deed is this book. It is known in every tongue and its praises have been sung in every note. Next to its original and source it is the most popular book ever written. I speak of "The Imitation of Christ," which Fontenelle without exaggeration well styles the most beautiful book that ever came from the hands of man.1 It has been admired by all classes of thinkers and all shades of creeds. Doctor Johnson loved it and used to speak of it as a good book, to receive which the world opened its arms.2 Jean Jacques Rousseau wept over it.3 John Wesley published an edition of it as food for the hungering souls to whom he ministered in the Durham coal-pits and on the Devonshire moors. Bossuet called it a volume full of unction; St. Charles Borromeo, the world's consoler; and blessed Thomas More said that the book, if read, would secure the nation's happiness. Surely, a book receiving praise from so many and such diverse sources is worthy of our intimate acquaintance. The author was Thomas Hämerken, of Kempen, commonly known as Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). We will first consider the man and his times; afterwards we will discuss the spirit, the philosophy, and the influence of the book.

CHAPTER VIII.

SPIRITUAL SENSE OF THE IMITATION.

I.

1. The century in which Thomas à Kempis saw the light was the transition period between the mediæval and the modern world. The Crusades had done their work; the gothic cathedral had been built; the Miracle-Play had ceased to instruct and edify; Thomas of Aquin had put the finishing hand to Scholastic Philosophy, and left it a scientific monument worthy of his genius and the age; Dante had crystallized the faith and science, the fierce hate and the strong love, the poetry, the politics, and the theology, the whole spirit of mediævalism in his sublime allegory. That old order was breaking up, and in the awakening of the new much anarchy prevailed. In the general crumbling away of institutions the human intellect seemed bewildered. A groping and a restlessness existed throughout; there was a yearning of men after they knew not what, for the night was upon them and they were impatient for the coming of the dawn. Where were they to seek the light? The ignorant and the obstinate, without either the requisite knowledge or the necessary patience to discover the laws of Nature, sought to wrest from her the secrets

¹ Le plus beau livre qui soit parti de la main d'un homme, puisque l'Evangile n'en vient pas.

² Boswell's Johnson, vol. ii. p. 143.

⁸ Dublin University Magazine, June, 1869.

of which she is possessed by the process of magic, astrology, and simulated intercourse with spirits.1 Hecate was their inspiring genius.

2. The learned sought the light, on the one hand, through the mists and mazes of the old issue of Nominalism and Realism, which had been revived by William of Ockham (d. 1347), and continued by Jean Buridan (d. after 1350), Albert of Saxony (who taught at Paris about 1350-60), Marsilius of Inghen (d. 1392), and the zealous Peter of Ailly (1350-1425).2 In their gropings they gathered up little more than an abundance of error, aridity, and intellectual pride. Others, following in the wake of Petrarca and Boccaccio, began to cultivate an exaggerated taste for the ancient classics and to revive the spirit of paganism. Children were instructed in Greek,3 and the pedantic quarrels of grammarians divided cities and even whole provinces.4 Others again, weary of the barren disputations of the Schools, sought the light in union with the Godhead through the dark and unsafe paths of Mysticism. Master Eckhart proclaimed it their goal and only refuge. He undertook to point out the way, but became lost in the mazes of neo-Platonism and Pantheism. Under his influence whole nations, impelled by an indefinite yearning for spiritual life, rose up as one man in universal clamor for mystical union with the Godhead. They became intoxicated with the New Science. He had taught them that the creation of the world and the generation of the Word were one act; that the soul preëxisted in God from all eternity; that the light of the Word was inseparable from the light of the soul, and that in union with that Word were to be found perfection and knowledge.1

3. Although Eckhart tried to hedge in these dangerous tenets with various safeguards and finespun distinctions, the people, in their ignorance and enthusiasm, broke loose from all restraint and fell into deplorable disorders. Large numbers formed themselves into societies having as spiritual directors laymen who claimed to be initiated into the secrets of this mystical union with the Godhead. This was a condition of things anomalous as it was dangerous. Sometimes, indeed, under this laydirection, the people made real spiritual progress, as did the society known as the Friends of God under the guidance of that mysterious layman who so

¹ See Görres, La Mystique, trad. par. M. Ch. Ste-Foi. partie iii. La Mystique Diabolique, t. iv. chap. viii., xiv.

