regretted by many as a drawback in Hugh Benson's life that he was no good as a "general practitioner." Whether it was a drawback is a matter of opinion; it is an undoubted fact that he could not do the everyday humdrum work of the ordinary priest. He realized it, and always felt that it was wanting in him; he loved the poor, could preach to them in the way they liked—but he could not visit them with any success; he was always willing to try, and several times when he announced his intention of going for a walk in a particular direction, I would ask him to look in upon some family.

"Is anybody ill there, or do you want me to get somebody to his duties, or what?" he would ask.

"Oh, no; it's just an ordinary parochial visit. They like to see a priest, and it shows that we're interested in them," I would say.

"All right, I'll do my best; but I'm no good at this kind of job." And off he would go, and do his best, and that best was usually rather poor. He would be uncomfortable, and the people he was visiting still more so; and probably a few days afterwards I would hear:

"Father Benson is such a nice man—but so nervous."

After one such visit I asked him:

"Well, how did you find old Mrs. Jones?"

"Oh! she was very well, and very pleased to see me." And then, after a pause: "But I didn't know what to do when she began to dust a chair with her apron."

Benson was not a "general practitioner" at all; he tried to be one for a time at Cambridge, but gave it up very soon. But he was a specialist, and an excellent one, in several branches of a priest's work, and a very fair division of his books would be to look at them as various types of text-books for the soul's progress; and by so doing we can see how wonderfully wide his scope was.

He could, and did, appeal to children. Of his love for them I propose to speak later; but the mere mention of his *Child's Rule of Life* brings to one's notice the work he has done for the Catholic child. The book is simple, beautiful and complete, and is rapidly becoming indispensable in the

Catholic nursery. Successful though this appeal was, his appeal to grown-up children, children in religious matters or in Catholicism, was far wider and even more successful. In every one of his novels we have the sugared pill of Catholicism, the layers of sugar varying in the different books; in them all he has written for the enormous educated public who knows next to nothing about the Church and who, for some extraordinary reason, can without any difficulty be persuaded to believe, or half believe, any stories, no matter how extravagant, about Catholics. There are certain educated ignoramuses, who, professing to write novels in the evangelical interest, succeed in publishing the most utter bunkum about Catholics in general and Jesuits in particular—and not only publish it, but sell it, in vast quantities too. To any reader who knows anything about Catholicism, such books are always diverting and often amusing, but the majority of the readers of such stuff know nothing of Catholicism, and if for a moment they begin to doubt the *bona fides* of the perpetrators, or to think their statements rather far-fetched, one glance at the benign and patriarchal physiognomies of the authors, constantly emblazoned in the pages of those semi-religious, semi-political newspapers whose business it is to boom them, sets all doubt at rest. For those readers R.H.B. has done the same work, in one great section of his novels, that Henty has done for the budding soldier.

In another batch of books he appeals to the mystically inclined, to the sort of people whose natural inclinations would lead them in the direction of "prayer-shops." To get at this rapidly-increasing public is very difficult, and especially so for the ordinary severely practical Catholic priest. He calls their pseudo-mysticism "rot," and at once becomes useless to them, being "too material." Now R.H.B. had an undoubted talent for presenting Catholic mysticism in a popular form of fiction. To a large number who read his historical and social novels with interest and avidity, his mystical novels are "hopeless" and "impossible," and they "can't see why on earth he wanted to waste his time writing them"; but there is another and an almost equally numerous class who think he wrote bad history, that his local colour was faulty, and who lose patience with his social books. "Why can't he leave country houses and the aristocracy alone?" they say, and then add: "But you know some of his mystical books are really quite wonderful."

But it is only in his definitely religious books that we see Benson as a real specialist, and in each and every one of them it is strikingly evident that he was a lecturer and preacher rather than a writer. In *Christ in the Church*, in *The Friendship of Christ*, in the *Paradoxes*, and in *The Religion of the Plain Man*, we have R.H.B. at his very best. It is the man as he was. Each sermon, for they are all sermons (in the first three mentioned this

is acknowledged), the reader can see again the eager face of the preacher, as he stretched out over the front of the pulpit, pouring out the love of God, and spitting conviction at his ever-present antagonist. They are not great theological works, and are, mercifully, completely lacking in theological terminology. Only the other day I heard this fact deplored by a young and excellent priest. He was discussing *Christ in the Church.*

"It can't be a first-rate book," he declared. "It is impossible to write a book about the mystical body of Christ and not bring in sanctifying Grace."

But it is the very fact that his spiritual books are different from everybody else's that makes them so valuable. The great body of the reading laity do not read the ordinary spiritual book, but they do read Benson. They do not read most spiritual books, because they do not understand the technical terminology which seems to be inseparable from spiritual writings, and it is because such terminology is absent from R.H.B.'s books, because those books are so eminently readable, because to read them is a real pleasure and not a necessary duty, that *Christ in the Church* and the rest of them are the most popular and consequently the most beneficial spiritual books of the present day.

Perhaps they will never be the resort of the expert in search of advanced theological learning; but they are the resort of a very large number of

teachers—I mean the clergy—whose main object is to present those theological teachings necessary to the people in a way the people can understand. R.H.B. provided Catholic material for the Kindergarten in his Children's Books of Rhymes; he provided for those very difficult people in the middle classes of the school of Catholicism with his novels, historical for the Lower Third, ranging up to mystical for the Upper Fifth; and in his definitely religious text-books, in his written sermons, he has provided material for the Sixth.

As we work upwards, from the *Child's Rule of Life* to *The Friendship of Christ*, we see in each book the tendency to write giving way to the desire to preach, and the more he preaches the more natural he becomes. He was a man of parts, and each part we see separately in his various books; but in his sermons, written or preached, we have the whole man, every part in its proper place, the product of the education he had provided for others, a maker of graduated text-books, and the outcome of their study. He was a man of the people, he wrote for the people, he preached for them, and it is to the people you must go, and not to their professors, if you are to get a true, adequate, and real appreciation of Hugh Benson.

CHAPTER XI

CONSCRIPTION FOR CHILDREN

One of the most striking differences between a conscription and a non-conscription country is in the attitude of the people. The people of France, for years now accustomed to compulsory military service, not only take it as a matter of course, but realize, too, the glory of their position as soldiers of their country. Their country is their own in a very real way; it is not a State for the upkeep of which they have to pay so much annually, like a sort of friendly society. For the ordinary normal peace-time procedure they may be quite willing to hire experts to do their work for them, but when it comes to something really serious, then the people of France set out at once to do it for themselves. The war was from the moment it began the people's war, and the people set out to carry it on; less important things can be left to specialists; but when the existence of the country is at stake then it becomes the affair of the people, and all else is put aside in order that it may be attended to. But in countries where there is no compulsory service, the very word "conscription" is abhorrent; in our own country, for instance, the idea was hated, highly-trained men were paid to fight the country's

battles in very much the same way as others are paid to collect the country's taxes or to make the country's laws. War was not to be seriously considered as an affair of the people: it was a clog on the wheel of progress, and its only effect was to give, usually for a very short time, a small part of the honour due to the professional soldier. For whatever we may say at present, the fact remains that in peace time the ordinary soldier is looked down upon. At the beginning of the war a non-commissioned officer explained to me that the reason he was applying for a commission was for the sake of his children. His actual words were: "If they have to say in the future: 'My father was a soldier,' it will be counted a disgrace; if they can say he was an officer it will be a very different thing." And such is undoubtedly true; but it would be impossible in a country with a system of compulsory service, and, thank God, in the future it will be impossible in this country too.

The profession of arms, except in the case of a commissioned officer, we have ever considered in this country a profession for "wasters," and perhaps there may have been some truth in it; but it is to those "wasters" that this country now owes its very existence. The old standing army was composed of what our thoroughly useful people in shops and offices would have called the "useless classes," and the country's first call was answered too by the other useless ones, from the

"knut" in Piccadilly to the lounger in Commercial Road, while the useful ones showed their loyalty by a lavish display of flags, and, when it was issued, a generous investment in War Loan, which incidentally allowed them a better interest than they could get almost anywhere else.

It was from those "useful" people that our first batches of conscripts were drawn; and if there was one thing more strikingly noticeable than another it was the difference in attitude of the British conscript compared with that of his French brother. The British conscript is dragged from his civilian life, and comes unwillingly and with a grumble; the Frenchman goes to the service of his country with a joy equal to that of a dog freed from his leash; a smile, often through tears, is on his face, and he chalks up "Vive la France," or "Vive la Classe 1918," or whatever it may be, wherever he goes. And the difference in attitude is absolutely general, for the one has been brought up to think first of himself, and after that there is never any time for anything else, and the other has always been taught that he has a duty outside himself to his country before he is allowed to consider number one.

Our own countrymen are quite certainly selfish: they are proud of their country and boast of its prowess, but they are unwilling to share in its burdens, and, in fact, are partial to a one-sided bargain. Such an attitude is bound to have an adverse effect upon the religion of the people, and,

consequently, in England we have a whole collection of little religions, practically unknown outside English-speaking countries, and designed to fit in with the ideas and feelings of the people, religions which will give a veneer of respectability to their patrons without being too exacting.

Now such an attitude is no good to Catholicism, and in the work of the conversion of England to which he gave his life, Hugh Benson realized that it was necessary to infuse into the English people a new public spirit—a spirit of obedience, devotion, loyalty and subservience to the Church, which is essential to any Catholic. It was, he was convinced, at once one of the most difficult and essential lessons for the average Englishman to learn—that Charity does not begin at home ; it may end there, but it has to begin at God, descend through our neighbour and end at home ; the Catholic must think outside himself first. To get to that attitude means really hard work, easy enough in one's first fervour, but troublesome and difficult as time goes on, and the demands of the Church begin to lose their newness. The Englishman has not got the habit of obedience : he feels that the blind acceptance of any teaching is subversive of his liberty, that his rights, intellectual, moral, or physical, are being encroached upon. Of course in elementary learning he is willing to accept first principles, in his trade or profession he is willing to accept other people's teaching, in that sort of thing he realizes that

others may, and very often do, know better than he does; but when it comes to religion, here he decides that it is a case of every man for himself, and one man is as good as another. For to our countrymen religion is placed on a quite different plane from everyday work's, and the business man who, in city affairs, is ready and anxious to accept the *ipse dixit* of his business equal, or at any rate of one slightly his superior, in religion, a thing about which he knows next to nothing, will not even accept the teaching of the most learned masters the world has ever produced.

Hugh Benson saw that it was going to simplify matters very considerably for the Catholic clergy of England if the Catholics of this country could be brought to realize what an everyday affair Catholicism is. No one had a greater appreciation than he had of the excellence of English Catholics, of their devotion and obedience. But he felt always that there was something lacking. He felt that their religion lacked that same something which is lacking in the loyalty to their country of a great number of "satisfactory" Englishmen—I do not mean "slackers," I mean that large class which, as soon as they realized the necessity of setting aside their own immediate personal interests, did so, and took an active part in the bearing of their country's burden, but were nevertheless surprised that such should be their duty. They took their duty upon themselves. In the Frenchman of the same class it was not

necessary to take it upon himself, it was within him, it was almost as natural to him as breathing, he had imbibed his national obligations with his mother's milk, it was part and parcel of the man. It was Benson's desire to do something towards making active leavening Catholicism part and parcel of the English Catholic.

To do this he set out to conscribe the Catholic child. He had definite ideas as to how a child ought to be brought up. Whether on the whole they were wise, I cannot say. He practised on a ward he had ; but the ward had left Hare Street before I went there, and I never saw the system in action. The departure of that small boy was a great blow to R.H.B. ; he was constantly talking about him, and he had lavished most of the love of a very affectionate nature upon him. It had once been necessary to punish this boy, and R.H.B. had done it conscientiously ; he told me about that punishment several times ; it had been a long drawn out and serious affair, and had necessitated considerable screwing up of courage on Benson's part, followed by a long lecture, an adequate spanking, a period for consideration during which resolutions were made, and a complete burying of the hatchet. I am convinced that in this case, at any rate, the punisher suffered more than the punished.

