

The Light in the Dormitory

By W. J. Wintle, F.Z.S.

The Abbey of St. Placidus stood in a valley between the mountains, and was hidden from the few travellers who passed through that lonely region by a thick belt of trees. It was several miles from the nearest town; and the road through the valley led to no place of any importance. It was therefore rarely used except by the dependents of the Abbey and a few other peasants.

Thus disturbance from the outside world was quite unknown; and the peace of the community was rarely broken by any disquiet from within. The monks spent their days in the silence of prayer and recollection; and the daily round of Offices in the Church and work about the house, gardens and farm, fully occupied their time and thoughts.

Speaking generally, the monks ran elderly. Most of them were well over forty—a few were over eighty—and the Abbot was nearer sixty than fifty. He very properly maintained that no man had cut his wisdom teeth till he had passed fifty. But at the same time the community felt the need of some younger members. The old ones could not expect to live for ever in this world; there was plenty of work that called for strong, young hands; and the noviciate cried aloud for occupants.

So the Abbot took counsel with his brethren, and they agreed with him that something must be done to meet the situation. And the only thing that seemed at all possible was to try the experiment of an almshouse or school for boys who seemed likely to develop a vocation for community life later on. And that is how it came about that the old dormitory over the west cloister was now occupied by a dozen youths of rather lively disposition.

It was a decided change for the old dormitory, for it had been disused for twenty years past. No one appeared to quite know why; but there seemed to be a combination of reasons. For one thing, it was the part of the house farthest removed from the rest of the rooms, and so was a trifle inconvenient for those who lived in it. Then the stairs leading up to it were narrow and steep, and so were trying to elderly legs; the dormitory itself was cold in winter, and so did not agree with people subject to asthma and bronchitis; and the place was said to be bad to sleep in.

What this last objection meant was not very clear; but those who were old enough to have slept there when it was last used said that it was noisy. This was odd in a place where silence reigned both in the house and outside it; but the suggestion was that the wind somehow caught that part of the buildings and howled through chimneys and chinks. Queer noises were heard, which were put down to birds under the eaves or rats under the floor—anyway the place was noisy and unsuitable for light sleepers.

It was known as the old dormitory because it— with the west cloister beneath it—formed the sole surviving part of the ancient monastery which was pulled down when the present Abbey was built. It dated from the beginning of the thirteenth century, but had been considerably altered inside. Originally it had been one long, open dormitory, in which some twenty beds could have been arranged along the walls; but it was now divided into what were called cells, though they were merely cubicles open to the gangways down the centre.

Thus, while the occupants of the cubicles had a certain amount of privacy, they could see anyone who passed down the dormitory; and as the partitions between the cubicles were only some eight feet high, a good portion of the old oak roof was visible from all of them.

The boys were a very varied set, who got on well together as a rule; but we are only now concerned with one of them. This was Brother Bernard, who on account of being the eldest and steadiest had been made prefect of the aluminate. This meant that he had general charge of the others, under the monk who was their immediate superior, and was held responsible for their good behaviour. He was a youth of seventeen; and he had his hands full!

His cubicle was that next to the stairs, and was so arranged that it commanded a rather larger view of the dormitory than the others. It was his duty to see that everyone was in his cell immediately after Compline, and that all lights were out half an hour later. There was no gas or electric light in this ancient building: the dormitory was rather ineffectually lighted by some hanging oil lamps.

It was Brother Bernard's business to put these out, and to see that everybody was in bed by that time. Then he returned to his cubicle; and it was usually about a quarter of a minute later when steady breathing told the shadows that he was fast asleep. And the steady breathing did not as a rule cease until the bell rang to wake the community in the morning.

But one night he woke up with a start, and was just in time to hear the Abbey clock strike midnight. He turned over and tried to go to sleep again, but without result. He had that queer feeling that somebody was about. But all was perfectly still and silent.

Then for the first time he noticed the light in the dormitory which was destined to have such a strange sequel. He was looking drowsily at nothing—for there was nothing to look at—when he saw it. It was just a patch of light shining on the roof about half-way down the room.

