

Selections from *Ascent of Mount Carmel* by St. John of the Cross

BOOK THE FIRST

Wherein is described the nature of dark night and how necessary it is to pass through it to Divine union; and in particular this book describes the dark night of sense, and desire, and the evils which these work in the soul.

CHAPTER I

Sets down the first stanza. Describes two different nights through which spiritual persons pass, according to the two parts of man, the lower and the higher. Expounds the stanza which follows.

STANZA THE FIRST

On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearnings — oh, happy chance! — I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.

IN this first stanzas the soul sings of the happy fortune and chance which it experienced in going forth from all things that are without, and from the desires⁷⁴ and imperfections that are in the sensual⁷⁵ part of man because of the disordered state of his reason. For the understanding of this it must be known that, for a soul to attain to the state of perfection, it has ordinarily first to pass through two principal kinds of night, which spiritual persons call purgations or purifications of the soul; and here we call them nights, for in both of them the soul journeys, as it were, by night, in darkness.

2. The first night or purgation is of the sensual part of the soul, which is treated in the present stanza, and will be treated in the first part of this book. And the second is of the spiritual part; of this speaks the second stanza, which follows; and of this we shall treat likewise, in the second and the third part, with respect to the activity of the soul; and in the fourth part, with respect to its passivity.

3. And this first night pertains to beginners, occurring at the time when God begins to bring them into the state of contemplation; in this night the spirit likewise has a part, as we shall say in due course. And the second night, or purification, pertains to those who are already proficient, occurring at the time when God desires to bring them to the state of union with God. And this latter night is a more obscure and dark and terrible purgation, as we shall say afterwards.

4. Briefly, then, the soul means by this stanza that it went forth (being led by God) for love of Him alone, enkindled in love of Him, upon a dark night, which is the privation and purgation of all its sensual desires, with respect to all outward things of the world and to those which were delectable to its flesh, and likewise with respect to the desires of its will. This all comes to pass in this purgation of sense; for which cause the soul says that it went forth while its house was still at rest; which house is its sensual part, the desires being at rest and asleep in it, as it is to them. For there is no going forth from the pains and afflictions of the secret places of the desires until these be mortified and put to sleep. And this, the soul says, was a happy chance for it — namely, its going forth without being observed: that is, without any desire of its flesh or any other thing being able to hinder it. And likewise, because it went out by night — which signifies the privation of all these things wrought in it by God, which privation was night for it.

5. And it was a happy chance that God should lead it into this night, from which there came to it so much good; for of itself the soul would not have succeeded in entering therein, because no man of himself can succeed in voiding himself of all his desires in order to come to God.

6. This is, in brief, the exposition of the stanza; and we shall now have to go through it, line by line, setting down one line after another, and expounding that which pertains to our purpose. And the same method is followed in the other stanzas, as I said in the Prologue — namely, that each stanza will be set down and expounded, and afterwards each line.

CHAPTER XIII

Wherein is described the manner and way which the soul must follow in order to enter this night of sense.

IT now remains for me to give certain counsels whereby the soul may know how to enter this night of sense and may be able so to do. To this end it must be known that the soul habitually enters this night of sense in two ways: the one is active; the other passive. The active way consists in that which the soul can do, and does, of itself, in order to enter therein, whereof we shall now treat in the counsels which follow. The passive way is that wherein the soul does nothing, and God works in it, and it remains, as it were, patient. Of this we shall treat in the fourth book, where we shall be treating of beginners. And because there, with the Divine favour, we shall give many counsels to beginners, according to the many imperfections which they are apt to have while on this road, I shall not spend time in giving many here. And this, too, because it belongs not to this place to give them, as at present we are treating only of the reasons for which this journey is called a night, and of what kind it is, and how many parts it has. But, as it seems that it would be incomplete, and less profitable than it should be, if we gave no help or counsel here for walking in this night of desires, I have thought well to set down briefly here the way which is to be followed: and I shall do the same at the end of each of the next two parts, or causes, of this night, whereof, with the help of the Lord, I have to treat.

2. These counsels for the conquering of the desires, which now follow, albeit brief and few, I believe to be as profitable and efficacious as they are concise; so that one who sincerely desires to practice them will need no others, but will find them all included in these.

3. First, let him have an habitual desire to imitate Christ in everything that he does, conforming himself to His life; upon which life he must meditate so that he may know how to imitate it, and to behave in all things as Christ would behave.

4. Secondly, in order that he may be able to do this well, every pleasure that presents itself to the senses, if it be not purely for the honour and glory of God, must be renounced and completely rejected for the love of Jesus Christ, Who in this life had no other pleasure, neither desired any, than to do the will of His Father, which He called His meat and food.¹⁹⁶ I take this example. If there present itself to a man the pleasure of listening to things that tend not to the service and honour of God, let him not desire that pleasure, nor desire to listen to them; and if there present itself the pleasure of looking at things that help him not Godward, let him not desire the pleasure or look at these things; and if in conversation or in aught else soever such pleasure present itself, let him act likewise. And similarly with respect to all the senses, in so far as he can fairly avoid the pleasure in question; if he cannot, it suffices that, although these things may be present to his senses, he desires not to have this pleasure. And in this wise he will be able to mortify and void his senses of such pleasure, as though they were in darkness. If he takes care to do this, he will soon reap great profit.