² Ueberweg, History of Philosophy, Eng. tr. vol. i. p. 465.

³ Ambroise, de l'ordre des Camaldules, au commencement de 1400, trouvait dans Mantoue des enfants et des jeunes filles versés dans le grec. Cantù, Histoire Universelle, t. xii. p. 578.

⁴ Les querelles des pédants hargneux intéressaient, divisaient les villes et les provinces. Ibid. p. 589.

^{1 &}quot;The Light, which is the Son of God, and the shining - das Ausscheinen - of that light in the creature-world are inseparable. The Birth of the Son and the Creation of the world are one act." Stöckl, Geschichte der Philosophie, § III., 6, p. 494. Also 10, p. 495. "The soul, like all things, preëxisted in God. . . . Immanent in the Divine Essence, I created the world and myself." Ueberweg, History of Philosophy, vol. i. § 106, in which Eckhart's teaching is accounted for at length by Dr. Adolf Lasson. The article in Stöckl is far more satisfactory.

successfully led the celebrated Tauler into the way of this mystical life.1 More frequently, they went beyond all control and became mere fanatics, as the Beguines and Begards.² Tauler (1290-1361) took the yearning multitude by the hand and led them in the path which he had trodden. So powerful was his eloquence and so great the influence that he wielded, that even at this day his name is a magic wand, capable of stirring the hearts of the descendants of the thousands along the Rhine who clung upon his lips and eagerly fed their hungering souls with the words of life that fell from them. And whilst the rugged earnestness of Tauler pierced their hearts, the gentle suavity of Heinrich Suso (1300-1365), the minnesinger of the love of God, swayed them with no less force and helped to dissipate the atmosphere of false mysticism and erroneous doctrines in which they were enveloped.

II.

1. To this extent had Mysticism become a passion, when Gerhard Groote established the Brethren of the Common Life. The mystical spirit entered into their rule of living, but in so new and

practical a form that they become known as Brethren of the New Devotion. It pervaded the books they wrote; its spirit was in the very atmosphere of their schools. The children attending them were imbued with it. Amongst those children was Thomas à Kempis. He afterwards became a member of the Order, was ordained priest, and lived to the advanced age of ninety-one years. We read nothing eventful in his life. Like the Venerable Beda, from his youth up he had borne the sweet voke of religion. Like Beda, also, it had been a pleasure for him to read and teach and write and transcribe what he found best in sacred and profane literature. In order that the intellect might not grow barren in the mechanical exercise of transcribing the thoughts of others, it was made a rule that the Brothers should cull, each for himself and according to his taste, some of the beautiful sayings and maxims of the Fathers and saints, and add thereto pious reflections.1 This was a labor of love for Thomas, and in performing it he was sowing and fertilizing the seeds of that special book that was to be the child of his genius.

2. Another source of inspiration for that book was the beautiful example of his brethren. His convent was a spiritual garden in which were tended with great care all the virtues of the religious life. He needed only to remember and record. Not only in his great work, but in the numerous lives of the brethren that he has left us, he never

¹ See *Life of Tauler*, prefixed to his Sérmons, edited and translated into French by M. Ch. Ste-Foi (Paris, 1855), vol. i. p. 7 et seq.

² When the organization was dissolved by Pope John XXII. it numbered more than three hundred thousand in Germany alone. Görres, *La Mystique*, t. i. p. 131. They were so called from their institutor, Lambert Begha, who established the organization in 1170.

¹ These collections were called Rapiaria.

world. And yet, when living, he shrank from notoriety; he loved retirement; he dreaded gossip.1 On, on, through the years of his long life, through the vigor of youth, through the maturity of manhood, through the gathering shadows of old age, he plied his pen and scattered broadcast devout books.

Let us approach still nearer.