His idea on the religious training of children was to give them a grounding at once adequate and not boring, and with that object he wrote his

two books of rhymes, *The Child's Rule of Life* and *Old Testament Rhymes* ; it was also at the back of his mind in doing his share in *The Alphabet of Saints*. He wanted religious truths to stick in children's heads in the form of nursery rhymes, and to a certain extent he has succeeded ; he has given two beautiful books to the nursery, and a valuable suggestion to Catholic writers with a similar ability. His rhymes are not always good, but they are lilting, and for children that is more useful ; they were written almost entirely on the backs of sevenpenny novels on railway journeys. Much time was spent in suggesting and criticizing Mr. Pippet's beautiful pictures ; in the pictures R.H.B. demanded beauty and accuracy, and he was fortunate enough to get an artist who could give him both.

The rhymes were meant to be insinuating, to get Catholic truths right into the very life of Catholic children, to make them live their Catholicity. Religion is taught in England very much after the manner of a lesson, and lessons are hardly ever really pleasant to the pupil; the child cannot grasp the object after which his instructors are striving, and the means presented to him are irksome.

I have already written rather at length about the children's Christmas parties at Hare Street ; but even at the risk of repeating myself I will mention them again, because they were started not alone with the idea of keeping the children together, and not even primarily with that object ;

their chief object was to put the most popular secular feast of the year in its proper religious setting. Father Christmas is to the English child a beneficent old gentleman with a marvellous gift for descending the dirtiest chimneys without in any way damaging his gorgeous apparel; R.H.B.'s idea was that the children should see in the popular Father Christmas the very Catholic St. Nicholas, the trappings and make-up were identical, and the gifts were distributed with the traditional generosity. But the child who, on entering the decorated dining-room, exclaimed with a startled intaking of breath: "Oh, Father Christmas!" went away at the end of the party hugging a toy which was looked upon as long as it lasted as a gift from St. Nicholas.

His whole idea was to appeal to children in the ways they want to be appealed to, which is not necessarily the same as appealing to them in accordance with the methods recommended by those who have made a special study of "the child, his habits and inclinations."

He wanted to make the Catholicity of the child something nearly akin to the Frenchman's love of his country; I do not mean a mild serene emotional benevolence, but a love that is fire; a lust for God; a love that will show itself in a desire for action; a sense of duty; a pride in possession; the sort of love that not only makes for good Catholic lives, but is an aggressive love glorying in its Catholicity and the propagation thereof.

CHAPTER XII

THE WAR FORGOTTEN

HUGH BENSON was undoubtedly very versatile, and his versatility got him a famous reputation both as a writer and as a speaker; but nearly all his utterances and writings centred round the one point—Catholicism; and it was his zeal for the spread of Catholicism that gave him his power. He was an apostle, and as such was invariably successful; when he used his powers away from his one great object, when he forgot that he was a soldier fighting in a great war and let himself wander away on side issues, he was frequently unsuccessful and never great.

Apart from his charming religious plays, the *Nativity Play*, *The Upper Room*, and *The Cost of a Crown*, quite a number of his close acquaintances never knew that he even tried to be a playwright, and yet he wrote at least two plays with the object of having them produced at a West End theatre. He was very interested in the theatre, knew next to nothing about the stage, and loved it.

It was once suggested that his play, *The Cost of a Crown*, written for and produced at the Ushaw centenary, should be "put on" in the West End of London, some friends and admirers offering to

supply the money for the production. Benson, convinced of the merit of the play, began to look forward to new fields of conquest. Critics who had seen the play at Ushaw pointed out that it had an anti-climax, and he set to work on alterations. The play was as good as produced when the whole thing fell through; the money was not forthcoming, the "backers" being frightened by the amount required. Whether such a definitely religious play would have had a successful run in London it is, of course, impossible to say, but the failure to get it produced rather damped R.H.B.'s ardour, and for some time he let the theatre alone; but it always had a fascination for him, and I was hardly surprised when one day, on his return from spending a month in Scotland, he announced:

"I've written a play."

"Oh, do tell me all about it," I said.

"Well," he said, "it's not a bit like anything I've ever done before. It's a completely secular work; I've got a fine game of cards in it. But I'll read it to you after dinner."

And he did, and as he read it, it was very interesting indeed. I have only the vaguest recollection of what it was about; but I know we were quite carried away by it at the time, and we all thought it was bound to go well.

The big scene in it was the game of cards, and on that the whole action turned, and it was that very game of cards that ruined the play's chances of production. He submitted it to a famous

producer, who read the play himself, and praised it. "But," he said, "it would be impossible to get that game of cards over," and as the game was essential to the play, the play fell through.

Then, later, he tried again, and wrote another play round a true and most terrible story. I have no intention of reproducing the story here for several reasons, the only one that really matters being that I do not think he would wish it. It was what I believe is called in theatrical circles "a gripping melodrama"; there was no religious element, but there was a most wonderfully tenacious "grip." It was a terrifying story, written with striking realism, but it was never submitted to a producer. R.H.B. felt that he could not have it produced under his own name, and therefore decided not to produce it at all.

Another of his "off duty" works was reviewing, but he only very rarely reviewed books during the latter years of his life, and nearly all his earlier work in that direction was in the nature of "potboiling." It did not appeal to him as a task, and when he was sufficiently in demand for work of his own he left other people's books alone. I remember talking to him about reviewing.

"There are only three steps in the reviewer's ladder," he said. "The first is the ordinary small-print, anonymous review, always critical, seldom appreciative, and usually uncharitable—that sort of reviewing is done by unsuccessful authors and journalists. Then there is the signed

review, which is much more valuable. And at the top of the ladder is the reviewer who can say "I" all the way through his review; he is a great person and usually writes an article on the subject of the book he is reviewing.

I asked him why he had given up reviewing.

"I didn't quite give it up," he said, "I rather dropped out of it, and I'm not sorry that I did drop out of it. It was always unsatisfactory work, and you are so liable to pick up a book with the one object of finding out its faults, and, having found them—and it's not usually a hard job—you write about them, and having damned the book completely you shove in a few remarks like 'showing promise,' 'a strong scene,' 'vivid imagination' and 'realistic dialogue' as a sort of sop in case it should turn out to be a good book."

I suggested that all reviews were not unfavourable.

"No," he said, "but most of them are. Of course, once you become successful as an author, it becomes the proper thing to praise you, and no matter what sort of stuff you write you can be sure of a good review. But if you have a public of your own, no review will either make or mar your book—you are bound to go into two editions, and the number you go into after that alone tells you if you have suited your public. No," he concluded, "I don't hold with reviewing, it's too difficult to be either conscientious or charitable."

During the last two years of his life a halfpenny newspaper with an enormous circulation was seized with a brilliant idea, and got a large number of popular novelists to write accounts of football matches. The writers were required to be present at the match, but the account was apparently not intended to be a report, at least that is what one gathered from the fact that usually the match was reported elsewhere in the paper by an expert journalist.

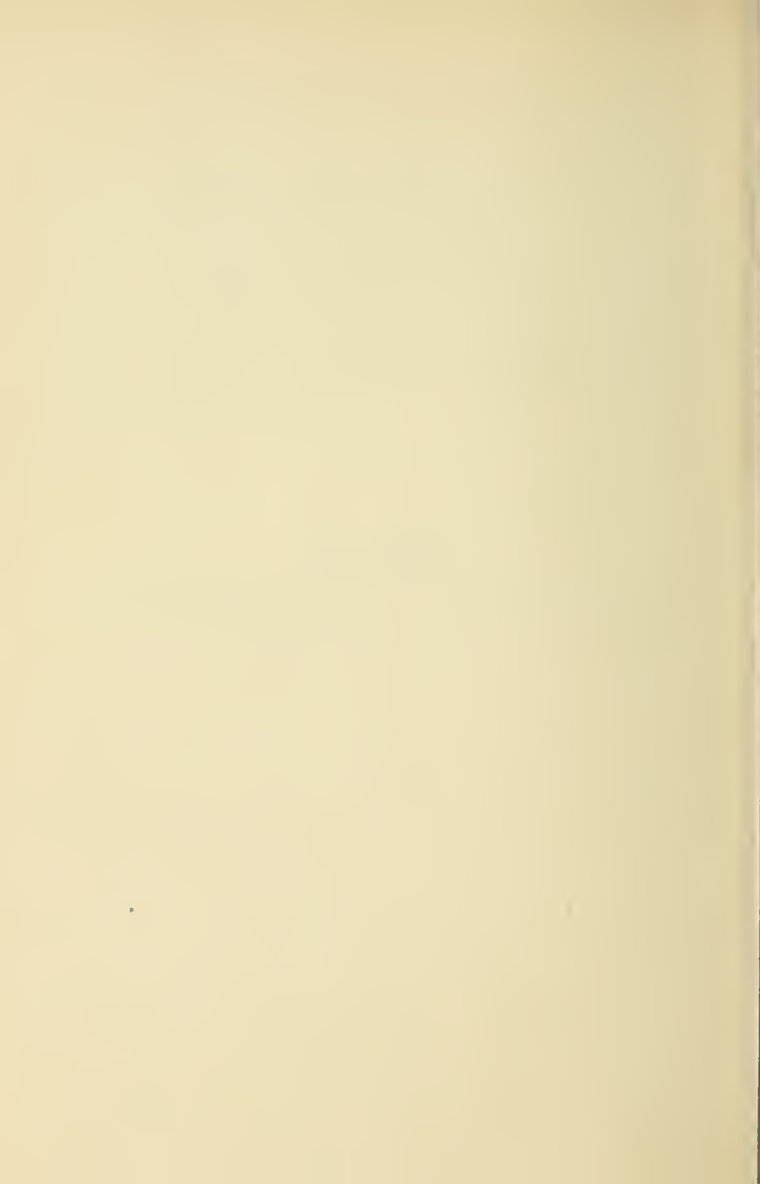
Benson was naturally pressed into service, and found it both remunerative and amusing. He was profoundly ignorant of the laws of Association football, and more than once, when he had seen an opportunity for a bit of graphic description of the scoring of a supposed goal, expressed his strong disapproval of the off-side rules. But his accounts, apart from the fact that any one of them would have done for any football match ever played, were always interesting; he could describe things in an interesting way and did so, and he at any rate brought a new outlook into his accounts. In one he compared the goalkeeper's nursing of the ball to a maiden aunt nursing a baby, and he usually managed to get some interesting or amusing point into each story.

But in ordinary journalism, as in reviewing, and, apart from his religious plays, in play-writing too, he was not great, and often not even successful. He was out of his element; he was essentially a soldier and his place was on the barrack square

or in the field ; he was second to none at his own business, and he was great when he stuck to it. He had one great object in life—the Catholic Church and its extension. He preached for it, he wrote for it ; and each sermon or lecture, each book, pamphlet or article written with his eye upon his enemy, achieved its object. He was a great fighter, but when he forgot the war he became a mediocre journalist.

PART III

IN ACTION (R.H.B. THE PREACHER)



CHAPTER XIII

REVEILLE

In the two preceding parts of this book we have seen Hugh Benson as a soldier in training for the War with the enemies of Christ, surrounded by the things he loved, doing the things that gave him pleasure, preparing for future conflicts rather than resting or recovering from the past—a thing once finished was done with so far as he was concerned; he would talk of his past sermons and missions, but that was because doing so interested his hearers, not because it interested him—his interests were in the future. I have several times heard him tell of his motor-mission to East Dereham, of the hostile reception he got, of the police escort that was necessary to get him to his hotel, and the like; and it was all very entertaining and interesting to those who listened; but he himself was far more interested when he spoke of the possibility of another mission to East Dereham, and what he would do and say if the opportunity occurred.

As a writer we have seen him leavening the novel-reading public with Catholicism; he published book after book, all with the one avowed object of making the Catholic Church known. It was no part of his object to paint a rosy picture of

the Church ; he presented her with all her imperfections obvious to the reader.