He at once thought that one of the alumni had got a bit of candle from the sacristy, and was enjoying a surreptitious spell of reading. This was forbidden; and it was his business to stop it. So he slipped out of bed, and went quietly down the passage between the cubicles. But everybody seemed to be fast asleep; there was no light in any of the cubicles; and there was no odour of a blown-out candle. When he looked up at the roof again, the light was gone.

This was distinctly curious; but Brother Bernard was too young to trouble his head about such a trifle. It was not until the thing happened again about a week later that he began to think it over. Much reading of detective stories, written by people who have never been detectives nor talked with detectives, had given that youth the idea that he was a born investigator; and he set to work with a relish to find out the mystery of the light in the dormitory.

Could it come from any of the cubicles? To this question he was able to give a pretty decided negative. He knew that nobody had a dark lantern or anything of that sort; and on both occasions he had made sure that no bit of candle was being burnt. Besides, when he came to think of it, the patch of light was too small and too sharply defined to be caused in that way. A candle would have lit up a considerable part of the roof and not a small patch of it.

Could the light have come from outside? Again he was obliged to answer "No." The old dormitory was lighted in the day by some narrow lancet windows. Had the light shone through one of these, it would have been a long strip of light and not a small patch. Besides, the windows overlooked the cloister garth, into which no one could enter at night; so that the notion of a strong bull's-eye lantern operated from the garth was quite out of the question.

But soon the mysterious light became still more mysterious. The next time that Brother Bernard woke up in the night and saw it there was a change. Before, it was a vague patch; but now it was more distinct and was in the shape of a cross. He rubbed his eyes and wondered if he was dreaming. Then he looked again, and it was clearly a cross. A moment later it disappeared. But it disappeared in a rather unusual way. It did not vanish either suddenly or gradually; but it went out from one side. First one arm of the cross vanished, then the upright, and then the other

arm. Imagine that the cross had been pushed sideways behind a dark screen, and you will have a fair idea of what happened.

It must have been just about the same time, if not on the same night, that one of the monks had a queer dream which he related next day at recreation. Of course Brother Bernard knew nothing about, this and only heard of it by chance some time later. The monk in question, who was a very level-headed man, had his cell overlooking the cloister garth, but on the side opposite to the old dormitory. He had heard nothing about the strange light that had been seen.

He dreamt that he was standing in the cloister when he saw a monk in front of him whom he failed to recognise by the back view. The monk was walking slowly away from him. It was apparently not one of the community; and he knew that no visitor had arrived. So he hastened to pass him, that he might see who it was. But the other also hastened, and turned the corner; where he seemed to vanish, for he was not to be seen a moment later.

The monk in his dream then thought that he turned back, and again saw the stranger before him. This time he stood still to watch, and saw him take some object out of the folds of his habit. Whatever this object may have been, it seemed to give out a faint light which shone on the roof of the cloister. Then the stranger walked to a certain spot in the old west cloister and appeared to step into the wall and vanish! At this point the monk woke up, and at that moment the Abbey clock struck midnight.

Brother Bernard continued to have disturbed nights, waking up without any apparent cause, but saw nothing more for two or three weeks. Then a night came when he was aroused at about twelve o'clock, and again saw the light on the roof. This time it was brighter than before—so much so that it drew him out of bed in spite of previous failures to discover the cause. He stepped out into the central passage, and there before him he saw what he took to be one of the monks.

This greatly puzzled him, for no one had any business there at night, except the infirmarian in case of sickness. But there was no one unwell in the alumnate over night; and, if anyone had been taken ill, the prefect must first have been called to fetch the infirmarian. It was very strange. It might possibly be the Abbot or Prior who had taken it into his head to go round and see that all was right. In any case, it was Brother Bernard's duty to ascertain who it was; so he stood and watched the figure, expecting that when it turned back he would see. But the mysterious monk did not turn back. He walked to the farther end of the dormitory, which ended in a blank wall without a door.

But as he walked, Brother Bernard noticed that the light on the roof went with him. It was just as if he was carrying a lamp turned upwards, except that the patch of light was as before in the shape of a cross. Yes; without a doubt the light was moving along. It continued to move until it came to the wall, and then it disappeared in the same curious way as before, just as if it had been pushed sideways behind a screen. Or it might be said to have vanished sideways into the end wall.