3. Figure to yourself a man of medium height,2 rather stout in body, with forehead broad, and a strong Flemish cast of features, massive and thoughtful, bespeaking a man of meditative habits; his cheeks tinged slightly brown; his large and lustrous eyes looking with a grave and far-off look, as though gazing into the world of spiritual life in which his soul dwelt. This is Thomas à Kempis as he appeared to his contemporaries. Still another glimpse of him, as he walks and speaks with his brethren, has been sketched with a loving hand: "This good Father, when he was walking abroad with some of the Brotherhood, or with some of his other friends, and suddenly felt an inspiration come upon him - namely, when the Bridegroom was willing to communicate with the bride, that is, when Jesus Christ, his Beloved, did call to his soul as His elect and beloved spouse -

¹ Among the small and peaceful circle of the religious Mystics, no man exercised so important an influence as Thomas Hämerken, of Kempen. Gieseler, Compend. Eccl. History, v. p. 73.

² Mgr. J. B. Malou, Recherches sur le véritable auteur de l'Imita-

³ Hoc anno frater Thomas à Kempis, de Monte Sanctæ Agnetis professor ordinis regularium canonicorum, multos scriptis suis divulgatis, ædificat: hie vitam Sanctæ Lidwigis descripsit et quoddam volumen metrice super illud, Qui sequitur me. Chroniques relatives a l'histoire de la Belgique, publiées par M. le Baron Kervyn de Lettenhove, t. i. The Imitation as written by a Kempis is both metrical and rhythmical. This is the conclusion of Dr. Hirsche after long and careful study of the original MS. (Thomæ Kempensis de Imitatione Christi. Berolini, 1874. Prefatio, pp. xiv, xv.) Henry Sommalius, in 1599, first divided each chapter into paragraphs, and in the seventeenth century several editors subdivided the paragraphs into versicles.

^{1 &}quot;Valde devotus, libenter solus, et nunquam otiosus." MS. 11,841, Bibl. de Bourgogne, Brussels, printed for the first time in Appendix to Recherches sur le véritable auteur de l'Imitation, par Mgr. J. B. Malou, deuxième ed. p. 388.

² "Hic fuit brevis staturæ, sed magnus in virtutibus." Ibid. From a measurement of the thigh-bone, Dr. F. R. Cruise of Dublin calculated the height of Thomas à Kempis to be at least five feet six inches. Thomas à Kempis, pp. 306, 324, 325.

was wont to say, 'My beloved brethren, I must now needs leave you,' and meekly begging to be excused, he would leave them, saying, 'Indeed, it behooves me to go; there is One expecting me in my cell.' They accordingly granted his request, took well his excuse, and were much edified thereby." In this reverential manner was his memory cherished. We are not surprised to learn that a great many, being attracted by his reputation for science and sanctity, flocked around him, to cultivate his acquaintance and to pursue their studies under his guidance.²

4. What was the inner life of this attractive soul? What were the trials, the struggles with self, the temptations through which he passed? Surely, he who is both philosopher and poet of the interior life in all its phases must have traversed the rugged path leading up to perfection with an observant eye for all the dangerous turns and treacherous pitfalls that lurk on the way. Above all, he must have loved much. "The passion," says Michelet, "which we meet in this work is grand as the object which it seeks; grand as the world which it forsakes." And in this love he found strength to overcome every obstacle. In another work he thus lays bare his soul: "Some-

times my passions assailed me as a whirlwind; but God sent forth his arrows and dissipated them. The attack was often renewed, but God was still my support." 1 And in his great book he occasionally gives us a glimpse of himself. Thus we see him at the beginning of his religious career in great mental anxiety as to whether or no he will persevere. "He presently heard within him an answer from God, which said, 'If thou didst know it, what wouldst thou do? Do now what thou wouldst do then, and thou shalt be secure.' And being herewith comforted and strengthened, he committed himself wholly to the will of God, and his anxious wavering ceased."2 In another place 3 we find him sending up cries for strength and resignation, such as could only come from a heart bleeding and lacerated with wounds inflicted by calumny and humiliation.4 But it is only a soul that rose above the spites and jealousies of life that could speak the words of comfort and consolation therein to be found. "Verily," hath it been beautifully said, "only a breast burning with pity - a breast that hath never wounded another breast - could have offered that incense to heaven, that dew to earth, which we call 'The Imitation." 5 Such was the author. He had learned to repress every inordinate desire or emotion, until

¹ Opera Omnia Th. de Kempis. Ed. Georg Pirckhamer. Nuremberg, 1494, fol. xxxv. Kettlewell, Thomas à Kempis and the Brethren of the Common Life, vol. i. p. 33. Mgr. Malou, Recherches, p. 84.