5. For the mortifying and calming of the four natural passions, which are joy, hope, fear and grief, from the concord and pacification whereof come these and other blessings, the counsels here following are of the greatest help, and of great merit, and the source of great virtues.

6. Strive always to prefer, not that which is easiest, but that which is most difficult; Not that which is most delectable, but that which is most unpleasing;

Not that which gives most pleasure, but rather that which gives least;

Not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome;

Not that which is consolation, but rather that which is disconsolateness;

Not that which is greatest, but that which is least;

Not that which is loftiest and most precious, but that which is lowest and most despised; Not

that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing;

Strive to go about seeking not the best of temporal things, but the worst.

Strive thus to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to everything that is in the world, for Christ's sake.

7. And it is meet that the soul embrace these acts with all its heart and strive to subdue its will thereto. For, if it perform them with its heart, it will very quickly come to find in them great delight and consolation, and to act with order and discretion.

8. These things that have been said, if they be faithfully put into practice, are quite sufficient for entrance into the night of sense; but, for greater completeness, we shall describe another kind of exercise which teaches us to mortify the concupiscence of the flesh and the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life, which, says Saint John, 198 are the things that reign in the world, from which all the other desires proceed.

9. First, let the soul strive to work in its own despite, and desire all to do so. Secondly, let it strive to speak in its own despite and desire all to do so. Third, let it strive to think humbly of itself, in its own despite, and desire all to do so.

10. To conclude these counsels and rules, it will be fitting to set down here those lines which are written in the Ascent of the Mount, which is the figure that is at the beginning of this book; the which lines are instructions for ascending to it, and thus reaching the summit of union. For, although it is true that that which is there spoken of is spiritual and interior, there is reference likewise to the spirit of imperfection according to sensual and exterior things, as may be seen by the two roads which are on either side of the path of perfection. It is in this way and according to this sense that we shall understand them here; that is to say, according to that which is sensual. Afterwards, in the second part of this night, they will be understood according to that which is spiritual.

11. The lines are these:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything, Desire to have pleasure in nothing.

In order to arrive at possessing everything, Desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at being everything, Desire to be nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything, Desire to know nothing.

In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure, Thou must go by a way wherein thou hast no pleasure.

In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not, Thou must go by a way that thou knowest not.

In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not, Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.

In order to arrive at that which thou art not,

Thou must go through that which thou art not.

12. When thy mind dwells upon anything,

Thou art ceasing to cast thyself upon the All. For, in order to pass from the all to the All, Thou hast to deny thyself wholly in all. And, when thou comest to possess it wholly, Thou must possess it without desiring anything. For, if thou wilt have anything in having all, 202 Thou hast not thy treasure purely in God.

13. In this detachment the spiritual soul finds its quiet and repose; for, since it covets nothing, nothing wearies it when it is lifted up, and nothing oppresses it when it is cast down, because it is in the centre of its humility; but when it covets anything, at that very moment it becomes wearied.

BOOK THE SECOND OF THE 'ASCENT OF MT. CARMEL'

Wherein is treated the proximate means of ascending to union with God, which is faith; and wherein therefore is described the second part of this night, which, as we said, belongs to the spirit, and is contained in the second stanza, which is as follows.

STANZA THE SECOND CHAPTER I

In darkness and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised — oh, happy chance! —

In darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest.

IN this second stanza the soul sings of the happy chance which it experienced in stripping the spirit of all spiritual imperfections and desires for the possession of spiritual things. This was a

much greater happiness to, by reason of the greater difficulty that there is in putting to rest this house of the spiritual part, and of being able to enter this interior darkness, which is spiritual detachment from all things, whether sensual or spiritual, and leaning on pure faith alone and an ascent thereby to God. The soul here calls this a 'ladder,' and 'secret,' because all the rungs and parts of it are secret and hidden from all sense and understanding. And thus the soul has remained in darkness as to all light of sense and understanding, going forth beyond all limits of nature and reason in order to ascend by this Divine ladder of faith, which attains and penetrates even to the heights of God. The soul says that it was travelling 'disguised,' because the garments and vesture which it wears and its natural condition are changed into the Divine, as it ascends by faith. And it was because of this disguise that it was not recognized or impeded, either by time or by reason or by the devil; for none of these things can harm one that journeys in faith. And not only so, but the soul travels in such wise concealed and hidden and is so far from all the deceits of the devil that in truth it journeys (as it also says here) 'in darkness and in concealment' — that is to say, hidden from the devil, to whom the light of faith is more than darkness.