" After all," he would say, " the Church is very like an ordinary human being, and love for a creature merely on account of that creature's good points is neither very much good nor very lasting—if your love is going to be any good it must be in spite of faults and failings. So preach the Catholic Church as it is. Make it known, and it will soon make itself loved."

And it was the one object of his books to make the Church known, and to do so he fired book after book at the world, in much the same way as an enemy drops shell after shell into a bombarded town, and with very much the same object. But, like his sermons and missions, once they were accomplished they lost interest for him ; discussion of them was forced on him from time to time, and though he would discuss them adequately, it was with none of the fiery interest with which he used to speak of them when he was busy writing them. The book that claimed his interest was always the one on the stocks ; and I have even known him pass an adverse criticism on one of his novels—it was about the only adverse one it got—even before it was published. His publishers had held up the book for a time, as its immediate predecessor, as yet on the six-shilling list, was still going strong, and R.H.B., with characteristic energy, was well into a new book when he got the proof. At dinner that night he said :

" I've just been looking over —— ; you know I don't think it's quite up to my average."

I laughed in his face, for only a few weeks before he had repeatedly declared, when writing it :

" It's quite the best thing I've ever done."

He always lived in the future, and never managed to be a monument over his own grave.

It was in the pulpit, however, that we saw the man himself, R.H.B. as he really was, the embodiment of energy and enthusiasm, his Catholicism no longer veiled in a novel, the pill no longer sugar-coated ; the barrack-square and the parade ground were left behind, the attractive full-dress uniform cast aside, and the useful service dress donned. His every preliminary movement showed the man preparing for action, the preoccupied air as he climbed the pulpit steps, the downcast eyes and uneasy expression as he found the places in the notice-book, the occasionally inaccurate and sometimes stumbling way he read the notices ; there was none of the assurance of the confident society preacher about R.H.B., and as he pushed the books aside, those wide-open staring eyes with which he looked at his congregation for the first time, the trembling under-lip and restless obtruding tongue, all betokened far more the soldier anxious to get at his foe. I have seen the same expression, the same odd little tricks, over and over again on the faces of soldiers waiting through the din of a bombardment for the order to advance. A hissing intaking of breath, the scriptural text

reference always before the text, the text itself almost spat out, an accurate though very rapid sign of the cross, and then—a torrent.

For his words came from him like a cascade; they seemed to be hustling each other in his mouth and rushed through his tightly closed teeth at an incredible pace, his body was stretched out over the pulpit, his face flushed, his unblinking eyes staring at each individual in the congregation. He never stumbled, was never at a loss for a word; his gestures, crude often, were always apt, as only spontaneous gestures can be; his face was bathed in perspiration, his voice grating and raucous. He broke every one of the stereotyped laws of elocution, but there was something wonderful about it all. Vast congregations were spell-bound, the little untidy man in the pulpit had ceased to exist, he had become a magnetic force, hundreds of his hearers disagreed with almost every word he said, but every one of them was carried away, every word went home to every individual. It was not the clear thought, it was not the mode of expression, the aptness of illustration, it was not even the personality of the man—but it was the love of God. Hugh Benson as a preacher was the very embodiment of the love of God. His arguments were usually convincing, he could present a difficult point with wonderful clearness, he could be interesting on the dullest subjects; but all that counted for very little; his appeal was not primarily an intellectual one, he had other ways

of appealing to the intellect. In his sermons he appealed to the most powerful side of his listeners, he appealed to their sentiments ; he knew the power of love, he had the fullest realization of the fact that Almighty God has never demanded profound learning, but has always yearned for a whole-hearted affection. A great number are incapable of making a definite intellectual effort ; but all are capable of loving. So he preached love. All his preaching could be summed up in the conclusion of one of the sermons he liked best : " A broken heart, O Lord, thou wilt not despise—but it must be broken ! "

There was a personal magnetism in Hugh Benson as a preacher that more than compensated for all his faults in elocution. All his personality and all his talents were used in every sermon. People drawn to hear him preach as a natural consequence of having read his books—for the novels were very much like advertisements on the hoardings—were at first sight of him disappointed. He looked insignificant, and the bigger the church the more insignificant he looked. Then when he spoke they became interested, if not in what he said, at any rate in the way he said it ; a few introductory words, and he had painted a picture ; the knack of portrayal, so evident and valuable in his books, was used with even better effect in his sermons ; his congregation at once began to see the things he was talking about, he was worth listening to from the very beginning. One could

feel a sudden tension, nobody was sitting back in the seats, everybody was on the alert ; along went the preacher at express speed, and everyone in the congregation went along with him. He had got up into the pulpit with something to say, and he was not content only to say it, he had to live it while he was up there, and not only himself but everyone in the church had to live it with him ; after half a dozen staccato sentences, it was no longer a case of a preacher addressing a congregation, but it was a whole crowd of people living together through an exhilarating experience ; they all went together through those wonderfully simple arguments, difficulties were smoothed out, and there were momentary thoughts of : "How simple it all is ! I wonder I never saw it before !" He took his congregation with him over every step of his journey through his subject ; they worked out the points together, saw the little, precise illustrations touched up into impressive pictures with a few words, they wept together, and laughed over little witticisms or an amusing story ; he saw everything he spoke of, and simply told the congregation what he saw, and he saw it all with that observing eye for picturesqueness of detail that has done so much towards making him a popular novelist. He saw always far more than the mere surface of things. A child in a Benson sermon was never merely an undeveloped human being, a child was always a potential sinner or a potential saint. The child's eyes were not merely

wells of innocence, but wells into which the treasures and refuse of the future were to be dropped, their expression was going to be changed, and R.H.B. would speculate on what that change would be, and what would cause it ; the mouth was going to be altered, and Benson would ask what would cause that alteration; the smooth forehead was to have a story written upon it, and he would wonder what that story would tell; the child was a wondrously interesting creature, stepping with a smile over the threshold of time. A sick man was never only a human being in pain, never only an object of pity ; the sufferer made a far deeper appeal to Benson than that ; as he looked down upon the sick-bed he did not see only an agonized face and twitching hands, not only untidy bedclothes and pillows that needed arranging, he saw a cross and on it the Saviour of mankind ; the sufferer was Christ at the supreme moment of the first Good Friday, those parched lips said " I thirst," that wet and matted hair was a crown of thorns, the beads of perspiration were drops of blood, even the bedclothes would turn into the veil of Our Blessed Lady. The sufferer took on a new dignity in R.H.B.'s eyes, he made no appeal to your charity, he was a creature of dignity, it was a privilege to wait upon him, for Benson he was Christ in agony, a rung in the ladder that ends in Heaven. The old and doddering, too, had a majesty all their own. That old man, who had become an insufferable bore because he would

persist in living in his own usually very dull past, could never be a bore to Hugh Benson, because R.H.B. had an invaluable faculty of disconnecting himself from what people appeared to be, and weaving his own romance round a withered creature. Here was no longer a decrepit body tottering on the brink of the grave, no longer a man going out by the back door of life, but an immortal soul on the brink of the wonders of the life to come, a soul that was nearing the end of its earthly apprenticeship, that had climbed up the mountain of mortal life and was now standing on the threshold of eternity with arm outstretched and hand gripping the curtain before the entrance to the throne-room of God.

The secret of his success as a preacher lay in the fact that he was always interesting; his sermons were to his hearers more than a duty, they were a pleasure. In very many cases, I think I can even say in the majority of cases, Catholics go to church and put up with the sermon, non-Catholics go to church in spite of the sermon, but when Hugh Benson preached, Catholics and non-Catholics alike went to the Catholic church because of the sermon. It was never too long, and he left behind him when he finished a feeling of regret rather than of relief; throughout he had held the attention of his congregation. He had not covered a great deal of ground in his discourse, he never did. "One thought, decently worked out, is always enough for a sermon, and often for a

whole course," he would say. He had not given anything new, Catholic doctrine leaves no room for that, but he had presented an old thought in a new way; an old, dry-as-dust doctrine, as true as it was old, had been brought out, polished up, newly decorated, and presented in an up-to-date manner. He spoke the language of to-day; his illustrations and similes were from the things round about, everything that came to his hand was pressed into the service of God; his manner was an everyday manner because the religion he preached was an everyday religion: it was not only a religion of churches and stained-glass windows, but a religion of factories and workshops, of hotels and drawing-rooms. He interested everybody, from the woman who drove to Church in a Rolls-Royce to her sister from the nearest East who would drive a day later to Hampstead Heath with a moke and barrow; from the Boston "highbrow" to the Dublin corner boy. He interested them all because he was interested himself; he preached to do good, not only to every member of his audience, but also to Robert Hugh Benson himself.

CHAPTER XIV

AN EYE ON THE ENEMY

Hugh Benson was not, and never professed to be, a great dogmatic theologian ; as far as his own profession as to his attainments went, he was a successful novelist, and a preacher in considerable demand. But he had a lot of talents that were obvious enough without his talking about them ; he had a great talent for graphic description, invaluable in devotional sermons ; he had a far-reaching knowledge of, and sympathy with, the religious positions and convictions of non-Catholics essential to a good controversialist ; he could present a difficult dogma in very simple form, and the value of that talent is inestimable in any kind of sermon.

I remember once he submitted a sermon for publication to a review. The subject was the Blessed Trinity ; it was one of the very few articles he ever had returned to him. The review refused it, the editor saying, as far as I remember, that he had read Monsignor Benson's article with great interest, and would very much like to publish it, but after reading it he failed to see where the *Mystery* of the Trinity came in, and consequently thought it would not be advisable to publish it. The sermon was a favourite one of R.H.B.'s, and

he often preached it. He had that very helpful faculty of explaining mysteries of faith in such a way that at the end you thought you understood the mystery, when all that had happened was that you had listened to a masterly exposition of the reasons why you should believe it.

He preached really three classes of sermons: controversial, devotional, and mixed; and it was in the third kind that you got R.H.B. at his best. In all his sermons controversy and devotion overlapped; but the really typical Benson sermon had them about equally mixed, the one explaining, amplifying or illustrating the other, and consequently he was able to appeal to every member of his various congregations and give everybody "something to take away."

He gave a course of evidence lectures in Buntingford, which really led to the foundation of the mission. His discourses were entirely on controverted subjects: the Real Presence, the Confessional, Monks and Nuns, and the like; they were essentially for non-Catholics, and his audiences were almost entirely Protestant; but there were a certain number of Catholics who made a point of attending the lectures, and they got a definite spiritual good from them. I do not mean that they necessarily learnt how to meet attacks on Catholic doctrines and practices, but he gave them all something that would be of help to them in their own private spiritual life. His sermons in churches were primarily for Catholics; but there

was always something as well for the inquiring Protestant; he preached to Catholics with an eye on the non-Catholics, and both were satisfied.

I once told him of a priest who specialized in very strictly liturgical Sunday evening services, to such an extent that, in addition to the excellent choir, there were usually about half a dozen people to form the congregation. I had spoken to the priest, and he had informed me that he looked to the chance "dropper in" whom he thought would be very much impressed by hearing Compline sung perfectly. I suggested that it would be even more impressive to hear "Faith of our Fathers" sung badly in a crowded church; he did not agree with me. When I told Benson, he said:

"But surely the whole object of opening a Catholic mission is to convert the people of the locality; and the musical tastes of the Catholics will be very similar to those of their next-door neighbours. By all means have strictly liturgical services if you can get your Catholics to come to them; but it's not much good talking about educating the taste of the people if they won't come to be educated."

And another time, talking about the same sort of thing, he said:

"Preach for your Catholics first, but never forget that keen Catholics will bring Protestants along with them, and they, poor things, deserve some consideration too."

And in his own sermons the principle he acted upon was to encourage enthusiasm. He was extraordinarily keen himself, and he always tried to make others equally so. He would never dwell on the difficulty of trying to be a good Catholic, but always on the privilege of being a Catholic at all; he never wanted to persuade people that they had to suffer, willingly or unwillingly, in their religion, but that they had to glory in it; he had no use for the Catholic who, in his religion, is always unostentatiously struggling up a hill—his own idea was to stand on the top and wave a flag. "The troubles will come," he said, "no matter what you do; but it's much easier to knock them down when you're on top, than to climb up against them."