² Hardenberg, MS. Life of Wessel, a disciple of Thomas & Kempis. Quoted by Ullmann, Reformatoren vor der Reformation, bd. ii. p. 738, Eng. tr. vol. ii. p. 271.

¹ Soliloquy of the Soul. See chaps. xv., xvi., xvii.

² Bk. i. chap. xxv. 2.

⁸ Bk. iii. chap. xxix.

⁴ Charles Butler, Life prefixed to Bishop Challoner's translation of *The Imitation*, p. vii.

⁵ William Maccoll in Contemporary Review, September, 1866.

III.

1. It is interesting to study the literary structure of "The Imitation," and note the traces of authorship running through it. We will glance at it for a moment. First of all and above all, the book is saturated through and through with the sacred Scriptures. You can scarcely read a sentence that does not recall some passage now in the Old, now in the New Testament. It reflects their pure rays like an unbroken mirror. To transcribe the Bible had been a labor of love for the author. Echoes of beautiful passages from the spiritual writers that went before him reverberate through the pages of this book which is none the less original. The author drew from St. Gregory the Great.2 St. Bernard seems to have been a special favorite.3 So was St. Francis of Assisi.4 He drew from St.

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Thomas; ¹ he drew from St. Bonaventura; ² he even drew from the Roman Missal. ³ He also laid the pagan classics under contribution. He quotes Aristotle; ⁴ he quotes Ovid; ⁵ he quotes Seneca, ⁶ and there are some remarkable coincidences in expression between himself and Dante. ⁷ He even quotes the popular sayings of his day. ⁸ The poem of the "Holy Grail" was not unknown to him. ⁹ In a word, as with the poet, whatever love inspired, no matter the speech in which the voice came, he wrote at her dictation. ¹⁰

2. In both language and spirit the book exhales the atmosphere of Mysticism in which it was con-

¹ Cf. Office for Corpus Christi, and bk. iv. chap. ii. 1; also chap. xiii. 2, 17.

² Cf. the hymn Recordare Sanctæ Crucis and bk. ii. chap. xii. 2. The Toulouse Sermons attributed to St. Bonaventura, having many extracts from The Imitation, are no longer regarded as authentic. See Mgr. Malou, Recherches sur le véritable auteur de l'Imitation, pp. 198-202.

³ Cf. Prayer for Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, and bk. iii. c lv. 6; Post. Com. Fourth Sunday in Advent, and bk. iv. chap. iv.

⁴ Aristotle, Metaphysics, i. 1, in bk. i. chap. ii. 1.

Ovid, lib. xiii. de Remed. Am. in bk. i. chap. xiii. 5.
Seneca, Ep. vii. in bk. i. chap. xx. 2.

7 Cf. Dante, Inferno, canto iii. and canto vi. with bk. i. chap.

8 Bk. ii. chap. ix. 1. The expression is: -

"Satis suaviter equitat, Quem gratia Dei portat."

⁹ Cf. in Le Saint-Graal (Les Romans de la Table ronde, ed. Paulin Paris, t. i. pp. 176-189) the consecration of Joseph as priest, and bk. iv. chap. v.

¹⁰ Io mi son un che, quando Amore spira, noto ed a quel modo Che detta dentro, vo significando.

Dante, Purgatorio, xxiv. 52-54.

¹ Charles Butler, loc. cit. p. viii. These words are inscribed on the pages of an open book represented in the Gertruidenberg portrait of the author. Dr. Criuse has an autotype copy of this portrait in his valuable and scholarly book.

² Cf. Gregory, Cura Pastoralis, and The Imitation, bk. iv. chap. v.