2. And thus the soul that journeys through this night, we may say, journeys in concealment and in hiding from the devil, as will be more clearly seen hereafter. Wherefore the soul says that it went forth 'in darkness and secure'; for one that has such happiness as to be able to journey through the darkness of faith, taking faith for his guide, like to one that is blind, and leaving behind all natural imaginings and spiritual reasonings, journeys very securely, as we have said. And so the soul says furthermore that it went forth through this spiritual night, its 'house being now at rest' — that is to say, its spiritual and rational parts. When, therefore, the soul attains to union which is of God, its natural faculties are at rest, as are likewise its impulses and yearnings of the senses, in its spiritual part. For this cause the soul says not here that it went forth with yearnings, as in the first night of sense. For, in order to journey in the night of sense, and to strip itself of that which is of sense, it needed yearnings of sense-love so that it might go forth perfectly; but, in order to put to rest the house of its spirit, it needs no more than denial of all faculties and pleasures and desires of the spirit in pure faith. This attained, the soul is united with the Beloved in a union of simplicity and purity and love and similitude.

3. And it must be remembered that the first stanza, speaking of the sensual part, says that the soul went forth upon 'a dark night,' and here, speaking of the spiritual part, it says that it went forth 'in darkness.' For the darkness of the spiritual part is by far the greater, even as darkness is a greater obscurity than that of night. For, however dark a night may be, something can always be seen, but in true darkness nothing can be seen; and thus in the night of sense there still remains some light, for the understanding and reason remain, and are not blinded. But this spiritual night, which is faith, deprives the soul of everything, both as to understanding and as to sense. And for this cause the soul in this night says that it was journeying 'in darkness and secure,' which it said not in the other. For, the less the soul works with its own ability, the more securely it journeys, because it journeys more in faith. And this will be expounded at length in the course of this second book, wherein it will be necessary for the devout reader to proceed attentively, because there will be said herein things of great importance to the person that is truly spiritual. And, although they are somewhat obscure, some of them will pave the way to others, so that I believe they will all be quite clearly understood.

CHAPTER XXVI

Which treats of the intuition of naked truths in the understanding, explaining how they are of two kinds and how the soul is to conduct itself with respect to them.

IN order to speak properly of this intuition of naked truths which is conveyed to the understanding, the writer would need God to take his hand and to guide his pen; for know, dear reader, that what they are to the soul cannot be expressed in words. But, since I speak not of them here of set purpose, but only that through them I may instruct the soul and lead it to Divine union, I shall suffer myself to speak of them here in a brief and modified form, as is sufficient for the fulfillment of that intention.

2. This kind of vision (or, to speak more properly, of knowledge of naked truths) is very different from that of which we have just spoken in the twenty-fourth chapter. For it is not like seeing bodily things with the understanding; it consists rather in comprehending and seeing with the understanding the truths of God, whether of things that are, that have been or that will be, which is in close conformity with the spirit of prophecy, as perchance we shall explain hereafter.

3. Here it is to be observed that this kind of knowledge is distinguishable according to two divisions: the one kind comes to the soul with respect to the Creator; the other with respect to creatures, as we have said. And, although both kinds are very delectable to the soul, yet the delight caused in it by the kind that relates to God is comparable to nothing whatsoever, and there are no words or terms wherein it can be described. This kind of knowledge is of God Himself, and the delight is in God Himself, whereof David says: 'There is naught soever like to Him.' For this kind of knowledge comes to the soul in direct relation to God, when the soul, after a most lofty manner, has a perception of some attribute of God — of His omnipotence, of His might, of His goodness and sweetness, etc.; and, whensoever it has such a perception, that which is perceived cleaves to the soul. Inasmuch as this is pure contemplation, the soul clearly sees that there is no way wherein it can say aught concerning it, save to speak in certain general terms, of the abundance of delight and blessing which it has felt, and this is expressed by souls that experience it; but not to the end that what the soul has experienced and perceived may be wholly apprehended.

4. And thus David, speaking for himself when something of this kind had happened to him, used only common and general terms, saying: *Judicia Domini vera, justificata in semetipsa. Desiderabilia super aurum et lapidem pretiosum multum; et dulciora super mel et favum.* Which signifies: The judgments of God — that is, the virtues and attributes which we perceive in God — are in themselves true, justified, more to be desired than gold and very much more than precious stones, and sweeter than the honeycomb and honey. And concerning Moses we read that, when God gave him a most lofty manifestation of knowledge from Himself on an occasion when He passed before him, he said only that which can be expressed in the common terms above mentioned. And it was so that, when the Lord passed before him in that manifestation of knowledge, Moses quickly prostrated himself upon the ground, saying: *Dominator Domine Deus, misericors et clemens, patiens, et multae miserationis, ac verax. Qui custodis misericordiam in millia.* Which signifies: Ruler, Lord, God, merciful and clement, patient, and of great compassion, and true, that keepest mercy promised unto thousands. Here it is seen that Moses could not express that which he had learned from God in one single manifestation of knowledge, and therefore he expressed and gave utterance to it in all these words. And although at times, when such knowledge is given to a soul, words are used, the soul is well aware that it has expressed no part of what it has felt; for it knows that there is no fit name by which it can name it. And thus Saint Paul, when he was granted that lofty knowledge of God, made no attempt to describe it, saying only that it was not lawful for man to speak of it.