And so he would wave the Papal flag wherever he happened to be; he never considered what a hard religion ours was to live up to, but always "what a jolly fine Church it is to belong to." His Catholicism was always aggressive—banners and flags, out-door processions, open-air sermons, newspaper controversies, even the campanile of Westminster Cathedral, were all after his own heart because they were aggressive. In all his utterances the outstanding note was one of pugnacity. He once went to address a society largely composed of Nonconformists; the subject was not a religious one, in fact I believe it was "The Modern Novel." When he came back I asked him how he had got on.

"Oh, very well," he said. "But the talk was after the dinner, and that doesn't improve the dinner."

"Did you manage to wave the Papal flag?"

"Yes, rather!"

"How did you do it?"

"Well, it wasn't very easy, and it was rather dragged in, and even when I had got it in I couldn't talk about Catholicism. But for about half the time I talked about Mediæval Christianity; they'll know what I was getting at by now." And after a pause, with his mischievous smile: "Perhaps it's just as well that it was after dinner."

In that way he got in a sly punch, and a sly punch was better than no punch at all, but it did not give him anything like the joy that he got out of a whole-hearted open one, the sort of punch he used to give in almost every sermon he preached. He was always out to fight, and he always fought fairly and straightforwardly; he gave as hard knocks as he could, and was prepared to take hard knocks in return if an opponent could get them in. He loved individual Protestants very dearly, and in addition to his mother, for whom he had an exceptional devotion, and his relatives, some of his dearest friends to the end of his days were non-Catholics—but that was not R.H.B.'s fault! And this never prevented him from hitting as hard as he could at Protestantism; he would refer to it as "preached by a licentious founder, introduced into England by an immoral king, and consolidated by a bastard queen."

Once, after hearing him talking in public in this strain, I said :

" Of course somebody will reply about bad popes, and that sort of thing."

" I wish they would," he said. " But they won't ; they've got too much sense to bring that out again. But if they do—that's what I want ! I'll show 'em ! "

And he was constantly " trailing his coat " in a similar way. He loved fighting for his cause, because fighting meant further conquests ; he had no use for hole-and-corner Catholicism. "The day for that is past ; now we must have our battles in the open, and I for one am not going to be put on the defensive." On one occasion his passion for attack had rather a funny sequel. He was lecturing somewhere in the Midlands, I think, and before the lecture he was warned by the promoters that there were likely to be some disturbance and interruptions. Consequently he prepared himself with a few typical Bensonian remarks to hurl at the first interrupter, and thus ready for all emergencies he started the lecture. He warmed up to his subject almost at once, and was soon going along at express speed, dripping with perspiration as he went, when suddenly, about half-way through, a man jumped up in the middle of the hall and said something. R.H.B. stopped dead, fixed the man with his eyes, closed his lips tight, drew in a long breath, went even redder in the face than he already was, if possible, and launched

out at the unfortunate man. He gave him three of about the fullest Benson minutes on record, the man collapsed in his chair almost immediately, and when R.H.B. had said all he thought about him he went on with the lecture. After he had finished, in the room behind the platform he said to the chairman :

"Well, I think I settled him at any rate."

"Yes," said the chairman, "you did ; but that happened to be one of the most fervent admirers you have in the district, not quite sober, and anxious to express his agreement with you. He's quite sober now."

In his sermons he constantly had recourse to invective, and in our early days together suggested it to me, as a way of dealing with the things that were being said by a very unpleasant, and either very ignorant or untruthful, local clergyman. I demurred, and said that such action on my part might do more harm than good.

"No!" he said. "It's the only way. Go straight for him, don't have any of the upper room about it ; there's no question now of fear of the Jews or any other Protestants, the Holy Ghost has called ; so let the reverend gentleman have it : I would." And I am quite certain he would ; and after a little while I did too, and with exactly the result that R.H.B. had foretold—the man shut up like an oyster, and, save for very occasional little surreptitious thrusts, left the Church and me alone for the future.

As for his own practice of calling people, collectively, names in the pulpit, I asked him once if it was not likely to give offence.

"Oh, yes; it always hurts someone's feelings; but, then, the Pharisees must have been very hurt when our Lord called them vipers and hypocrites and that sort of thing—but it was very good for them all the same. You need never be afraid of letting yourself go, you'll never use stronger language about His enemies than our Lord did Himself."

CHAPTER XV

ALWAYS ON THE ALERT

In the pulpit Hugh Benson, though undoubtedly in his element, always looked extremely nervous; but that nervousness was the result of his highly strung temperament rather than "funk"—I apologize for the word, but it expresses my meaning more than "fear" would. Fear seems to convey an intellectual idea, but all Benson's feelings were physical; and in the pulpit that "jumpiness" was no more than apparent. Once he "got going" in a sermon he thoroughly enjoyed himself. The nervous manner remained throughout, and became characteristic, but it in no way affected him inside; his mind was as clear as possible, and he had all his wits about him. But where his "funk" really did affect him was at the time of preparation. During the hours he always gave to the preparation of a sermon he was in that state commonly known as "blue-funk"; I can liken it only to the feeling, so familiar to nearly everybody, the weight in the pit of the stomach that makes us so uncomfortable while waiting outside a room in which we are shortly to undergo that form of torture known as a *viva*

voce examination; it is the same feeling that renders adequate for patients' needs the month-old illustrated periodicals that seem to be essential to a dentist's waiting-room. Monsignor Benson, great preacher, on whose words thousands hung, for several hours before preaching was a truly pathetic figure. He would want to be alone, and in that mood it was much better to leave him so; he would sit down with his sermon book on his knees, and fidget; he could not keep any part of himself still for a minute, he would cross and re-cross his legs, he would shuffle about in his chair, stroke his chin, scratch himself, and ruffle his hair; he was absurdly uneasy, and very irritable; he would bury his face in his hands, then return to his book, jump up and light another cigarette—of course he smoked all the time—walk about the room, and then sit down again. How he did not work himself into a state of nervous prostration long before he ever reached the pulpit will always remain a mystery to me.

This agony was not a preliminary only to a sermon in a big church or on a special occasion, for he was as conscientious and particular in the preparation of every sermon he ever preached; he would go through the same torture before an unannounced "talk" on a Wednesday night at Hare Street to twenty country people as he would in preparation for a sermon in Westminster Cathedral that had been billed for weeks beforehand and which would draw a congregation of

thousands. He was never slipshod in his methods, and always considered the glory of God, for which he was preaching, before his congregation; he was an ideal special preacher for a small parish, for he was incapable of adopting the attitude of "Oh, it's only a little country place—anything will do."

Not content with extraordinarily careful preparation himself, he was convinced that it was only a matter of care and preparation to turn anybody into a good preacher.

"If priests would only take as much care about their Sunday sermons as ordinary laymen take about their everyday work, we wouldn't have long to wait for the conversion of England," he would say.

"But," I replied, "we can't all be good preachers."

"Oh, yes, we can—if we want to. But the trouble is so many priests don't care."

"I think you are wrong there."

"Well, if they do care, how do they show it? Over and over again I've met priests who didn't know on Saturday night what they were going to preach about on Sunday morning; and the result is they get up into the pulpit, read the Gospel, make a few disconnected remarks about it, and after they've been doing that for about six months, they've developed one sermon which they preach Sunday after Sunday—and then they talk about the leakage!"

"But surely there are some men who cannot and never will be able to preach," I urged.

"If ever there was a man who had everything against him as a preacher, I am that man," he said. "I've got this beastly impediment in my speech, and I'm as nervous as a chicken."

"Why don't you write a book about preaching?"

"I will some day." But, alas, he never did, and his system, except to a few ever-grateful people who learnt it from him, is lost. It was a wonderfully useful system, and he was always ready to expound it to anybody anxious to learn.

His first three hints were: Be natural, be careful, and don't take notes into the pulpit.

"Every man has a style of his own," he said, "and that's the only style he will ever preach well in. It's no good to ask an excitable man to restrain himself, and on the other hand some men are incapable of letting themselves go; so be yourself."

And as for care, he himself was an example of it. Every sermon took him seven or eight hours of really hard work. The subject had to be fixed, then the ideas formulated, then additions and eliminations had to be made, and when he had got all his material it had to be divided up into points. An ordinary twenty-minute sermon, which would usually take from thirty to thirty-five minutes to preach, would consist of an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. "In your introduction you tell them what you are

going to say, then you say it, then you show them that you have said it ; and don't forget to finish with a bang."

Each point was sub-divided, and illustrations and examples added. " I always try to give them one laugh in a sermon," he declared. Then he would work it all up into a conglomerate whole, adding all the necessary trimmings. "When you preach, always let the bones show ; it's a great help to the preacher—but still greater to the congregation."

When the sermon had reached a certain stage of preparation, it was ready to go into his book, where one page was allotted to it. It was written very clearly and with great care in a sort of semi-written, semi-printed hand, with the main points in capitals, subsidiary points underlined, and the like. For underlining he recommended coloured inks or crayons to beginners—he, however, always used ordinary ink. When he had the whole sermon written out, he would set out to visualize the page. In the necessity for visualization I think lies the one weak point of his system ; some people cannot visualize, so it is no good expecting them to do so ; if you had said that to R.H.B. he would have replied : " Of course they can, if they want to." Then the last thing he did was to choose a text. " Make your text fit your sermon, never preach from a text," was one of the best lessons he taught.

His first requirement from those who asked

him to help them to preach was a promise not to use notes. "They're absolutely fatal," he said; "if you get the note habit you never take the trouble to prepare properly, you are being constantly distracted by them, and if you are distracted you can't keep anybody else's attention; don't have anything to do with them. No, no, no! not even in your pocket."

He loved to spring surprises on his congregation, and one of his favourite controversial sermons, since printed, I think, in *The Religion of the Plain Man*, was the one on St. Peter, where he spends about two-thirds of his time insisting upon the absolute supremacy of our Lord, the foundation of the Church, the Door, and the Good Shepherd; and when he has got worked right up to a climax he begins to bring in the famous Petrine texts, each text a "bang" in itself, each forced home with all the energy of that wonderful little body. "Yes," he would cry, "it was the Church's One Foundation that said 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church,' it was the Door Himself who gave to St. Peter the keys, it was the Good Shepherd who called upon St. Peter to feed His lambs and His sheep." To preach that sermon was always a pleasure to him: it was one of the best of the surprise type.

He preached his sermons over and over again, noting each place in which he preached them on the sermon itself; but no matter how often he preached a sermon, it always required hours of

preparation, hours of agony during which " I would give anybody a five-pound note to take this job on."

Once when he went to visit the Redemptorists at Bishop Stortford, a charming and very persuasive Superior tried at lunch time to get him to preach at night. He refused, the notice was too short, he could not do it ; but all excuses were unavailing. Still the Superior went on persuading him, and after lunch R.H.B., in a disreputable suit and a white straw trilby hat, stole out of the house and mounted his bicycle and rode back to Cambridge. " It's no good," he said later. " I can't preach without long notice and preparation, and what's more, I won't."

But his care rewarded him. " I can see my page all the time I am preaching," he said, " and I preach right down it."

" Do you ever miss a point ? " I asked him.

" No, never a point—sometimes a sub-section or an illustration, but very rarely. It's all a matter of preparation."

Any remarks about R.H.B. as a preacher would be woefully incomplete without a reference to his generosity in ideas. One of the most attractive things about his preaching was his originality ; there was nothing about him or his sermons, style, or matter that was not original, the oldest themes appeared new, the dullest took on an interest as unexpected as it was welcome. He was a preacher with ideas, and he never needed to " crib "

anything from anybody. Sometimes, however, he did so, but always quite openly.

I asked him about it one day, and he replied:

"It's not much good as a rule taking other people's sermons, they never ring true. You can only carry conviction with your own stuff."

