

## Father Anselm's Experiences

BY LADY ROSA GILBERT  
in the Ave Maria

Father Anselm's story affected his audience deeply, and he was beset with questions and cross-questions on the subject of the reality of such occurrences. "Why, if such things are allowed to happen, do they not happen more frequently, Father? How many souls could be saved, how much evil prevented, by a spiritual apparition or a supernatural message!"

The sweet-faced old missionary looked at us with a wistful smile. "These are among the mysteries," he said. "But that they do occur, when God pleases, who can dare to doubt? It is equally certain that to some persons, and even to particular families, a power is given, like an extra sense, leading them into communication with the spiritual world. Why? you ask me; and I can only say: 'Again the mystery!' Some of us are in the thick of it, while the great mass of our neighbors are neither comforted nor terrified by any such intercourse."

Some of his audience gazed at the good Father with envy, some with compassion; while all seemed eager to know whether he himself was a sharer in that marvellous gift which had been bestowed on his uncle. Had he ever had personal experience of the actuality of the spiritual world?

"Certainly," he said, simply; "many, many times."

A thrill ran through his listeners—a sensation of mingled curiosity, keen interest and fear.

"I will tell you one of my first experiences of this nature," he went on. "When I was a very young priest I was sent on the mission to assist an old reverend Father in his duties in a remote part of England. We had a small house, a small chapel and a small congregation, as a matter of course. It was my part to say the early Mass every morning; and, being a sleepy-headed fellow, I depended on our excellent elderly housekeeper to waken me in time for this sacred duty."

"It was in the dark wintry weather when, waking unexpectedly in the night, all hours seem the same, unless one hears a clock strike or one lights a candle to look at a watch. I was not accustomed to any such freakish awakenings. Invariably taking my full measure of allotted slumber right on to the end. I went to bed one night as usual, thoroughly tired and heavy with sleep; and when I found myself starting up at the sound of a heavy knock on my door, I, of course, thought it was my usual morning summons to get up."

"I lay for a minute collecting my senses and listening for the retreating footsteps (no fairy ones) of our rather ponderously constructed housekeeper; and it struck me as strange that I had not heard them, though they were always exceedingly audible to the least sensitive tympanum. In fact, though the knock had been unusually loud, it was followed by no sound whatever. There was that indescribable something in the air which gives assurance that the mysterious night voyage of our earth is still nearer to its beginning than to its end; also that there is a deathlike collapse of all animal vitality around us, while the waking consciousness is aware of a chill rustling of the silence, perhaps the rushing of Time's wave, which is felt and not seen or heard."

"I sat up and struck a light. It was just 3 o'clock, about four hours from daylight. Yet I had distinctly heard the knock; and while I lay thinking with my candle alight, I heard it again. I called, but there was no answer. I got up and opened the door—no one was there."

"A strange conviction of the impossible, so far as natural things are concerned, seized me; but, shaking off suggestions of the uncanny, I turned my thoughts in the most matter of fact direction. It was hardly probable that burglars would knock on my door to announce their presence in the house, and yet for burglars I felt myself bound to search. I thought of the church, the sacristy, the sacred vessels, the little poor-box behind the door of the chapel. My own valuables were few; my good superior, asleep on the other side of the passage, possessed scarcely anything pawnable beyond a rather antediluvian watch; and as for our elderly housekeeper, I could have sworn that the rings in her ears were made of gilded tin. To the chapel, then, I proceeded, armed with the poker, and looking in to all the rooms—not a very lengthy task—on my way."

"Nothing was stirring. Not a mouse squeaked or scraped. Even the homely cat failed to meet me on the stair with a mew that might have seemed to acknowledge guilt and apologize for disturbance."

The church was solemnly still, as all churches are at 3 o'clock in the morning; no watcher before the tabernacle; the Lord solitary on His humble throne; while poor human nature, even the disciples who love Him, are weakly elsewhere and fast asleep. "Could ye not watch with Me one hour? I felt sad and ashamed to think that only a human sense of alarm had brought me down there to kneel for a time under the speck of red light aloft in the silver lamp, which was the only customary faithful night-watcher."

"But after a certain vigil, during which serious and sacred thoughts had driven out of my mind almost all remembrance of the cause of my being there, the sleepiness of youth—Peter's sleepiness John's sleepiness—began to overpower me, and I rose from my knees and returned to my room. I was standing in the middle of the floor, about to spring into bed, when I was suddenly aware of a something in my neighborhood which caused me to say aloud: 'Who is here? Who are you? Is there anything I can do for you?'"

"Then there came an answer, clear and distinct—a voice I knew, the tones of which chilled my heart. 'I died an hour ago,' said the voice, that I knew; nothing more."