5. These Divine manifestations of knowledge which have respect to God never relate to particular matters, inasmuch as they concern the Chief Beginning, and therefore can have no particular reference, unless it be a question of some truth concerning a thing less than God, which is involved in the perception of the whole; but these Divine manifestations themselves — no, in no way whatsoever. And these lofty manifestations of knowledge can come only to the soul that attains to union with God, for they are themselves that union; and to receive them is equivalent to a certain contact with the Divinity which the soul experiences, and thus it is God Himself Who is perceived and tasted therein. And, although He cannot be experienced manifestly and clearly, as in glory, this touch of knowledge and delight is nevertheless so sublime and profound that it penetrates the substance of the soul, and the devil cannot meddle with it or produce any manifestation like to it, for there is no such thing, neither is there aught that compares with it, neither can he infuse pleasure or delight that is like to it; for such kinds of knowledge savour of the Divine Essence and of eternal life, and the devil cannot counterfeit a thing so lofty.

6. Nevertheless he might make some pretence of imitating it, by representing to the soul certain great matters and things which enchant the senses and can readily be perceived by them, and endeavoring to persuade the soul that these are God; but he cannot do this in such wise that they enter into the substance of the soul and of a sudden renew it and enkindle it with love, as do the manifestations of God. For there are certain kinds of knowledge, and certain of these touches effected by God in the substance of the soul, which enrich it after such wise that not only does one of them suffice to take from the soul once and for all the whole of the imperfections that it had itself been unable to throw off during its whole life, but it leaves the soul full of virtues and blessings from God.

7. And these touches are so delectable to the soul, and the delight they produce is so intimate, that if it received only one of them it would consider itself well rewarded for all the trials that it had suffered in this life, even had they been innumerable; and it is so greatly encouraged and given such energy to suffer many things for God's sake that it suffers especially in seeing that it is not suffering more.

8. The soul cannot attain to these lofty degrees of knowledge by means of any comparison or imagination of its own, because they are loftier than all these; and so God works them in the soul without making use of its own capacities. Wherefore, at certain times, when the soul is least thinking of it and least desiring it, God is wont to give it these Divine touches, by causing it certain remembrances of Himself. And these are sometimes suddenly caused in the soul by its mere recollection of certain things — sometimes of very small things. And they are so readily perceived that at times they cause not only the soul, but also the body, to tremble. But at other times they come to pass in the spirit when it is very tranquil, without any kind of trembling, but with a sudden sense of delight and spiritual refreshment.

9. At other times, again, they come when the soul repeats or hears some word, perhaps from Scripture or possibly from some other source; but they are not always equally efficacious and sensible, for oftentimes they are extremely faint; yet, however faint they may be, one of these recollections and touches of God is more profitable to the soul than many other kinds of knowledge or many meditations upon the creatures and the works of God. And, since these manifestations of knowledge come to the soul suddenly, and independently of its own free will, it must neither desire to have them, nor desire not to have them; but must merely be humble and resigned concerning them, and God will perform His work how and when He wills.

10. And I say not that the soul should behave in the same negative manner with regard to these apprehensions as with regard to the rest, for, as we have said, they are a part of the union towards which we are leading the soul, to which end we are teaching it to detach and strip itself of all other apprehensions. And the means by which God will do this must be humility and suffering for love of God with resignation as regards all reward; for these favours are not granted to the soul which still cherishes attachments, inasmuch as they are granted through a very special love of God toward the soul which loves Him likewise with great detachment. It is to this that the Son of God referred, in Saint John, when He said: *Qui autem diligit me, diligetur a Patre meo, et ego diligam eum, et manifestabo ei me ipsum.* Which signifies: He that loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will manifest Myself to him. Herein are included the kinds of knowledge and touches to which we are referring, which God manifests to the soul that truly loves Him.

11. The second kind of knowledge or vision of interior truths is very different from this that we have described, since it is of things lower than God. And herein is included the perception of the truth of things in themselves, and that of the events and happenings which come to pass among men. And this knowledge is of such a kind that, when the soul learns these truths, they sink into it, independently of any suggestion from without, to such an extent that, although it may be given a different interpretation of them, it cannot make inward assent to this, even though it endeavor to do so by putting forth a great effort; for within the spirit it is learning otherwise through the spirit that is teaching it that thing, which is equivalent to seeing it clearly. This pertains to the spirit of prophecy and to the grace which Saint Paul calls the gift of the discernment of spirits. Yet, although the soul holds something which it understands to be quite certain and true, as we have said, and although it may be unable to cease giving it that passive

interior consent, it must not therefore cease to believe and to give the consent of reason to that which its spiritual director tells it and commands it, even though this may be quite contrary to its own feelings, so that it may be directed in faith to Divine union, to which a soul must journey by believing rather than by understanding.