"Do you ever take other people's ideas?" I asked.

"Ideas? Oh yes, rather! If they are good and suit my subject I use them without scruple. For instance, I use Newman's analogy between Our Lady and Eve often."

"Do you acknowledge the authorship of the ideas to your congregation?"

"Of course not, that would spoil the whole sermon. I incorporate them into the body of my own work; it would be dreadfully dull if you had to give references for every idea you took."

"I can imagine people being upset at somebody else using their ideas without acknowledgment."

"Well, they've got no right to be. If a man thinks of something good that's going to help things on, he ought to be only too glad if others use it as well."

And R.H.B. was certainly as good as his word in this matter. He once came back to Hare Street delighted because, on the previous evening, he had heard a priest preach, almost verbatim, one of his sermons out of the *Friendship of Christ*.

"Did he know you were in church?" I asked.

"No; but I think I'll write and tell him—shall I?"

"You might make him very uncomfortable."

"That would never do; besides, perhaps he's preaching the lot, and if I wrote he might stop—I wouldn't like that."

He was, as I have said, extraordinarily generous with ideas. If he was writing a new course of sermons, he would tell me all about them, and would offer me his brand-new ideas with an almost comic diffidence. While he was compiling his "Paradox" course, he asked me to help him to find contradictory texts, and when he had got all his material I happened to say that I thought it was a great idea. At once, without a moment's hesitation, he said:

"Why don't you preach them too?"

"No good," I said. "Four sermons would easily exhaust all I could say on contradictory texts."

"Oh, rot!" he replied. "I'll help you with points and that sort of thing. I'll tell you what we'll do. I'm going to preach right through the lot; if you take the same text here as I'm taking wherever I happen to be, we'll both be working on the same subject at the same time, and we'll be able to help each other tremendously."

That was his way of putting it. And that was how I began to get lessons in sermons and preaching from him, and I never had more interesting or valuable lessons in my life. He was quite as

interested in my sermons as he was in his own ; he asked for my ideas for my sermon for the following Sunday on the previous Monday night, and at the same time he gave me his. When any of my suggestions pleased him he would exclaim : "Oh, that's fine—I'll use that too!" At times he almost persuaded me that ours was a conglomerate effort. From that time I always submitted my sermons to him, and he was always generous, and always gave the best help he could.

The first time we had a service when he was at home I tried hard to get him to preach.

"No," he said ; "I'll play the organ if you like, but I won't preach."

"Unless you'll preach I'd much rather you stayed away altogether." This was before the incident of the "Paradoxes," and I was very nervous about preaching before him ; however, someone had to do it, and as he would not I was the only one left. But it was the one and only time I was nervous about preaching before him. At dinner that night, what I had feared happened. He started straight off with a *post-mortem*.

"I liked your sermon to-night ; it was very nice. Do you mind if I criticize ?"

"Oh, no! I should like it!" What else could I say ?

"Sure ?" And he started. He found far more to praise than he did to blame, but that was his way, and even when he found faults he always offered them in question form.

"Why do you use notes?"

"Because I can't do without them."

"That's only because you've never tried. I'll show you a way to do without them."

Then one of my most cherished ideals went.

"Your scripture texts to-night—they gave me the impression that you felt a sort of duty to get so many in." As a matter of fact that was exactly what I did feel; but I did not say so—I did not say anything. He went on: "Personally, I think it's better to leave them out altogether than to drag them in by the heels; a lot of people would never agree with me, but that's how I feel." And so he went on, giving hints and advice, and always with a charming diffidence. But since then I have noticed how very valuable every bit of that advice was.

On one occasion I had prepared a sermon on Detachment, and was hunting round for a text to fit it when he came into my room.

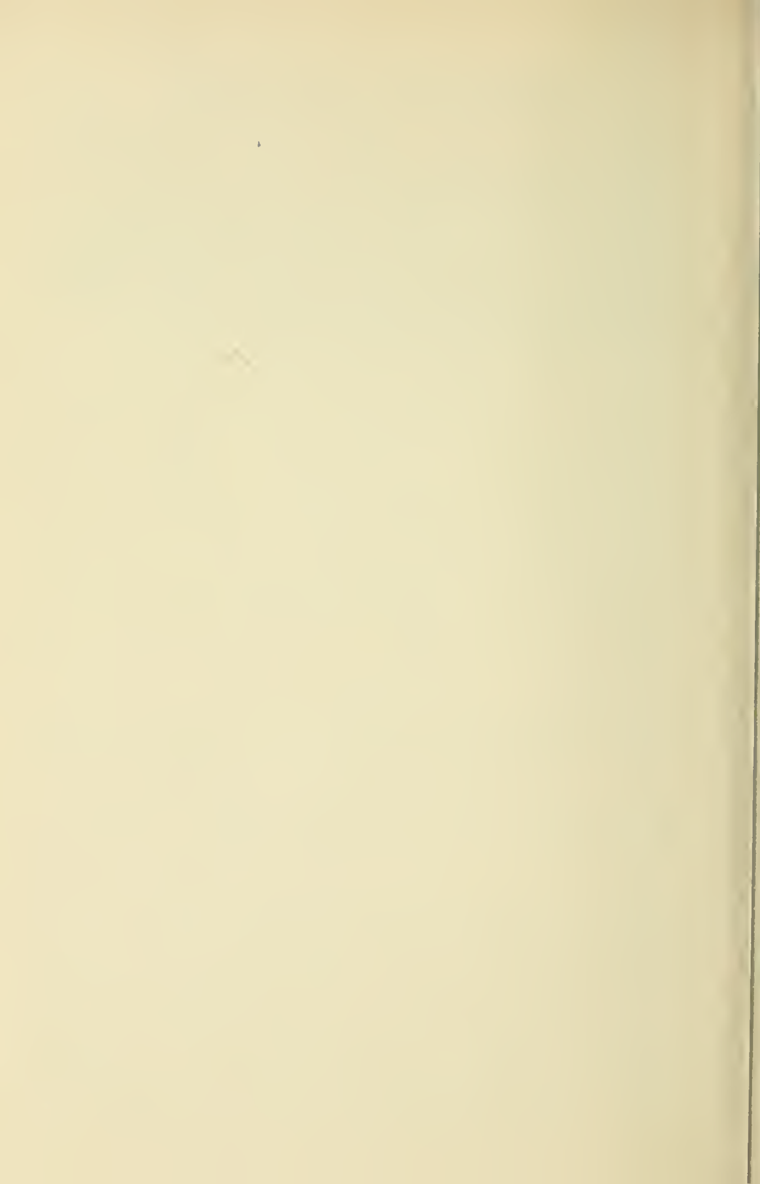
"A new sermon! Let's have a look!"

He read steadily through, and I asked him if he could suggest a text.

"Yes, rather! I've got a beauty; I use it myself. Here it is—you must give it out slowly, accentuate all the 'ands' and pause between most of the words—like this: 'If any man come to me and *hate* not father, *and* mother, *and* wife, *and* children, *and* brethren, *and* sisters, *yea—and—his—own—life—also*, he cannot be my disciple.' That makes 'em sit up." And then he picked up my

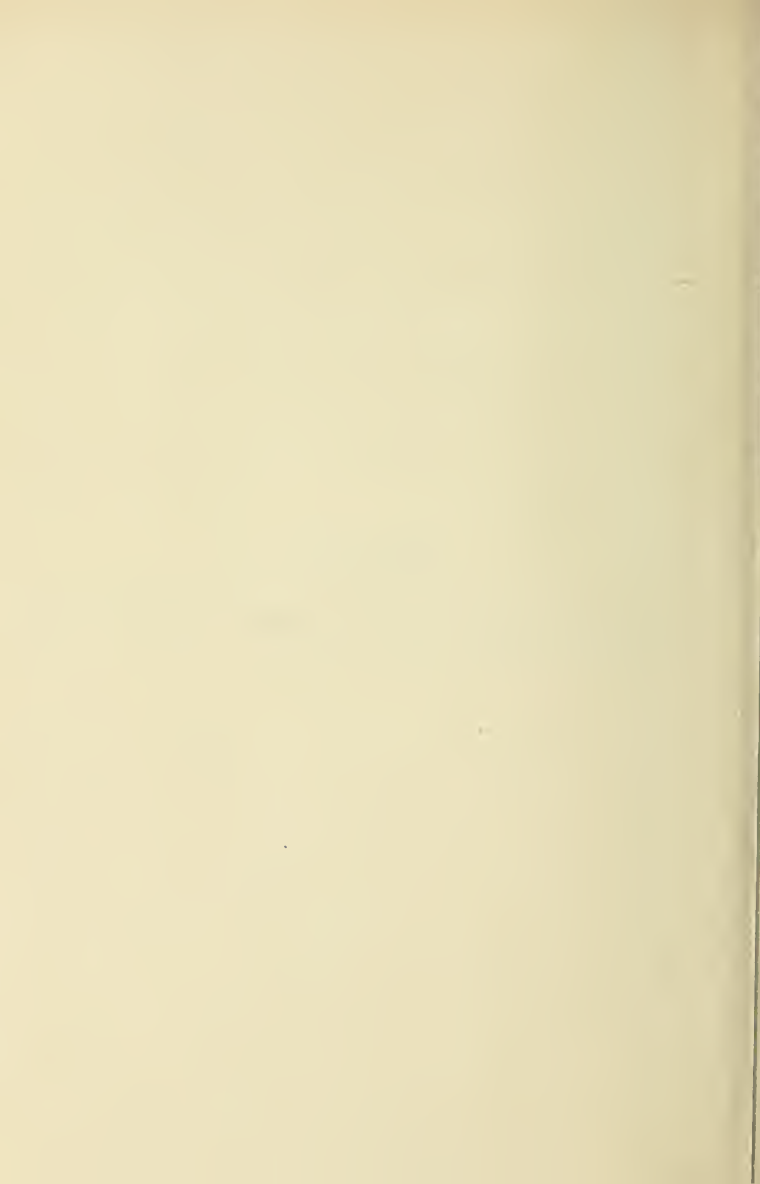
sermon again, and, reading one sentence, said: "I like that—may I use it?"

Naturally I was flattered, and consented with alacrity. A few days later I met him at Buntingford station. He had just returned from preaching in London. His first words were: "I preached that sermon of yours last night—fine!"



PART IV

IN COMMAND (R.H.B. AS A DIRECTOR)



CHAPTER XVI

G.H.Q.

As a soldier climbs the ladder of promotion, he ceases to be a number and becomes a name ; from being part of a crowd he becomes an individual. And if he goes on climbing he gathers responsibilities around him ; the man who was at one time ordered about begins to order others, the man who avoided his superiors comes in his turn to be avoided by his inferiors ; but the most important thing that happens to him is that he becomes a person to be consulted, he is looked up to, his permission may be required for something or other—he is an individual with other individuals and groups dependent upon him. A priest in very much the same way, but with much greater rapidity, collects responsibilities ; almost as soon as he begins his public work he is called upon to bear other people's burdens ; his dependents are usually his own parishioners ; but if his reputation begins to spread outside his parish, as a natural consequence his responsibilities begin to multiply.

Hugh Benson was known at least as well as any other English priest. He preached all over the United Kingdom and North America, and to the English-speaking community in Rome. As a

novelist his reputation was even wider: he had an enormous public in England and in the United States, and nearly all his novels were translated into half a dozen other languages. It was only natural in such circumstances that a very great number of people began to look to him for advice and guidance—some in literature, but the vast majority of them in their spiritual life.

I have headed this section: "In Command," and the chapter "G.H.Q.," but by this I do not wish to convey the idea that Hugh Benson was a sort of General Officer Commanding in the Army of the Catholic Church; that is a position which could only be attributed to the Pope, with the Archbishops and Bishops as Corps and Divisional commanders under him. But there are a very considerable number of influential and important officers on every general staff, who are as much members of G.H.Q. as is the General Officer Commanding. As the part of Hugh Benson's work with which I propose to deal in this section was almost entirely work for the individual, advice, and personal assistance, direction, as it is commonly and unpleasantly called, I would ask my readers, with that knowledge of alphabetical titles which is almost universal nowadays, to look upon him as an A.A.G., or a D.A.A.G., in the Catholic Church—an important and indispensable officer who has had thrust upon him, by their owners, the charge of a very considerable number of immortal souls, which it is his work to steer into

the Kingdom of Heaven, a work, as every priest knows, as difficult as it is necessary.