Brother Bernard was watching the light, and so he did not see what became of the monk. But when the light vanished, he looked for him—and saw nothing! In fact it was too dark to see anything. There was no moon; and the dormitory was in total darkness. Then it struck him as very strange that he should have been able to see the monk at all in the dark. He could only suppose that the light on the roof enabled him to see.

Up till now, he had said nothing to anyone about the light in the dormitory, as he had no special wish to be laughed at for foolish fancies. But now he thought it right to mention the matter to the Prior. To his surprise, he was taken at once to the Abbot, and was asked to repeat

the story in full detail. A good many questions were asked; and he was told not to say anything to the other alumni but to report any further happenings at once.

He was considerably astonished to find his story taken so seriously; and he would have been still more surprised if he had learnt the reason. Things had been happening at the Abbey. In the first place, an old manuscript had been found among the documents stored in the library, which seemed to be part of a diary kept by one of the monks over a century ago. Amongst other things of interest, it contained an account of some curious happenings in the Abbey at that time. Several of the community had seen what they supposed to be a spectre monk, walking in the cloister at night. On several occasions he had been seen to vanish into the wall of the west cloister; and he seemed to carry something in the folds of his habit that gave out a faint light.

Another, and still older, document had come to light in the same place. This was very difficult to read, and seemed to have been purposely written in such style as to conceal some secret from any casual reader. But, so far as could be made out, it was intended to record the hiding of something of value on the Abbey premises, and to give a clue to the hiding place. The clue was apparently lost now, for the manuscript was torn badly and the latter part could not be read.

But something else had happened besides the finding of these two papers. Curious rustling sounds had been heard late at night in the old west cloister by a monk who had been sitting up late to finish some important work; and on going to see what it was he had caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a figure in black that melted into the wall.

He went to the spot where the figure had disappeared; and he thought that a faint patch of light shone on the roof just overhead; but it was very faint, and had gone before he could be quite certain that it was there.

The next time that Brother Bernard woke up in the night, he saw the dark figure more distinctly, and he also saw plainly that it was carrying something partly concealed in the folds of its habit. The light appeared to come from this. He plucked up his courage and ran lightly and silently down the central passage to the intruder. But, quick as he was, the visitor was quicker still and had vanished before he overtook him. But Brother Bernard was in time to detect a curious perfume that seemed to linger on the air for a moment. It was like the pleasant scent that comes from an old chest in which spices and perfumes have been stored long ago.

Now we have said that the youth had detective ideas; and he decided to lay a trap for the visitor. The next night, when all were in bed and he went round to put out the lamps, he fastened a piece of black cotton across the passage about a foot from the floor, in such fashion that anyone passing that way would inevitably break it.

Nothing happened that night nor the next; but on the third he again woke up and saw the mysterious monk standing half-way down the passage. This time he was turned partly towards Brother Bernard, who could now see that he was holding what appeared to be a golden cross which gave out a pale light that seemed to be reflected on the open roof of the dormitory. He seemed to hesitate for a few moments, then walked slowly down the passage way, appeared to push the cross into the wall and then to melt away. The figure walked right past the place where the black cotton was fixed; but, when Brother Bernard went to examine it, he found that it had not been broken. It was pretty clear from this that the intruder was not of solid flesh and blood. What then could he be made of?

When the Abbot heard this story, he decided that a watch should be kept by two seniors; and for over a week these two monks—much to their disgust—sat up in the old dormitory till after midnight. But nothing at all happened, and they said a good many things about the folly of paying attention to idle tales. But it was a little odd that both of these monks dreamed the next

night that a monk stood by their beds and said something about a hiding place. But in the morning neither of them could remember what it was the Visitor had said.

The suggestion was now made by somebody that the whole affair was a delusion of the evil one; and Brother Bernard was told to try to sprinkle the apparition with holy water the next time it was seen. So he provided himself with a sprinkler and waited for an opportunity.