12. Concerning both these things we have clear testimonies in Scripture. For, with respect to the spiritual knowledge of things that may be acquired, the Wise Man says these words: *Ipse dedit mihi horum, quae sunt, scientiam veram, ut sciam dispositionem orbis terrarum, et virtutes elementorum, initium et consummationem temporum, vicissitudinum permutationes, et consummationes temporum, et morum mutationes, divisiones temporum, et anni cursus, et stellarum dispositiones, naturas animalium et iras bestiarum, vim ventorum, et cogitationes hominum, differentias virgultorum, et virtutes radicum, et quaecumque sunt abscondita, et improvisa didici: omnium enim artifex docuit me sapientia.* Which signifies: God hath given me true knowledge of things that are: to know the disposition of the round world⁴⁴² and the virtues of the elements; the beginning, and ending, and midst of the times, the alterations in the changes and the consummations of the seasons, and the changes of customs, the divisions of the seasons, the courses of the year and the dispositions of the stars; the natures of animals, and the furies of the beasts, the strength and virtue of the winds, and the thoughts of men; the diversities in plants and trees and the virtues of roots and all things that are hidden, and those that are not foreseen: all these I learned, for Wisdom, which is the worker of all things, taught me. And although this knowledge which the Wise Man here says that God gave him concerning all things was infused and general, the passage quoted furnishes sufficient evidence for all particular kinds of knowledge which God infuses into souls, by supernatural means, when He wills. And this not that He may give them a general habit of knowledge as He gave to Solomon in the matters aforementioned; but that He may reveal to them at times certain truths with respect to any of all these things that the Wise Man here enumerates. Although it is true that into many souls Our Lord infuses habits which relate to many things, yet these are never of so general a kind as they were in the case of Solomon. The differences between them are like to those between the gifts distributed by God which are enumerated by Saint Paul; among these he sets wisdom, knowledge, faith, prophecy, discernment or knowledge of spirits, understanding of tongues, interpretation of spoken words, etc.⁴⁴³ All these kinds of knowledge are infused habits, which God gives freely to whom He will, whether naturally or supernaturally; naturally, as to Balaam, to other idolatrous prophets and to many sybils, to whom He gave the spirit of prophecy; and supernaturally, as to the holy prophets and apostles and other saints.

13. But over and above these habits or graces freely bestowed, what we say is that persons who are perfect or are making progress in perfection are wont very commonly to receive enlightenment and knowledge of things present or absent; these they know through their spirit, which is already enlightened and purged. We can interpret that passage from the Proverbs in this sense, namely: *Quomodo in aquis resplendent vultus prospicientium sic corda hominum manifesta sunt prudentibus.* Even as there appear in the waters the faces of those that look therein, so the hearts of men are manifest to the prudent. This is understood of those that have the wisdom of saints, which the sacred Scripture calls prudence. And in this way these spirits sometimes learn of other things also, although not whensoever they will; for this belongs only to those that have the habit, and even to these it belongs not always and with respect to all things, for it depends upon God's will to help them.

14. But it must be known that those whose spirits are purged can learn by natural means with great readiness, and some more readily than others, that which is in the inward spirit or heart, and the inclinations and talents of men, and this by outward indications, albeit very slight ones, as words, movements and other signs. For, even as the devil can do this, since he is spirit, even so likewise can the spiritual man, according to the words of the Apostle, who says: *Spiritualis autem iudicat omnia.* 'He that is spiritual judgeth all things.' And again he says: *Spiritus enim omnia scrutatur, etiam profunda Dei.* 'The spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.' Wherefore, although spiritual persons cannot by nature know thoughts, or things that are in the minds of others, they may well interpret them through supernatural

enlightenment or by signs. And, although they may often be deceived in their interpretation of signs, they are more generally correct. Yet we must trust neither to the one means nor to the other, for the devil meddles herein greatly, and with much subtlety, as we shall afterwards say, and thus we must ever renounce such kinds of knowledge.

15. And that spiritual persons may have knowledge of the deeds and happenings of men, even though they be elsewhere, we have witness and example in the Fourth Book of the Kings, where Giezi, the servant of our father Eliseus, desired to hide from him the money which he had received from Naaman the Syrian, and Eliseus said: *Nonne cor meum in praesenti erat, quando reversus est homo de curru suo in occursum tui?* 'Was not my heart perchance present, when Naaman turned back from his chariot and went to meet thee? This happens spiritually; the spirit sees it as though it were happening in its presence. And the same thing is proved in the same book, where we read likewise of the same Eliseus, that, knowing all that the King of Syria did with his princes in his privy chamber, he told it to the King of Israel, and thus the counsels of the King of Syria were of no effect; so much so that, when the King of Syria saw that all was known, he said to his people: Why do ye not tell me which of you is betraying me to the King of Israel? And then one of his servants said: *Nequaquam, Domine mi Rex, sed Eliseus Propheta, qui est in Israel, indicat Regi Israel omnia verba, quaecumque locutus fueris in conclavi tuo.* 'It is not so, my lord, O King, but Eliseus, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel all the words that thou speakest in thy privy chamber.'

