

Emmaus, 11th June 1909

I HAVE LEARNED at last to measure grace by silence. But only by doing the unspeakable.

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I was not there when Franz succumbed to his final agony. While his suffering was at its greatest, I was struggling to find my way back to Emmaus. The injured child I had been called away to baptise died before I reached it. Night had fallen on the hills of Skimpers Nek and I had been riding hopelessly for hours before stumbling upon the path. It was Sr Angela who, at twenty-five minutes to two o'clock, heard the last word Franz spoke – "Light". As she knelt next to him, he slipped away. She told me that he turned his dying eyes to the door again and again, watching for me. By the time I arrived in the blue murk of four o'clock, all that was left for me to do was to close those eyes fixed upon the door and give the first blessing over the body.

Later, in a dawn shrouded with mist, I said the Mass for the Dead. Then I stood back as Sr Angela, still shaking with grief, went to the kitchen and came back with our largest knife in her hands. I said nothing as she stood with her arms raised, the blade gleaming in the light of the candles we had arranged around his body in the dark room. And I said nothing when the knife (a knife that, it struck me in that instant, in all its long service had never known flesh or bone or blood) suddenly flashed down and was buried in his chest. The sound of cutting and carving was strange in the quiet of the morning, and I withdrew into that stillness as the weeping Sister squelched about and finally lifted out the heart. This she brought bleeding to me. I took it in my hands, uncoffined, and walked out into a morning that was spreading like a bruise over Emmaus.

Alone I started up the steep steps the old man had himself cut into the hill immediately behind the station, his place of exile. With just a field hoe and a crowbar he had built in only six weeks the Way of the Cross up this hill he called Calvary. I held his heart out before me each step of the way and, as he had done every morning until his strength failed him, I

stopped at each of the fourteen Stations on the zigzagging path, but only to catch my breath. On the summit is a great cross of iron. At the foot of this cross I dug a hole and in it I placed his heart. I packed it in with sand and stone and stood up, wiping my hands on the worn white wool of my habit. Beneath me the featureless expanse once known as Nomansland stretched away for miles in every direction.

No, I was not there when Franz died, his tongue paralysed and still at last. But his blood is on my hands and, being mortal, the sins I have committed for the sake of silence bind me to – what? Confession, I almost said, but the heart of he who is, even now, the one to whom I am bound to confess is hidden on that bare hill, and his body buried amidst the community from which we were expelled. If he, in death, has been welcomed back to the house that rejected him in life, no such charity has been extended to me. Nor could it be. For just as there is now no proper authority to absolve me of my sins, so too there is no community left to accept me back into its embrace if ever I could make proper reparation for those sins.

It may be true that anything I have to confess is best left to silence, but what then of silence itself, at least the silence I sought to safeguard? If this has to be put before you in so many, many words, well, that is because I, more than most, have had to come to terms with the secrets that lie on the other side of silence. All I can offer you is the certainty that each word I write is a penance for the things I did in silence, for the sake of silence. And I shall consider myself absolved only when I am free to slip back into the silence for which I did such dreadful things.

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When I speak of silence, I am being quite, quite literal; I was once, after all, a monk of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance or, as they are more popularly known, the Trappists. *The ninth degree of humility*, says St Benedict in his Rule for Monasteries, *is that a monk restrain his tongue and keep silence*. This is so overt a feature of his Rule that Trappists are continually caught in the paradox of having to explain it. Their silence is something of a scandal to those outside the Order, but Trappists are – or should be – too much a part of the mystery of silence to formulate an apologetic for it; quite simply, it is an essential part of our withdrawal from the world. The central mystery of a Trappist's vocation is his entry into the silence of God within the hidden life of the monastery.

Ah, the monastery! That retreat of piety and learning, that hidden community of the humble and holy, that still centre of solitude, that house of assiduous prayer and joyful penitence. Why, when the world thinks of a monastery, does it think of murder? What is it about a cloister that brings killing to mind?

Well, I must admit to you now that I shall have to give in to such gothic imaginings. I will give you evil under the habit, a death's head in a cowl, sinister intent in the hiss of sandals slipping along empty corridors of echoing stone. And I must, indeed, give you murders – thirteen at a stroke, I shall have to report. And the old man himself, perhaps – but every accident of our history must be counted out, each detail clicking by as if a bead on a rosary. One decade for each mystery, I dare to say, though all the mysteries here are sorrowful ones, where the sacred and profane mix so intimately in my intentions.

Forgive me. I am rushing ahead to my intentions, no less, when I have not even told you who I am. And was it not our very own St Bernard who condemned the rationalist Abélard for his sceptical teaching that an act is to be judged by the intention of the doer in doing it?

But there I go again, off in every direction but that of the plain facts in plain speech. Off after an arcane elaboration that is nothing more than a vain attempt to use my little and rusty scholastic skill to take the sting out of the truth. *In much speaking*, says the Rule, *you will not escape sin*. And did not the founder of the Trappists, in the holy zeal with which he returned us to St Benedict's ancient Rule, forbid intellectual work? *It is written*, after all, as the Rule reminds us, *that a wise man is known by the fewness of his words*.

So, to the plain truth of it. My name is Eduard Biegner. I was born in Moravia on the 27th September 1845 and, to all intents and purposes, died at Emmaus in East Griqualand on the 24th May 1909 – well beloved in life, I am sure it will be said, and much mourned in death.

Given even these simple facts, you may well be more confused than helped by my efforts towards plain speech. I am called to explain many things, which in itself undoes a proper sense of contrition. "If I justify myself, mine own mouth will condemn me," says Job. But there is nothing else for it. At times I shall have to correct the records as they stand, change the light in which they are seen, add here, take there – in the end, desert eternity for history, God for the historian.

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