³ Cf. the hymn Jesu, dulcis memoria, and bk. ii. chaps. vii, viii. For numerous other instances of passages from St. Bernard corresponding with sentences in *The Imitation*, see *Thomas à Kempis*, by F. R. Cruise, M. D., pp. 314-20.

⁴ Cf. Epist. xl., and bk. iii. chap. 1. 8.

ceived and written. Its very terms are the terms of Mysticism. And if we would understand the book thoroughly we must make tangible to ourselves this mystical state. In the human soul there is and has been at all times a strong and irrepressible yearning after the higher spiritual things of the unseen Universe. It is not given to all to attain its dizziest heights. It may not even be well for all to aim thereat. But it is something to be proud of, to know that our humanity has reached that state in its elect few. And what is the mystical state? It is a striving of the soul after union with the Divinity. It is therefore a turning away from sin and all that could lead to sin, and a raising up of the soul above all created things, "transcending every ascent of every holy height, and leaving behind all divine lights and sounds and heavenly discoursings, and passing into that Darkness where He is who is above all things."1

3. In this state the soul is passively conscious that she lives and breathes in the Godhead, and asks neither to speak nor think. Her whole happiness is to be. She has found absolute Goodness, absolute Truth, and absolute Beauty; she knows it and feels it and rests content in the knowledge. She seeks nothing beyond. She has left far behind her all practical and speculative habits. Her faculties are hushed in holy awe at the nearness of the Divine Presence.² Memory has ceased to

minister to her; Fancy and Imagination walk at a distance and in silence, fearing to obtrude themselves upon the Unimagined Infinite; Reason is prostrate and abashed before the Incomprehensible; Understanding remains lulled in adoration before the Unknowable. She is overshadowed by the intense splendor of the Divine Glory, and filled -thrilled through and through - with the dread Presence, she is raised above the plane of our common human feelings and sympathies into the highest sphere of thought and love and adoration attainable in this life, and is thus given a foretaste of heaven. The soul apprehends with clearness mysteries that are entirely beyond her ordinary power of conception. Such was the experience of a Francis of Assisi, a Heinrich Suso, a Tauler, a Loyola, a Theresa of Jesus. But this experience became theirs only after they had passed through much tribulation of spirit and their souls had been purified; for it is only to the clean of heart that it is given to become intimately united with God in this manner.

4. Men of proud thought and vain desire have attempted without the requisite purification to attain that state; but invariably they became lost in illusions, were confounded, and fell into the deepest follies. Therefore it is that this union is safely sought only through the Redeemer. And so, the writings attributed to the Areopagite make the Chalice of the Redeemer the central point of all Christian mysteries; the Chalice being according to them the symbol of Providence which pene-

¹ Dionysius Areopagita, De Mystica Theologià, cap. i. § 3, t. i. col. 999. Patrol. Græcæ, ed. Migne, t. iii.

² See Tauler. Sermon for the Sunday after Epiphany; trad. Ste-Foi. t. i. p. 130.

trates and preserves all things.¹ This symbol passes down the ages, gathering around it feats of chivalry and love and bravery, — adventure and prowess which are also symbolic, — and men speak of it as the Holy Grail, which only such as the suffering Tituriel and the pure Galahad are permitted to behold.² What is it all but a beautiful allegory typifying the struggles of the devout soul before it is permitted to commune with God in this mystical union?

IV.

1. Thomas à Kempis knows no other way by which to lead the Christian soul to the heights of perfection and union with the Divinity than the rugged road trodden by Jesus. The opening words of "The Imitation" strike the keynote with no uncertain tone: "He that followeth me walketh not in darkness,' saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are taught to imitate his life and manners, if we would be truly enlightened and be delivered from all blindness of heart.