It came about a week later, and the result was not at all what he expected. The mysterious visitor was standing opposite his cubicle when he woke up with a start. As soon as he saw this, he slipped out of bed and took up the sprinkler. But something caught him by the wrist and held his hand back. Meanwhile the apparition was moving slowly down the central passage. Three times Brother Bernard tried to use the sprinkler, but each time the same thing happened. The last time, his wrist was held so tightly and jerked back so sharply as to cause actual pain. But who did it? Certainly not the apparition; for that was going down the dormitory at the time.

So the experiment was tried again in a different way. A small stoup of holy water was hung on the end wall at the exact spot where the monk had so many times been seen to disappear. The result was curious, according to Brother Bernard's account the next morning. He woke up as usual and saw the monk going down the dormitory. When he came to the usual spot he did not vanish but stood still as if hesitating what to do. The watcher saw his chance and ran towards him. But again he was disappointed, for something caught him by the heel and he fell with a crash. When he scrambled to his feet, the apparition was gone.

This was distinctly vexing, for he could not tell how the mysterious monk got over the difficulty of having to pass through a stoup of holy water. But a few nights later he found out, for he saw him again. This time he did not attempt to interfere but simply watched. When the monk reached the end of the dormitory, he seemed to hesitate for a moment; then he appeared to push the cross he was carrying into the wall a little below the holy water stoup; after which he simply vanished. How he went, the watcher could not describe: he just was not there, and that was all that could be said.

Things now took a rather unpleasant turn for Brother Bernard. The whole story rested on his word; and every attempt to test the truth of it had failed. Several of the monks who had heard the history began to suggest that the whole business was imagination at first and romancing later. He was cross-questioned pretty sharply by the Prior more than once; and the Abbot took occasion to say a few words on the sin of lying. So it was very fortunate for him that one or two small incidents happened at this time to confirm his story.

One of the boys was a little unwell, and the local doctor came to see him. He was accompanied by a little terrier which came up to the dormitory with him. Needless to say, the doctor was not in the habit of taking a dog with him to see his patients; but in this case he had called in the course of a country walk and had asked permission to bring the dog in, as he did not want it to go chasing rabbits in his absence.

While the doctor was examining his patient, the terrier ran about the dormitory. Presently it went to the wall at the end. It stopped suddenly, hesitated for a moment, and then went slowly and suspiciously to the very spot where the nocturnal visitor was in the habit of disappearing. It went to sniff at the wall; darted suddenly back as if it had touched something very hot; and then dashed howling out of the place.

The other incident was the merest trifle in itself, but was significant in view of what had happened. A new boy joined the aluminate. He had heard nothing about anything occurring in the dormitory; and it chanced that he was placed in the bed nearest to the end wall. But in the morning he asked to be moved, and could give no better reason than that he felt afraid and that

he thought he heard whisperings in the wall. He was told not to be silly: but he was moved all the same.

And now things developed rapidly. Brother Bernard woke up a few nights later to find the mysterious monk standing by his side and bending over him. He at once moved away, but kept looking back as if expecting to be followed. The boy got up and went with him; and, when he thought it over afterwards, he was surprised that he did not feel in the least afraid. The monk walked slowly down the dormitory. This time he did not appear to be carrying anything; and the usual light on the open roof was not there. But the moonlight was streaming through the windows, and everything could be seen.

They reached the end wall; and then the monk stopped and pointed to a spot below the holy water stoup. To his surprise, Brother Bernard then saw distinctly a cross of light shining on the place. He turned to his companion, meaning to ask him what it meant—but he was alone. The monk had vanished completely.

He was not much taken aback by this. He was getting used to queer things happening. So he just went quietly back to his cell again; and, as he went up to the dormitory, he heard an alumnus talking in his sleep. And the boy was saying,

“Open the wall, Father!”

Next day all this was duly reported to the Prior; and the Abbot decided to make a search. A mason was sent for, and the end wall of the old dormitory was opened at the place that Brother Bernard had indicated. It quickly became evident that the wall had previously been tampered with. Beneath the stone facing, the wall had been cut away and then loosely filled in with broken stone and mortar. This was cleared away, and then a box came to light. It contained a cross of gold, containing a relic for which the Abbey had been famed in the olden days, before the dissolution.

Brother Bernard had the honour of carrying it in the procession when it was solemnly conveyed back to the church and placed once more in its old position above the high altar. And since that day, the light in the old dormitory has been seen no more.