"I wept. I need not say I was sleepy no longer. I crossed and remained in prayer till the slow daylight dawned and the hour for the early Mass arrived; then, before beginning the Holy Sacrifice, I made a brief announcement from the altar."

"The Mass about to be said will be offered for the repose of the soul of one who died this morning."

"The announcement produced a sensation, which the sense of propriety in our pious little congregation was with difficulty able to suppress. We were miles away from a postoffice or a telegraph station, and our one delivery of letters in the twenty-four hours reached us about the middle of the day. Therefore a death occurring that morning of which I had knowledge must be the death of a member of the congregation. This thought was at once forced into the minds of all who were about to assist at this Mass, which they were informed was to be a Requiem. The service was followed with intense reverence and earnestness, and when it was over the thing I expected to happen exactly took place. The congregation crowded round the outer door of the sacristy, anxious to know which member of their body had departed from amongst us in the small hours of that winter's morning. I quietly reassured them on this point, and steered through the difficulty of answering their further questions as best I could."

"There remained the great question for myself: What news would the postman bring me at noon on the morrow? The news came. A dearly-loved friend had suddenly expired on the morning and at the hour indicated to me by the voice I had heard in my chamber."

Father Anselm ceased, and we were all silent. Finally we summoned courage to put a few questions to him:

"What did you think of the condition of that spirit, Father? Was it a happy or an unhappy one?"

"He wanted the Mass, therefore he was happy. If he had been unhappy, he would not have come to me."

"But does it not imply that he was in purgatory?"

"In some degree of purgatory. But purgatory is a happy state," responded Father Anselm. "In some cases I do not doubt that it seems to the spirits there already heaven."

"That is a sweet doctrine, Father," said some one.

"It is very sweet," said the priest.

"Will you not tell us something more?" was the next appeal to him.

"Ah! I could tell much, but there are limits to such revelations. I relate only what is cause for rejoicing. And yet what I am going to tell now, though also a spiritual experience, is not of apparitions or actual communication with the other world, except by that spiritual telepathy which is indeed a frequent form of communication."

"I was in another part of the country, acting as temporary curate, some miles from a large central town through which many people passed on their way to more important places. Our new mission was small and struggling, and there was not always enough for a zealous priest to do. Often, not to be idle, I did a little gardening; and I read a great deal in the tiny brown parlor, where, as some one said, I could poke the fire, shut the

door and open the window, all without rising from my seat."

"One wet day I was particularly busy and interested in my studies. In the morning the rain had been light, and I had remained gardening, putting out tiny plants for the spring, till I was soaked with wet; and at last, feeling chilled, had come in and changed all my clothing and sat by the fire—thankful that there was nothing at all likely to occur obliging me to stir out of doors till the morrow."

"Suddenly I felt a kind of cloud come between me and my book, and a strong desire arose in me to get up and go at once to the Catholic Church in the town of R—. I put it out of my mind; it seemed such an unreasonable idea. There was nothing for me to do there on any afternoon, if I were to go the church would probably be shut up before I arrived. I tried to go on with my reading, but it was of no use. I looked at the rain streaming down the window panes. I thought of the long walk, without the possibility of meeting with any kind of vehicle; and I had already lit the worse of a wetting that morning. All my reasoning and temporizing were in vain; I felt that I had to get up and proceed at once to that distant church, and I went."

"St. Mary's of the Martyrs was a dark, dingy old chapel, frequented only by the poor employees, chiefly Irish, of the factories of the town. Having tramped the roads running with rain, and the flowing streets, I arrived after about two hours' travel at the door of the church. It was still open, though the gas lamps in the streets outside were lit, and the interior was quite dark. Entering the church I saw that it was empty. Still feeling sure that I had come for some purpose, at some call, if only to try my obedience, my faith, I walked up to the altar rails and knelt there, with the rain running down from my clothing and out of my boots. I had been so kneeling for only a few minutes when I heard a sound of some one stirring in a bench not far away, and a figure came forward in the twilight and stood beside me. It was a woman. I turned my head and looked at her."

"Are you a priest?" she inquired, in a low, faltering voice.

"Yes," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

"Everything," she said. I knew by her voice that she was in a state of suppressed excitement. "I am a great sinner, but the good God has worked a miracle for me."

"Praise God!" I cried, rising from my knees at once. "I know now why I have come here."

"I have brought you here," she said, "or rather God brought you here for me. I promised Him that if a priest came into the church within an hour, I would believe in Him and go to confession. I had heard the sacristan tell a man that the only priest in the town had gone away for the day."

"She went on to explain that many years before she had lost her faith and ceased to be a Catholic. Living among Protestants and unbelievers, she had felt no desire for any kind of religion, led a pleasant life, and never thought of the future. On that morning she had arrived in the town from a countryhouse two miles off, with a party of friends, to attend a mid-day theatrical performance. When they arrived at the place of amusement some unaccountable repulsion to the idea of entering it seized on her; and to the annoyance of her friends, she declared her intention of separating herself from the party and going at once to the hotel where they were to dine. After some remonstrance and persuasion, her friends allowed her to indulge her whim; and went into the theatre, while she remained without."

