

Life of the Spirit

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TOWER OF IVORY¹

BY

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IN speaking today of those in heaven who are interested in us we realise something at least of what St Paul meant when he said he was indebted to the whole world. In the sweep of his vision he meant Christ and all the saints—St Stephen whose persecutors' garments he had held. And so we owe much to all sorts of people, known and unknown. How much we owe to our blessed Lady herself. We think of and speak of her under many titles and invocations, but one title strange though it sounds at first shows more than any other the perfect balance of her character. 'Tower of Ivory'. We remember how one of the Jewish kings built a palace of ivory for himself, what ever that may mean, probably something we do not know.

Ivory is something extraordinarily fragile and delicate. It is frail horn, a growing matter, fibre closely interwoven, a living thing, something rare. It can be carved with a delicacy and refinement of its own—exquisite delicacy and grace. It has a colour again of exquisite delicacy, a colouring unusual—a transparency and radiance when used adjectivally about a human being.

Then a tower is a symbol of strength and power. It stands square, usually on a hill and seems to us on the skyline. Height, grandeur, power and strength. It stands a long siege, the waves of war wash up against its steep sides. We look upon some people as towers of strength. A tower is something rugged, enduring, solid.

Those two ideas meet and we speak of our Lady as a 'Tower of Ivory', exquisitely graceful, delicate, refined, strong. These two latter qualities so often separated hardly ever co-existing in one person. Great artists have left on record beautiful pictures of the Annunciation—scenes of exquisite beauty, flowers, spring, the angel and our Lady so fresh and fragrant, something almost of the child as she stands to receive him, he bowing low before her. There is

¹ From notes taken down at a Conference to religious, 29 July 1927.

exquisite delicacy too in the manger scene where we see her as the child Mother. What a contrast to the shepherds and kings. It is just that that you see in the Temple, the timid question 'Why hast thou done so to us?' She understood not but she pondered in her heart and he went down and was subject to her. So exquisitely beautiful and simple is the picture of the life at Nazareth. The wedding feast too, no request but a mere delicate statement of the fact 'They have no wine', and then to the waiters 'Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye'. Again on the edge of the crowd 'Thy Mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to see thee'. Then meeting him in the road where he carried his cross.

Equally obvious is her mere strength. When at the angel's word she is to become Mother of God—'I know not man'. The presence of the angel messenger didn't abash her with all her delicacy. Reassured she accepted God's will: 'May it be done to me according to thy word'. Beautiful—so strong. Dignified strength at Cana—too sure of herself to do more than suggest. But *most* strong under the Cross, where she stood—*most* strong measured against the skyline. To stand and watch him—her son—and not faint under it. It is that balance in her of strength and delicacy, that balance hard to establish. Some people have delicacy but lack strength, others have strength and independence but lack delicacy, are harsh, almost brutal. The two *she* stands for. In history it is always difficult for womanhood to achieve that balance. You have shrinking delicacy—and something of the strength gone. And in our own times womanhood has gained in strength but she has lost an immense amount of delicacy. With vigour losing refinement, with delicacy losing strength. She, Mary, stands for the perfect balance, goes her own way, managing serenely, gathers everything capably and quietly into her own hands. Strong, rigid—no not rigid, rigid implies stiffness, but strong like those welded steel swords, strong and tempered till they bend back on themselves tip to hilt, soft and pliant, yet unbreakable. She is at the apex of creation. She began where the saints have ended. They at the end of life established order in their soul, subjected reason to the law of God, she was orderly from the beginning. All that grace had done for her. She grew from grace to grace, greatest of all in her position she went straight onward. In herself delicacy and strength. Interwoven it produces perhaps something we mean by Mercy, a mingling of strength and delicacy. Mercy means wise stooping, at times refusing to stoop. Real justice is mercy. At a king's coronation, justice and mercy are both shown by two swords carried before him, one point dull and broken to show mercy, the other keen and sharp, justice. Mercy means deli-

cacy and strength. Someone who will stoop with dignity, be strong without harshness, that combination so difficult to achieve.

To this ideal you have vowed yourself. Afraid of nothing yet gentle and flexible. Our life has its own rigid principles yet omits no one from the width of the heart.

The immense dignity of Mary is the reflection of her Son as in a mirror—radiant as he was. He was the Man of Sorrows, the strong man who could drive the buyers from the Temple with a scourge yet stoop to speak so exquisitely of the lilies and the sparrows. Calm—strong—tender—an example his Mother follows in all things. 'Tower of Ivory.' Her sympathy knows no limit. Hold steadily to her then you need fear nothing—can risk all—unafraid. Dangers we must have everywhere in life, it were dreadful to dodge and try to escape them. Through her you will reach him. She 'Mirror of Justice'—he the perfect thing.

Bid her pray for you under this invocation. Beg something too of that frail, delicate fragility, something too of her unquenchable spirit of strength.



OUR LADY'S FOOL¹

BY

MARIA WINOWSKA

It takes a wise man to make a fool.—Old Proverb.

HIS story reminds one of the finest pages of the Golden Legend; and like the lives of so many saints, is hardly credible. Modern man, used to psychological and other methods, may find it offensive: might we call it a challenge to human reason? Where shall we draw the line between the marvellous and the absurd? Certainly we prefer stories that we can measure against our own limited standard. But, God is not logic. He is not (so St Teresa says) even reasonable. And the saint, every saint, always remains unfathomed—a sort of walking scandal, a challenge hurled at reason, a wager. The Creator's imagination infinitely surpasses the cleverest of those who ape him, romancers and poets, and the improbable is the natural habitat of his masterpieces, the Saints. That is why they bewilder us and lay hold of us: does it not

¹ Translated from *La Vie Spirituelle*, October 1948, by S.M. Imelda, O.P. The article is now published separately as a booklet—*Le Fou de Notre Dame*. (Conf: Blackfriars; 1s.)