Every priest, in the course of his career, attracts a number of spiritual dependents. The better known the priest, the more does this happen, and if, in addition to being remarkably well known, he has a very magnetic personality, such as Hugh Benson had, the number is apt to become enormous. Benson had a terrifying number of such dependents, people of every class and all conditions, and though, as is natural, the majority were women, the number of men who were in the habit of seeking his advice was far above the average. He was by no means an easy director, in fact he was rather inclined to be stern ; he treated himself harshly in his spiritual life, and it was not in his nature to treat others in a different way. He was patient, understanding and helpful, but never soft ; he took great trouble to understand the circumstances of his spiritual children, and having once decided what course to adopt he stuck to it through thick and thin ; he was usually kind, but if cruelty was necessary in order to be so, he never hesitated to be hard. He had a very full appreciation of the importance of the work of direction, and as in everything else, he was conscientious in his performance of it, he always did his best. But whether that best was uniformly satisfactory is quite another matter. For himself he was convinced that he was a good director for the particular type that were attracted by his personality ;

and I, personally, speaking with first-hand knowledge, agree with him, at any rate as regards his direction of men. But with women, or rather a certain section of women, and that a small though very troublesome section, I do not think he was so successful; he allowed them to get on his nerves, and he became irritable, and in such a condition it was quite impossible for him to advise well; he was affected, more than any man I have met, by his moods; but he had the rare advantage of knowing it, and pointed it out to his friends.

This small and troublesome section of his friends gave him no peace; they made appointments with him when he was in London, and occasionally they followed him to Hare Street, where they insisted upon going to Confession to him, and would receive Holy Communion only at his Mass. They would pester him for an interview, and when he promised them half an hour, would arrive long before the appointed time, but were always kept waiting until the exact minute. When their half-hour was up they would draw as many red herrings across the track of the conversation as they could, intent upon prolonging it as much as possible. After such interviews R.H.B. was nearly always nervy and irritable, and for a man so highly strung as he was, and working at such high pressure as he did, this was serious; it had a bad effect on his health, and a deplorable effect upon his temper.

Such people had convinced themselves, always

an easy matter, that they were his best friends. Those who were in a position to know were equally convinced, and did their best, sometimes with a certain measure of success, to convince R.H.B. that they were his worst enemies.

Times and again his friends begged him to discontinue his practice of giving interviews with such ease when he went up to London to preach, his sermons alone being too great a strain upon his physical resources ; and every now and then he would appear to be on the point of cutting them off, when the old unselfish argument would come up and carry the day :

" They are convinced that I am good for them," he would say, " and if that's the way they are going to get to Heaven, I suppose I must let them get there on the end of my cassock."

It was charitable, and it was typical of R.H.B., but it was very foolish.

To do them justice, most of these people were sure that they had a great saint for a director, and the energies of great saints sometimes seem to be inexhaustible ; but Benson's were not, and the strength which would have been so valuable in his last illness was gradually sapped from him during several years before by those who took always and never gave.

They did not only worry him in their ordinary interviews, but as was inevitable, they squabbled among themselves, they became jealous of each other, and no jealousy seemed too petty to set

before their spiritual director, till the poor unfortunate man could never be certain that he would have as much as half an hour to himself. This unkindness, as systematic as it was unconscious, put a totally unnecessary strain upon an already overwrought nervous system.

Sometimes his friends were able to save him from these unpleasant invasions, but it was never an easy matter. I remember once he was really very unwell, and I persuaded him to go to bed after breakfast. About eleven o'clock a lady, who had been more than once before, and had always had an irritating effect upon him, arrived, anxious to see him. I interviewed her in the library.

"I want to speak to Father Benson," she said.

I told her that he was very unwell, that he was, in fact, in bed, and that it would be better if she could come another time.

"Oh, no! I've come all the way from London; I want to see him particularly."

I knew the lady, and I had a fair idea of what sort of an interview it would be if she saw him, and I made up my mind that she was not going to see him. I said:

"Perhaps I could do something for you; or could you leave a message, or write a note?—I would give it him to-morrow."

"Oh, no; I must see him."

"Well, I'm afraid you can't; he's very unwell, and in no condition to receive visitors."

"I've come all this distance, and I must see a priest."

"Well, I shouldn't have thought it was necessary to leave London for that; but since you are here, there is a priest here, and if I won't do, there are about a dozen five miles away, and a train at 12.45." I was getting annoyed.

"You are being very rude to me; I shall tell Father Benson."

There was nothing to reply to that, so she went on:

"If Father Benson knew I was here I'm sure he would see me."

"I am equally sure that if he knew you were here he would see you—and that is exactly the reason why he is not going to be told."

That ended our conversation, and when the following day I told R.H.B. about her he was very grateful for his escape; he was not anything like so pleased about it the next Saturday evening when he met the lady in a London presbytery.

But I must hasten to add, this was only one type of his "hangers-on." There were others, thank God, sincere and devout women, whose direction, though often exacting, was always consoling—people often in real difficulties, who came to him with their troubles, and not only asked for advice, but were prepared to act upon it even if it went against the grain. When they came to him they always showed a due regard for his time and his strength, and would pour out their troubles to a wonderfully sympathetic listener; for

R.H.B. could by his very silence draw people out, and give a strange and adequate consolation.

"It is often only necessary for people to state their own case fully," he would say, "and then they will see for themselves how to act."

And whenever possible he worked upon that principle, and let his penitents and dependents settle their own difficulties. At times it was necessary, and he was never a man to shirk responsibility, to take the matter into his own hands and give a decision, and when he did so, in such important matters as religious vocations and the like, he did not often make a mistake.

But his decisions were rarely if ever given on the spur of the moment, his penitents' difficulties were his difficulties, their troubles he took upon himself. His simple "Come and see me again next week" did not mean that he only wanted to let water flow under the bridge, it meant constant thought and frequent prayer, it meant mementos in Mass, and careful weighing of *pros* and *cons*. Spiritual direction was a very serious matter to him; often far more so than it was to those who sought it.

As it is in the Army so, too, is it in the Direction of Souls—the keen and serious soldiers more than make up for the insufferable nuisances. Hugh Benson had many truly exhausting half-hours, the effects of which collectively lasted through all his days, but he had far more consoling ones, and their effects will last through all eternity.

THE DINING ROOM FIREPLACE, CARVED BY R. H. B.

CHAPTER XVII

DISPATCHES

Every morning at Hare Street Hugh Benson would arrive in the dining-room for breakfast with a pile of letters in one hand and a waste-paper-basket in the other. Having deposited the basket by the side of his chair and the letters in front of his place at table, he would collect his breakfast from the sideboard and settle down to the rapid consumption of a small amount of very necessary food and a large amount of more or less unnecessary information. The view I had of him during breakfast was rather like the view you get of a small boy drinking out of a large cup—his wide-open eyes fixed upon his diminishing pile of correspondence. As each letter was read, or rather looked through, it was either torn up and thrown into the waste-paper-basket or placed on one side for future attention. His breakfast being finished, when he was about half-way through the pile of letters, still reading he would begin to tap himself over his various pockets, then his eyes would wander to the chimney-piece, and then round the room, the result usually being unsatisfactory.

"G-got a cigarette?"

I would push over a case; still reading he would

grope for it, find it, extract a cigarette, put it in his mouth; and then the tapping process would begin again, once more his eyes would go on a tour of investigation, again unsatisfactory.

"Match?"

Having lighted his cigarette he made two hurried signs of the cross, a slight pause between them, grabbed his two piles of letters, and retired to the parlour; if you listened carefully you would hear a sigh as he drew his chair up to the table, kicked off his shoes and settled down to two hours of letter-writing until the arrival of the *Daily Mail* at eleven.

But two hours did not exhaust his day's correspondence; it nearly always occupied him until lunch time and frequently bit into his evening as well; and it was not until every letter had been dealt with that he felt himself at liberty to "get at" his book. His correspondence took up the greater part of his day, and it was not the sort of correspondence that could be dealt with by a secretary—the part of it that took the time was purely personal and he had to attend to it himself. He had a secretary for a time, and he often got help from friends who happened to be staying in the house, and for such help he was always grateful, but it was not really much of a relief to him. I had as intimate a knowledge as anybody of his correspondence, as I always sorted it for him when he was abroad.

"Would you mind sending my letters on to

me ? " he would ask before leaving. And when I assented he would thank me and plunge into instructions.

" Open everything, and tear up all the rubbish. Deal with anything you can, and tell me what you've done ; send on anything that looks private, but make a note of the address so that I can send you instructions for an answer if I don't answer it myself ; tear off all the blank sheets, put all that you are sending on into a big envelope and keep it as light as you can, and don't send it oftener than once a week. Don't throw away the blank sheets—I always keep them in that little note-paper thing in the parlour."

It sounds a big job, but as nearly all the letters " looked private," or came under the category " rubbish," it did not really take up very much time ; the rest of my work consisted in sending out his answers, which I received in a big envelope, written on small scraps of foreign notepaper ; he answered nearly all of them himself, and it was only very occasionally that I got " instructions for an answer."

When he was at home one could give him more help by writing dictated replies ; but no matter what assistance he got the great bulk of his correspondence could only be dealt with by himself. For most of his correspondents wrote to him on matters of conscience or about other absolutely private affairs, and such letters could not be put into the hands of any secretary.

He had reduced the post card answer almost to a fine art, and could crowd on as much information as could have filled a four-page letter, but no matter how small the space occupied the answer was always complete and adequate. If a letter required a long answer it got it, but if there was a possibility of crowding the answer into a few numbered sentences on a correspondence-card, even if the embossed address had to be written over, with " God bless you ; R. H. Benson " at the bottom, that was the form the answer would take, and it is in the form of crowded correspondence-cards, in his odd elongated writing, almost like little groups of impressionist soldiers marching up the page, that many of the most valued Benson letters have gone out into the world. He had quite detached himself from the almost universal custom of varying the length of a letter in accordance with the distance it has to go—the ordinary correspondent would no more think of sending a long letter to Putney than he would of sending a short note to Paraguay—but R.H.B. answered any letter in the shortest possible adequate manner ; all that troubled him was that for some he had to remind Reeman to put a twopenny-halfpenny stamp on.

In answering any letter he always carefully numbered the various points, and, being answered, it was done with, torn up and thrown into the waste-paper-basket ; but however careful he was himself he never succeeded in instilling equal care into those who wrote to him, and repeatedly on

reading his letters he would make that noise, used indiscriminately for an expression of slight annoyance or for the urging of a horse to further effort, and in answer to my inquiry "What's up?" would say:

"It's very nearly exasperating—I spent twenty minutes answering this woman's innumerable questions yesterday, and now she sends me four pages more of the things she forgot to say."

"Never mind—tell her what you think of her on a post card."

"That's all very well; but I've torn up her letter and she hasn't put her address on this one." And he would march out into the stable, mumbling as he went, to rummage in the rubbish barrel for the fragments of yesterday's letter. Another thing that annoyed him was when people enclosed letters for him to read and then wrote a few days afterwards and asked for them to be returned.

"Why can't they say so at the time if they want the letter back? Well, anyhow, they can't have it now—it's torn up, and that's all about it, and I shall tell them so."

And indeed he tore up every letter he received except those from his mother, all of which he kept in a drawer in the library. Once, from Rome, he wrote to me:

"I am enclosing one of my mother's letters with the rest. Will you put it in the bottom left-hand drawer of the knee-hole table in the library?

There are a lot of her letters there, and I keep them all, so be careful of this one; I feel sure they will be published some day. She *can* write letters—I'll read you some bits some time."