"At this moment she felt no desire to go anywhere in particular—only an unreasonable and, to herself, incomprehensible aversion to entering that place of amusement. Instead of proceeding straight to the hotel, she thought she would explore the town a little. Seeing the church door open, she went in. She thought it a dark, disagreeable-looking place; but something stronger than her aesthetic tastes urged her to remain. Sitting down in one of the benches, memory began working within her, and recollections of her early days and their forgotten teachings came stealing up out of the long-shut-up chambers of her brain. After an hour spent sitting in that dark, damp, solitary corner, her hands covering her face, her mind a battleground between the spirit of grace and the sceptical spirit of the world, she could endure it no longer—she dare not depart without making some effort to correspond with the suggestions of God's presence now so suddenly and unexpectedly put before her. All at once she surprised herself by dropping on her knees and speaking aloud in the silence of the sacred place."

"If Thou wilt send me a priest here within an hour," she said, "I will believe in Thee."

"No doubt it was an audacious address to the Almighty—to Him who said: 'An unbelieving generation asketh for a sign, and a sign shall not be given it.' But who can tell the designs or limits the favors of a God whose mercies are known to be beyond all His other works? The cry was made in agony, and it was answer."

"She made her confession and went out of the church overwhelmed with gratitude and at peace with her Creator. She was a woman of talent and good sense, and the possessor of wealth; and during the remaining twenty years of her life she devoted herself to the service of God and of the poor, not only in the neighborhood of her home, but in every place where she found her ready help most needed. She was one of my most trusted friends until her death, and I believe she is now in heaven."

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"One more story Father Anselm was coaxed into telling us that evening before we allowed him to go away to his room and finish his Office."

"It is the sweetest tale of all, and I have kept it to the last as a sort of bonne bouche for the young people. The incident occurred in Ireland, where I was engaged at the time with another Father of our order in giving a mission."

"There was a family of poor laboring people living just outside the town in a quarter reserved for their class—the merest slum; no gardens, no fields, no trees, nothing beautiful of nature near it. The little yard of the poor family adjoined the yard of a dealer in manure, and a little child of three years was in the habit of pushing her small way into the neighbor's yard to enlarge her playground, and also perhaps with an infant's brave idea of exploring a foreign country. It was in February of a very hard winter, and the snow was on the ground."

"One day the child—a sweet little Mary, just beginning to talk intelligibly—ran in to her mother about dusk. She had been out for a couple of hours at her play in and about the yards, no one with her—the premises of the manure dealer being at that time of the day deserted. The child ran home carrying in her hands a tall white lily on a long stem, of the kind known as Madonna lilies. The mother, in astonishment, asked her where she got it."

"The boomer lady in the blue cloak gave it to me!" cried the little one in triumph, holding up the flower and touching her mother's bent face with it."

"The mother went out and searched the yards, impossible places, far from the imagination of flowers. Inquiries were made: no one had seen a lady in a blue cloak, while the child kept repeating: 'Boomer, boomer lady—a white flower for 'little Mary!'"

"The flower was placed in a jar of water, and the neighbors went in and out looking at it. There it was, fresh, pure, spotless, as if newly gathered out of a queen's garden. Heads were shaken and words were whispered."

"Sure," 'twas herself an' nobody else! they said to each other. The mother threw her apron over her face and wept."

"The next morning little Mary was taken ill with the croup, that snatcher of young children's lives. By night she was dead. The day after that she lay on her poor bed like a small waxen angel; and the Blessed Virgin's lily, still fresh and unfaded, was on her breast."

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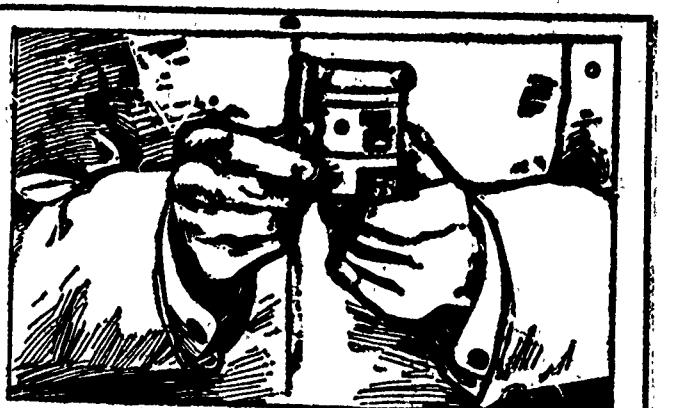
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