16. Both kinds of this knowledge of things, as well as other kinds of knowledge, come to pass in the soul passively, so that for its own part it does naught. For it will come to pass that, when a person is inattentive to a matter and it is far from his mind, there will come to him a vivid understanding of what he is hearing or reading, and that much more clearly than could be conveyed by the sound of the words; and at times, though he understand not the words, as when they are in Latin and he knows not that tongue, the knowledge of their meaning comes to him, despite his not understanding them.

17. With regard to the deceptions which the devil can bring about, and does bring about, concerning this kind of knowledge and understanding, there is much that might be said, for the deceptions which he effects in this way are very great and very difficult to unmask. Inasmuch as, through suggestion, he can represent to the soul many kinds of intellectual knowledge and implant them so firmly that it appears impossible that they should not be true, he will certainly cause the soul to believe innumerable falsehoods if it be not humble and cautious. For suggestion has sometimes great power over the soul, above all when it is to some extent aided by the weakness of sense, causing the knowledge which it conveys to sink into the soul with such great power, persuasiveness and determination that the soul needs to give itself earnestly to prayer and to exert great strength if it is to cast it off. For at times the devil is accustomed to represent to the soul the sins of others, and evil consciences and evil souls, falsely but very vividly, and all this he does to harm the soul, trusting that it may spread abroad his revelations, and that thus more sins may be committed, for which reason he fills the soul with zeal by making it believe that these revelations are granted it so that it may commend the persons concerned to God. Now, though it is true that God sometimes sets before holy souls the necessities of their neighbours, so that they may commend them to God or relieve them, even as we read that He revealed to Jeremias the weakness of the prophet Baruch, that he might give him counsel concerning it, yet it is more often the devil who does this, and speaks falsely about it, in order to cause infamy, sin and discouragement, whereof we have very great experience. And at other times he implants other kinds of knowledge with great assurance, and persuades the soul to believe them.

18. Such knowledge as this, whether it be of God or no, can be of very little assistance to the progress of the soul on its journey to God if the soul desire it and be attached to it; on the contrary, if it were not scrupulous in rejecting it, not only would it be hindered on its road, but it would even be greatly harmed and led far astray. For all the perils and inconveniences which, as we have said, may be involved in the supernatural apprehensions whereof we have treated up to this point, may occur here, and more also. I will not, therefore, treat more fully of this matter here, since sufficient instruction about it has already been given in past chapters; I will

only say that the soul must always be very scrupulous in rejecting these things, and seek to journey to God by the way of unknowing; and must ever relate its experiences to its spiritual confessor, and be ever attentive to his counsel. Let the confessor guide the soul past this, laying no stress upon it, for it is of no kind of importance for the road to union; for when these things are granted to the soul passively they always leave in it such effect as God wills shall remain, without necessity for the soul to exert any diligence in the matter. And thus it seems to me that there is no reason to describe here either the effect which is produced by true knowledge, or that which comes from false knowledge, for this would be wearisome and never-ending. For the effects of this knowledge cannot all be described in a brief instruction, the knowledge being great and greatly varied, and its effects being so likewise, since good knowledge produces good effects, and evil knowledge, evil effects, etc. In saying that all should be rejected, we have said sufficient for the soul not to go astray.

Selections from *The Dark Night* by John of the Cross

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER VIII

Wherein is expounded the first line of the first stanza, and a beginning is made of the explanation of this dark night.

THIS night, which, as we say, is contemplation, produces in spiritual persons two kinds of darkness or purgation, corresponding to the two parts of man's nature--namely, the sensual and the spiritual. And thus the one night or purgation will be sensual, wherein the soul is purged according to sense, which is subdued to the spirit; and the other is a night or purgation which is spiritual, wherein the soul is purged and stripped according to the spirit, and subdued and made ready for the union of love with God. The night of sense is common and comes to many: these are the beginners; and of this night we shall speak first. The night of the spirit is the portion of very few, and these are they that are already practised and proficient, of whom we shall treat hereafter.

2. The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to sense, as we shall now show. The second bears no comparison with it, for it is horrible and awful to the spirit, as we shall show presently. Since the night of sense is first in order and comes first, we shall first of all say something about it briefly, since more is written of it, as of a thing that is more common; and we shall pass on to treat more fully of the spiritual night, since very little has been said of this, either in speech or in writing, and very little is known of it, even by experience.