I once spoke to him about the publication of letters, suggesting that his would probably be published.

"Lor'!" he said. "Won't they be rum?"

Then he went on to explain that since most of his letters, and all his best letters, were about people's souls, and as people did not like to parade their souls in public, it was highly improbable that his letters ever would be published. Be that as it may, they were certainly never written with a view to publication, but were, in nine cases out of ten, merely answers to questions asked him, written in very particular circumstances, and to meet individual cases. Nearly all the important letters he wrote were of a very private nature, and contained matter that would render it almost impossible for the recipients to publish them, and even if a few recipients were willing, no priest-editor would pass them. Consequently we have to be content at most with R.H.B.'s second-best letters, and it is hardly fair to judge any letter-writer by his second-best productions.

As I have said, his correspondence was enormous, it would be difficult to estimate its size or to give an average number of letters received or written; the best idea of it can be obtained, I think, by considering the time he took over it in relation to

the man himself and his habits. Everything he did, he did energetically and quickly, he never wasted time, and rarely had to wait for thoughts to come. Working as he did, at express speed, at his correspondence, he took from three to four hours every day over it. I have known him finish in two; but also I have known him go on at it until dinner time—I think three and a half hours daily would be a fair average. He answered each letter by return of post, except when he was travelling, and then the held-over letters would receive his first attention on his reaching home. He never put anybody off, and a schoolgirl writing for an autograph would receive as courteous a reply as a peeress inviting him to stay at a country house, or a publisher offering him an attractive contract. He got a little bit annoyed when editors of Catholic newspapers and periodicals wrote, as they sometimes did, and asked for an article at specially reduced rates because he was a priest; he was annoyed about it, and did not think they were playing the game; but after declaring that he would not do it on any account he usually ended by granting their request, saying:

"I bet they can well afford to pay—but I suppose I must do it."

Local letters, asking for subscriptions to football clubs and cricket clubs and the like, nearly always met with a generous response, and he was genuinely pleased when he was made an honorary Vice-

President of some village club, though as often as not he only had a very vague idea of where the village itself was.

His correspondence was phenomenal in Hare Street, being about as big as all the rest of the village correspondence put together; and the village postmaster, who was also incidentally the village baker, always knew when Monsignor's (the second syllable pronounced like the first in "cigarette") birthday was, because on that day it became necessary to call in the special Christmas machinery, consisting of a bicycle with a basket in front, to deal with the post.

CHAPTER XVIII

"POWWOWS"

Any big military action is usually preceded by a number of conferences which are called "powwows" in military slang. The Commander-in-Chief will call together those who are to be responsible under him for the action; he will tell them what he wants done, and perhaps suggest a way to do it; he will ask for suggestions and information and give his generals an opportunity of seeing his intentions and airing their own; and these generals will then call together their own subordinates, their battalion-commanders and the like, and through them the plans of the controlling mind will filter by way of the junior officers to those who are going to carry out the plan.

In her campaign against sin, the Church in her multifarious branches is perpetually holding "powwows" on matters of discipline and management, as well as on purely spiritual matters; but it is with spiritual "powwows" that we shall be concerned in considering the last phase of Hugh Benson as a Director. We shall look upon him as presiding over a sort of spiritual review; not merely reviewing, but organizing, directing, controlling and advising those in whose interests it is being held.

A spiritual retreat holds very much the same position in the war of the individual against the powers of darkness as does a "powwow" in ordinary warfare. It is not merely a series of sermons, it is not only a sort of spiritual Turkish bath, but it is a period of immediate preparation; a review that is not merely an exhibition of proficiency but an inspection held with the object of finding out weak points and strengthening them, of brightening the rusting part of the soldier's equipment, of sharpening the dull weapons, and preserving those that are sharp. It is an examination of spiritual strength by a leader whose business it is to correct faults and issue instructions for future action.

Hugh Benson was in considerable demand for giving spiritual retreats; he had a very practical form of piety, he was never stereotyped, took incredible care in the preparation of everything he said, never dished up old addresses unless the circumstances were almost identical with those they had been prepared for; in a word, he never "made things do."

To "make a thing do" is rather a habit with many priests who spend a great part of their lives giving missions and retreats; and it is remarkable what different circumstances a sermon or address can be made to fit. I once knew a priest who declared that he always made the sermon he preached on a Sunday morning in a prison do for a convent of enclosed nuns in the afternoon.

Hugh Benson's one and only object was to suit his congregation—not to give them what they wanted, but what they needed. He used his sermons over and over again, and most of his retreats he gave more than once; but that was because they had been prepared for almost identical circumstances; if the circumstances fitted an already-existing sermon, well and good—but an already-existing sermon was never made to fit the circumstances. If he found a square hole and had only round pegs, he would much rather make a new square peg than mutilate an old round one.

It was this care and selflessness that made him a successful giver of retreats—the people making the retreat had to be considered first. Here were a number of people sufficiently in earnest about the service of God to leave their ordinary occupations, in some cases to give up a well-earned holiday, in every case to spend a certain amount of money, in order to devote a few days to straightening out their spiritual lives. "Very well," he would say, "it's for me to see that they have all the help that I can give them." Acting upon this resolution, he would begin, while the retreat was still weeks off, to get ready for it. First he had to consider what sort of people were going to make the retreat. Then he had to decide what he would talk to them about. "You have to be practical in these things." Then how he would divide up his talks. "No good giving them a

mystical subject after lunch." Then he had to find out whether the silence would be well kept. "That depends to a great extent upon the nuns —some are much better than others." Then what instructions would be most useful. Having mapped out his plan of campaign, he set out to prepare the particular discourses; all the work that he was accustomed to do on the day of the sermon had to be done days beforehand in the case of retreats.

"Why don't you leave your particular preparation until just before the talk?" I asked him.

"Never have a minute once the retreat starts."

"But surely you get your time between talks."

"I'm never left alone; confessions and consultations go on all day long."

"But you should make some rules about it."

"Rules are no earthly good—there's bound to be a knock at the door, and a head will come round and say: 'I knew you wouldn't mind, Father—I just want to speak to you for a minute.' Those minutes are the things that run away with time."

Consequently every discourse had to be prepared long before the time for its delivery, and no K.C. ever gave more care and attention to the preparation of a highly remunerative brief than R.H.B. gave to the preparation of even the points of his suggested meditations. He felt that great care on his part was due to those who were to listen to him—"It's no good asking people to keep silence unless you are going to give them something

to think about." And he prepared with the avowed intention of being so interesting that his hearers would really want the silence-time to think over what he had said. He always tried to be interesting, and was very particular about the observance of silence; and if occasionally individuals were inclined to be slack in that matter he would take a great part of the blame upon himself, and would really feel that it was to some extent his fault as it was part of his work to fill their minds, and make them not want to talk.

And, after all, since most of his retreats were given to lay people, in nearly every instance you might be justified in concluding from the very fact of an individual's presence that he or she was in earnest and intended to get all the good possible out of it; it is not like a compulsory retreat, where the preacher has so often to stir up the interest of his hearers before he can make any headway. In Benson's retreats the interest of the congregation was there before he started, and it was his work to keep it and increase it. A few, perhaps, had come as a result of a sort of semi-spiritual fascination, attracted by the preacher, and desirous of the greater intimacy existing in the relations between preacher and congregation in a retreat than in an ordinary sermon, but they were only a very few, and the majority had undoubtedly come intent upon the spiritual benefit to be gained. But even in the cases of the infatuated ones, and there were always a few, Hugh Benson felt that he had a very

definite duty towards them; he could not help their infatuation, but he could make use of it for their own good, and a retreat offered an admirable opportunity. So it was always with a definite appreciation of the difficulties of his position that he started his retreats.

Retreat-giving was the most difficult work he ever did. He was no longer in the familiar and happy position of a preacher of acknowledged popularity, addressing a mass of people; he was an individual addressing individuals, there were in front of him a lot of souls, each asking for particular attention, each looking to him for assistance on the way to Heaven, each relying upon him to give that help. He felt like a musician playing on a harp and each particular soul was a separate string, the fullest use of each string being necessary for the production of a successful retreat in the sight of God. It was not for him in these circumstances to stir up lethargic souls; it was not his object to convince doubters, or satisfy inquirers; what he had to do was to guide energetic souls along the right path, to restrain those who, in their enthusiasm, were liable to get off the beaten track. To return to my original simile, it was his work to produce harmony by the masterly handling of his various strings; he had to play with care and with abandon, to produce a sweet harmony to ascend to the throne of God.

He could ignore no one in his endeavour to obtain his harmonious whole, every string had to

be touched and always just in the right way, and at the right time. In some cases he had to play upon the intellect, in others on the will; a sentimental appeal would be necessary for one, while another could only respond to the severely practical. He was always very serious about his retreats. I do not wonder that he declared: "I'd sooner preach a hundred sermons than one retreat."

Each discourse needed all the preparation of a big sermon; the preparatory nervous strain and physical effort was the same in each, and the same tax was placed upon his memory. It is true he had his notes with him, but he hardly ever referred to them; he was seated, but that, instead of easing him, only seemed to add to his difficulties. He swung himself about, rocked forward and backward, leant out towards his congregation. He had the vigorous gestures so reminiscent of the pulpit, the searching eyes looking from one to the other of his hearers, the rapidly changing expressions, the uneasiness as somebody begins to move about, the slight annoyance as he sees another note an unimportant item and miss a real point, the puzzled look which almost says: "I haven't got the attention of that dark woman in the fifth row," immediately followed by the reiteration of the point, or the introduction of a new analogy, the energy with which he revives a flagging interest with a little story or a witty remark. All the sermon tricks are there

with others added. It is obvious that the retreat is going well, he is stirring up spiritual activity, he is planting the seeds of sanctity in one soul, watering the shoots in another, in a third he is pruning a young sapling, in a fourth hacking off great branches from an old tree, all are working onward and upward, but the preacher is working harder than any other. He is God's gardener working in his Master's orchard, and as the tree is to be known by its fruits, the gardener is to be known by his trees.

If he had had nothing more to do than to preach them, R.H.B.'s retreats would have been strenuous enough, but his "talks" were only part of the work he had to do. He had other and even more wearying tasks; nearly all the time that might have been "spare" was taken up with confessions and consultations. "And you know they won't be content with coming once, they come over and over again."

Here as elsewhere many anxious to be his best friends were again his worst enemies. Without any necessity, retreatants would present themselves three times and sometimes four for confession, and would come even more often for consultations —and this in a five days' retreat. His most frequent visitors were not always making the best retreats. He told me how when a lady came to call upon him for the third time in as many days, he asked her:

"Whatever have you come for this time?"

"Well," she replied, "I saw Miss —— outside your door, and from the way she looked I knew she was going to tell you something about me."

Poor R.H.B. was very helpless in such circumstances.

He might have cut out his consultations altogether, or at any rate restricted them to a fixed number, but he never felt that he could do so. "After all," he said, "if one in ten, or even in twenty, does good, I think I ought to continue them." And so he would go on giving every bit of that valuable energy, and getting very little return for it in this world. He was incapable of sparing himself where the salvation or assistance of souls was in question; his generosity in the matter was undoubtedly abused, but then generosity nearly always is. But it was known to all who made retreats under his direction, and it gave courage to many who needed it to come and seek help; and of them some are serving God in Religion, others in the married state, and others going on their accustomed way doing the same old humdrum things as before; some have formed an alliance under his direction, and others broken a relationship. But all have benefited, and those souls he helped will form an eternal halo round the head of him who brought them to his Master, Who was at once their Saviour and their Slave.