. . . Whosoever would fully and feelingly understand the words of Christ must endeavor to conform his life wholly to the life of Christ." In this

manner does the author give us purely and simply, without gloss or comment, the spirituality of the gospel. He does not flatter human nature. He merely points out the narrow and rugged road to Calvary. The "royal way of the holy Cross" is the only safe way: "Go where thou wilt, seek whatsoever thou wilt, thou shalt not find a higher way above, nor a safer way below, than the way of the holy Cross."1 The pious author, in descanting on the merits of the Cross, becomes truly poetical: "In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection against our enemies; in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; in the Cross is the height of virtue; in the Cross is the perfection of sanctity. There is no salvation of the soul, no hope of everlasting life, but in the Cross. Take up therefore thy Cross and follow Jesus and thou shalt go into life everlasting." 2 Thus it is that in the language of à Kempis the Cross symbolizes all Christian virtue; and bearing one's trials and troubles with patience and resignation is walking on the royal road of the Cross. It supersedes the symbol of the Chalice.

2. For the student "The Imitation" is laden with beautiful lessons. Thomas à Kempis must have had his own scholars in his mind's eye in penning many a passage. He never tires of recalling to them that there is something better than vain words and dry disputations. "Surely great words do not make a man holy and just." Many

¹ Crater igitur cum sit rotundus et apertus, symbolum est generalis providentiæ quæ principio fineque caret atque omnia continet penetratque. Dion. Areop. Ep. ix. Tito Episcopo, § iii. col. 1110. Patrol. Græcæ, ed. Migne. t. iii.

² The symbol of the Chalice is older than Christianity. It was adopted from the Dionysian mysteries of the Greeks and given a Christian meaning. See Görres, *La Mystique*, t. i. p. 78.

⁸ John viii. 12. ⁴ Bk. i. chap. i. 1, 2.

¹ Bk. ii. chap. xii. ² Ibid. ⁸ Bk. i. chap. i. 3.

words do not satisfy the soul.1 . . . Meddle not with things too high for thee; but read such things as may rather yield compunction to thy heart, than occupation to thy head."2 He distinguishes between the reading that goes home to the heart and that which is merely a matter of occupation. The distinction is important. One to whom we have been already introduced draws the same line. Notice how closely the philosopher and man of the world, writing four centuries after, coincides with the monk. "I am," says Maine de Biran, "as agitated by my books and my own ideas, as when occupied with worldly matters or launched in the vortex of Parisian life. . . . I fancy that I am going to discover my moral and intellectual welfare, rest and internal satisfaction of mind, the truth I seek, in every book that I scan and consult; as though these things were not within me, down in the very depths of my being, where with sustained and penetrating glance I should look for them, instead of gliding rapidly over what others have thought, or even what I myself have thought. . . . My conscience reproaches me with not having thoroughly sounded the depths of life, with not having cultivated its most earnest parts, and with being too occupied with those amusements that enable one to pass imperceptibly from time to eternity."3 In good truth, men may go through life discoursing upon the things of life,

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formulating their views of the diverse subjects that call for definite opinion; and yet, for want of this introspection, this self-communion, this thoughtfulness of God's presence within them, they may indeed possess many and varied accomplishments, but these are all of the outward man. The inner man is starved to a skeleton. This is why all great thinkers, all the founders of religious orders as well as of schools of philosophy, Pythagoras and Socrates as well as Benedict and Loyola, have laid stress upon the cultivation of this interior spirit. It is not merely the opinion of a devout writer; it is the doctrine of the gospel, made the wisdom of humanity.

3. Again, the author lays down the conditions under which study may be pursued with advantage. He shows the greater responsibility attached to human knowledge, and counsels the students to be humble. "The more thou knowest, and the better thou understandest, the more strictly shalt thou be judged, unless thy life be also the more holy. Be not therefore elated in thine own mind because of any art or science, but rather let the knowledge given thee make thee afraid. If thou thinkest that thou understandest and knowest much, yet know that there be many more things which thou knowest not."1 Bear in mind that the author is not simply inculcating the modesty and diffidence that belong to every well-educated person, and that may accompany great intellectual pride. He goes deeper, and insists upon true humility: 2 "If thou

 ¹ Ibid. chap. ii. 2.
 ² Ibid. chap. xx. 1.
 ³ Journal Intime. Apud Nicolas. Étude sur Maine de Biran,
 p. 54.

¹ Bk. i. chap. ii. 3.

² Cardinal Newman, in one of his most beautiful discourses,