3. Since, then, the conduct of these beginners upon the way of God is ignoble, and has much to do with their love of self and their own inclinations, as has been explained above, God desires to lead them farther. He seeks to bring them out of that ignoble kind of love to a higher degree of love for Him, to free them from the ignoble exercises of sense and meditation (wherewith, as we have said, they go seeking God so unworthily and in so many ways that are unbecoming), and to lead them to a kind of spiritual exercise wherein they can commune with Him more abundantly and are freed more completely from imperfections. For they have now had practice for some time in the way of virtue and have persevered in meditation and prayer, whereby, through the sweetness and pleasure that they have found therein, they have lost their love of the things of the world and have gained some degree of spiritual strength in God; this has enabled them to some extent to refrain from creature desires, so that for God's sake they are now able to suffer a light burden and a little aridity without turning back to a time^[62] which they found more pleasant. When they are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of Divine favour is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness, and shuts against them the door and the source of the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whensoever and for as long as they desired. (For, as they were weak and tender, there was no door closed to them, as Saint John says in the Apocalypse, iii, 8). And thus He leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whither to go with their sensible imagination and

meditation; for they cannot advance a step in meditation, as they were wont to do afore time, their inward senses being submerged in this night, and left with such dryness that not only do they experience no pleasure and consolation in the spiritual things and good exercises wherein they were wont to find their delights and pleasures, but instead, on the contrary, they find insipidity and bitterness in the said things. For, as I have said, God now sees that they have grown a little, and are becoming strong enough to lay aside their swaddling clothes and be taken from the gentle breast; so He sets them down from His arms and teaches them to walk on their own feet; which they feel to be very strange, for everything seems to be going wrong with them.

4. To recollected persons this commonly happens sooner after their beginnings than to others, inasmuch as they are freer from occasions of backsliding, and their desires turn more quickly from the things of the world, which is necessary if they are to begin to enter this blessed night of sense. Ordinarily no great time passes after their beginnings before they begin to enter this night of sense; and the great majority of them do in fact enter it, for they will generally be seen to fall into these aridities. 5. With regard to this way of purgation of the senses, since it is so common, we might here adduce a great number of quotations from Divine Scripture, where many passages relating to it are continually found, particularly in the Psalms and the Prophets. However, I do not wish to spend time upon these, for he who knows not how to look for them there will find the common experience of this purgation to be sufficient.

BOOK TWO CHAPTER V

Sets down the first line and begins to explain how this dark contemplation is not only night for the soul but is also grief and torment.

THIS dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorances and imperfections, habitual natural and spiritual, and which is called by contemplatives infused contemplation, or mystical theology. Herein God secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in perfection of love without its doing anything, or understanding of what manner is this infused contemplation. Inasmuch as it is the loving wisdom of God, God produces striking effects in the soul for, by purging and illumining it, He prepares it for the union of love with God. Wherefore the same loving wisdom that purges the blessed spirits and enlightens them is that which here purges the soul and illumines it.

2. But the question arises: Why is the Divine light (which as we say, illumines and purges the soul from its ignorances) here called by the soul a dark night? To this the answer is that for two reasons this Divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but is likewise affliction and torment. The first is because of the height of Divine Wisdom, which transcends the talent of the soul, and in this way is darkness to it; the second, because of its vileness and impurity, in which respect it is painful and afflictive to it, and is also dark.

3. In order to prove the first point, we must here assume a certain doctrine of the philosopher, which says that, the clearer and more manifest are Divine things in themselves the darker and more hidden are they to the soul naturally; just as, the clearer is the light, the more it blinds and darkens the pupil of the owl, and, the more directly we look at the sun, the greater is the darkness which it causes in our visual faculty, overcoming and overwhelming it through its own weakness. In the same way, when this Divine light of contemplation assails the soul which is not yet wholly enlightened, it causes spiritual darkness in it; for not only does it overcome it, but likewise it overwhelms it and darkens the act of its natural intelligence. For this reason Saint Dionysius and other mystical theologians call this infused contemplation a ray of darkness--that is to say, for the soul that is not enlightened and purged--for the natural strength of the intellect is transcended and overwhelmed by its great supernatural light. Wherefore David likewise said: That near to God and round about Him are darkness and cloud; not that this is so in fact, but that it is so to our weak understanding, which is blinded and darkened by so vast a light, to which it cannot attain. For this cause the same David then explained himself, saying: 'Through the great splendour of His presence passed clouds'--that is, between God and our understanding. And it is for this cause that, when God sends it out

from Himself to the soul that is not yet transformed, this illumining ray of His secret wisdom causes thick darkness in the understanding.

4. And it is clear that this dark contemplation is in these its beginnings painful likewise to the soul; for, as this Divine infused contemplation has many excellences that are extremely good, and the soul that receives them, not being purged, has many miseries that are likewise extremely bad, hence it follows that, as two contraries cannot coexist in one subject--the soul--it must of necessity have pain and suffering, since it is the subject wherein these two contraries war against each other, working the one against the other, by reason of the purgation of the imperfections of the soul which comes to pass through this contemplation. This we shall prove inductively in the manner following.