CHAPTER XIX

CONCENTRATION OF FORCES

And now I have reached the end of the memoirs of a friend. To write of him has been a great joy and has brought a fuller understanding and an appreciation not felt when we were together. I began with the object of pleasing mutual friends, I continued in admiration of him whom it was a privilege to be intimate with, I complete the book as a labour of love, and offer it to all who are indebted to him, as I am, for what it may be worth as a reminder. The Catholic Church in England cannot even now, more than three years after his death, fully appreciate the loss it sustained when Hugh Benson was called to his reward. Perhaps he never entered quite fully into the participation of our English Catholic life, perhaps he never quite understood us or we him; but he did open our eyes to our surroundings, he did more than any priest of modern times to drag us out of the hole-and-corner attitude which had been part and parcel of our religion since our very recent persecution-times; he made a public feature of our religion in a way almost shocking to the descendants of that gallant band of English Catholics who have borne the burden of the day and the heats; he came to us in the eleventh hour

and worked for a very short time, but that time was very full and richly has he deserved his reward.

He was a big man; and he was not a perfect man. Other biographers have been accused of ignoring his faults, of presenting him as a saint. Only a few days ago I was asked:

"Did Benson completely master his temper before he died? When I knew him at Eton and Cambridge he had a violent temper."

And I answered then as I do now: "He had a violent temper to the end." It was a temper which overcame him from time to time, but never without a struggle; he fought it, and he often conquered. In his rages he could be, and was, scathingly unkind. I have known him forget his duties to himself and to his friends, but he was always big enough to be sorry afterwards and to say so. He lost his temper completely, but his subsequent apology was, if possible, more complete; his apology was abject, he humbled himself to others in it, and he was as dirt in his own estimation. It would be possible also to call him to a certain extent petty—but his "smallness" in this sense was the direct and natural consequence of his boyishness; he loved to be "first horse" and revelled in the limelight. I have known him sulk and be positively rude because he felt he was being pushed into a back seat in a conversation; and I have known him, within twenty-four hours of such an event, re-create the identical circumstances in order that he might conquer the feeling.

But neither his temper nor his love of the limelight was his biggest fault. He had one which overshadowed all his relations with his friends. With regard to money and the things it could buy R.H.B. was—shall we say—careful? He would calculate even a small improvement or alteration in his property by the amount of interest the money it was to cost would bring in if invested. This fault exasperated his friends to such an extent that once one of them turned on him and said:

"Look here, Benson, if you are not very careful your money will take you to Hell!"

This was said in the morning when we were all out shooting. After dinner, when R.H.B. and I had the parlour to ourselves, he said:

"Do you think —— meant what he said about money to-day?"

"Yes, I think so. Why?"

"Nothing, only it makes you think."

Like every big character, he was cursed with small faults; but they were never welcome guests—they were ever stings to him to be always extracted or treated with varying success.

But look at these three faults (and I feel confident they were the only three he had) and see what you can put against them. His temper was ever compensated for by the depth of his sorrow, his "smallness" by his manifest endeavours to overcome it, and if he was mean with money he was the personification of generosity with things far more valuable. He would give away his

thoughts, ideas, services, the benefit of his invaluable experiences, for the asking. He had a forgiving spirit that made you forget his temper; he had a loyalty that made his friendship inestimable.

Like every other man he had his faults. They were annoying ones, but they were all "small" in the sense that they were concerned with the things that do not really matter very much, and against them his virtues, even in the natural order, were so numerous and so big as completely to eclipse his failings. If it had been possible to put his faults in one tray of a balance, and his virtues in the other, the virtues would have been so much in excess of the faults that the scale would have gone down with a force that would have scattered the faults to the four winds.

The secret of Hugh Benson's position in the public eye was and is undoubtedly his "bigness." You may disagree with him, you may dislike him, you may think him overrated, but you can never ignore him—he was too big for that; he always has to be mentioned. As a writer, there are a great number who consider him the greatest of modern English Catholic novelists; again, there are a great number who have no such opinion of him, who prefer John Ayscough, or, following Tolstoy's lead, would give their vote to Canon Sheehan. But though you can discuss the talent of Ayscough and ignore Sheehan, and you can belaud Sheehan and never think of Ayscough (and both John

Ayscough and Canon Sheehan had passed the period when a lady tells her age, before Benson was born), no matter what Catholic novelist you discuss, Benson's name is bound to intrude itself. Not only can you not discuss Catholic novelists in general without mentioning him, you cannot even discuss an individual Catholic novelist without his coming in.

As a preacher, too, he is equally obtrusive. I suppose one can safely say that the most popular Catholic preachers of the past decade in England were Benson, Croke Robinson, Maturin and Vaughan—I adhere to a strictly alphabetical order, but, in non-Catholic as well as Catholic circles, only Father Vaughan can be compared to Benson for popularity, and yet in point of age Hugh Benson might have been son to two of them.

As a representative of Catholic opinion, after the Archbishop of Westminster, as leader of the Catholic clergy, and before the majority of the bishops, again Hugh Benson would share a leading position in public opinion with Father Bernard Vaughan.

Among Anglicans, opinion about Benson was varied. Most of them viewed him kindly, perhaps with a suspicion of sadness; a few were envious, and some were frankly bitter. But whether they looked on him as a poor misguided creature fallen from great heights, as one who had acted according to his lights to save his soul, or as

a turncoat and traitor, they have never succeeded in ignoring him—perhaps because he was a son of an Archbishop of Canterbury ; but he was not the only one of the extant progeny of the highest Anglican Ecclesiastic, and the others are not in the full glory of the footlights in the same way. Even the sons of Archbishops can sink into oblivion unless they are forced on to the attention of the world.

And that is just what happened to R.H.B. He was forced on to the attention of the world, pushed into the limelight, and held there solely by his own merits. His worst enemies could not accuse him of being a self-advertiser—a more retiring man never lived. He was incapable of seeking publicity; he liked to be important in his own little intimate circle, but that is a very different thing from forcing himself on the attention of the world. That he could never have done. But the fact remains that he did get into the public eye, and since he could not put himself there the question remains : " How did he attain to his position ? " and the answer, put shortly and concisely, is : " Purely and simply on his merits."

He began his life's work for God as an Anglican clergyman, his work was for his brethren in the Church of England, it was undoubtedly his vocation, and that vocation never underwent any change until the end of his days. He started by working for Anglicans, and he finished still working for Anglicans: the only thing that changed was

the character of his work. At a certain period he became convinced that he was working for the wrong cause, and characteristically he changed at once and began working for the right; temporal advantages never affected him for a moment, he apparently burnt all his boats behind him when he left Anglicanism; by sheer merit he became a much greater force through Catholicism. It is true he never attained to any great dignity in the Church, he was only an inferior type of Chamberlain. "But," as he said, "there is one grade below mine." And, after a pause: "At least, I think there is." But he did become a power, a man to be quoted, and consulted.

He loomed big in Catholic life in two continents because he was a man of single purpose. His objects were the conversion of Anglicans and the salvation of Catholics; he wrote for them, he worked for them, he preached for them, and he died for them. He had hardly any natural advantages; for the most part, as he repeatedly declared, his talents were acquired. He was little, insignificant, stammering, untidy, and odd, and yet he "arrived." For his "arrival" there was one reason, and only one: He was a Big Man for God.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST POST

LOOKING back now we can see that it was from the time he insisted upon going to Rome to preach, so much too soon after his operation, that Hugh Benson's decline began. For twelve months he struggled to get really well again, until the following Lent, 1914, when he went to New York; while he was there he was very ill, he did not lie up, but preached with a temperature of 104 degrees. I showed the letter in which he told me of this to an old and valued friend of his, who only made one remark:

"That's the beginning of the end."

And it was so; there was a change in him when he returned, he was going down hill. In the North of England, feeling ill, he took medical advice, and as a result had to give up smoking, a great blow indeed. He also consented to take a long holiday, which he decided to spend at Hare Street; but the decision was just too late. I was an Army Chaplain at Bedford at the time, and one morning I got a letter from him telling me all about it. "I've got what the doctor calls a false angina," he wrote, "and I'm going to take a long holiday. Can you manage to come over

and shoot on Thursdays?" I was actually answering that letter when a telegram was brought to me announcing his death. A few days afterwards I stood at his own gates to receive his body. He had died away from home, and all his characteristically-careful preparations had fallen through. For years he had preserved a set of vestments in which he was to be buried, and from aught I know to the contrary they are still in the chest in which he kept them. It had been his desire that his Monsignorial robes should be buried with him, and they were lost on that last journey between Manchester and Buntingford. Almost the first instruction he gave me when I went to Hare Street was with regard to a little chalice which stood on the shelf in the hall outside the parlour:

"I want that chalice put into my coffin. I had it made expressly for it," he said. "If anybody tries to prevent you putting it in, don't let him."

I did not take him very seriously, and never at that time thought about his death except as a very remote certainty.

"Why should anyone object?" I asked.

"Oh, they'll object right enough. I know exactly what they'll say."

"What?" said I.

"Oh—'Just think how useful a chalice is in a poor parish.' 'I'm sure if he was here now he wouldn't wish it to be buried with him,'—and all that sort of thing. Well, you can just tell them that he would wish it, and what's more, it's no

THE CHAPEL

good for any poor parish, because it's c-copper—so there!"

The little chalice was not put inside his coffin, but it was placed on top and buried with him, and just as he had prophesied—and almost in his identical words—there were those who demurred.

It was fitting that before the funeral his body should lie in his own little chapel. There lay that massive, handsome, but strangely incongruous coffin amidst all the people and things he had loved best upon earth. That little chapel, so particularly his own, had been, for years, his Base and Arsenal. It was an old brewhouse, with the original beams and brick floor remaining; a nearer approach to Bethlehem's stable was never fashioned into chapel. Those great rough beams, the undressed wood of the rood screen, formed a basis for the super-imposition of the various things calculated to stir his devotion—rough, crude, and realistic wooden statues, some made on the premises, others imported from Belgium, among them an indelicate St. Sebastian, about which he would say: "He came without even arrows, but I made them myself and stuck them in." The statue of Our Lady, carved from one of his own pear trees, was encrusted with jewels collected from his friends. The Altar itself, a huge oak chest, which in its earlier days had done duty as a store-place for gramophone records, was rendered effective by heraldic paintings.

It was his Master's house, prepared by a devoted servant. The personality of R.H.B. was everywhere; it was as if he had turned to his God and said:

"Here are all the things I love best in the world. Come and dwell in their midst with me."

It was a wonderful little place, a home of great happenings; in it he got his inspirations for his public works. Sermons destined to rouse thousands first took form in that little chapel; books that would circulate to the uttermost ends of the earth were thought out there. There he prayed with his friends and followers. People great and small, wise and foolish, princesses and penitents, poor and wealthy, landed proprietors and wanderers on the face of the earth worshipped there; there was cradled a new parish. In the little confessional distraught souls sought and found comfort and consolation, great decisions were made, great events had their small beginnings. If you want to know Hugh Benson, there only can you get his atmosphere. He called it "the most devotional chapel in the whole world"—it is his most adequate memorial.

As he lay there, the great catafalque assuming enormous proportions in the tiny building, as his nearest relations and dearest friends knelt in prayer for his soul, during that last most solemn Mass of requiem, in every mourner, from his Ordinary arrayed in all the glory of his episcopal office, right down to the little village boy peeping

round the door, was felt a sense of personal loss. He was a loss not only to his Church and country, but to every individual who knew him.

We buried him in his own little orchard, under the shadow of the crude and barren Calvary erected with his own hands: the shadow of the cross stretches out across his grave, the cross he helped so many hundreds to bear.

As we go along those garden paths, or wander wondering into the little chapel, so like and yet so different from what it was, there is a feeling of emptiness, with an occasional glow of anticipation. One almost expects to see him hurry round a corner, or bustle into the chapel: he has stamped his own character upon the place, it is still his, it is redolent of him.

But in the orchard there is a mound, and beneath it lies the body of Robert Hugh Benson, Novelist, Preacher and Director, Friend and Adviser, Soldier and Leader in the Army of Christ, Papal Chamberlain, Catholic, Priest of God—he is dead, and as yet there is none to take his place.

Let that wearied body rest there from its labours until the Last Post sounds and he rises again in the glory of his Lord and presents his great army to the King he served so well.

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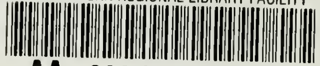
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