5. In the first place, because the light and wisdom of this contemplation is most bright and pure, and the soul which it assails is dark and impure, it follows that the soul suffers great pain when it receives it in itself, just as, when the eyes are dimmed by humours, and become impure and weak, the assault made upon them by a bright light causes them pain. And when the soul suffers the direct assault of this Divine light, its pain, which results from its impurity, is immense; because, when this pure light assails the soul, in order to expel its impurity, the soul feels itself to be so impure and miserable that it believes God to be against it, and thinks that it has set itself up against God. This causes it sore grief and pain, because it now believes that God has cast it away: this was one of the greatest trials which Job felt when God sent him this experience, and he said: 'Why hast Thou set me contrary to Thee, so that I am grievous and burdensome to myself?' For, by means of this pure light, the soul now sees its impurity clearly (although darkly), and knows clearly that it is unworthy of God or of any creature. And what gives it most pain is that it thinks that it will never be worthy and that its good things are all over for it. This is caused by the profound immersion of its spirit in the knowledge and realization of its evils and miseries; for this Divine and dark light now reveals them all to the eye, that it may see clearly how in its own strength it can never have aught else. In this sense we may understand that passage from David, which says: 'For iniquity Thou hast corrected man and hast made his soul to be undone and consumed: he wastes away as the spider.'

6. The second way in which the soul suffers pain is by reason of its weakness, natural, moral and spiritual; for, when this Divine contemplation assails the soul with a certain force, in order to strengthen it and subdue it, it suffers such pain in its weakness that it nearly swoons away. This is especially so at certain times when it is assailed with somewhat greater force; for sense and spirit, as if beneath some immense and dark load, are in such great pain and agony that the soul would find advantage and relief in death. This had been experienced by the prophet Job, when he said: 'I desire not that He should have intercourse with me in great strength, lest He oppress me with the weight of His greatness.'

7. Beneath the power of this oppression and weight the soul feels itself so far from being favoured that it thinks, and correctly so, that even that wherein it was wont to find some help has vanished with everything else, and that there is none who has pity upon it. To this effect Job says likewise: 'Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, at least ye my friends, because the hand of the Lord has touched me.' A thing of great wonder and pity is it that the soul's weakness and impurity should now be so great that, though the hand of God is of itself so light and gentle, the soul should now feel it to be so heavy and so contrary, though it neither weighs it down nor rests upon it, but only touches it, and that mercifully, since He does this in order to grant the soul favours and not to chastise it.

CHAPTER XI

Begins to explain the second line of the first stanza. Describes how, as the fruit of these rigorous constraints, the soul finds itself with the vehement passion of Divine love.

IN this line the soul describes the fire of love which, as we have said, like the material fire acting upon the wood, begins to take hold upon the soul in this night of painful contemplation. This enkindling now described, although in a certain way it resembles that which we described above as coming to pass in the sensual part of the soul, is in some ways as different from that other as is the soul from the body, or the spiritual part from the sensual. For this present kind is

an enkindling of spiritual love in the soul, which, in the midst of these dark confines, feels itself to be keenly and sharply wounded in strong Divine love, and to have a certain realization and foretaste of God, although it understands nothing definitely, for, as we say, the understanding is in darkness.

2. The spirit feels itself here to be deeply and passionately in love, for this spiritual enkindling produces the passion of love. And, inasmuch as this love is infused, it is passive rather than active, and thus it begets in the soul a strong passion of love. This love has in it something of union with God, and thus to some degree partakes of its properties, which are actions of God rather than of the soul, these being subdued within it passively. What the soul does here is to give its consent; the warmth and strength and temper and passion of love--or enkindling, as the soul here calls it--belong only to the love of God, which enters increasingly into union with it. This love finds in the soul more occasion and preparation to unite itself with it and to wound it, according as all the soul's desires are the more recollected, and are the more withdrawn from and disabled for the enjoyment of aught either in Heaven or in earth.

3. This takes place to a great extent, as has already been said, in this dark purgation, for God has so weaned all the inclinations and caused them to be so recollected that they cannot find pleasure in anything they may wish. All this is done by God to the end that, when He withdraws them and recollects them in Himself, the soul may have more strength and fitness to receive this strong union of love of God, which He is now beginning to give it through this purgative way, wherein the soul must love with great strength and with all its desires and powers both of spirit and of sense; which could not be if they were dispersed in the enjoyment of aught else. For this reason David said to God, to the end that he might receive the strength of the love of this union with God: 'I will keep my strength for Thee;' that is, I will keep the entire capacity and all the desires and energies of my faculties, nor will I employ their operation or pleasure in aught else than Thyself.

4. In this way it can be realized in some measure how great and how strong may be this enkindling of love in the spirit, wherein God keeps in recollection all the energies, faculties and desires of the soul, both of spirit and of sense, so that all this harmony may employ its energies and virtues in this love, and may thus attain to a true fulfilment of the first commandment, which sets aside nothing pertaining to man nor excludes from this love anything that is his, but says: 'Thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind, with all thy soul and with all thy strength.'

5. When all the desires and energies of the soul, then, have been recollected in this enkindling of love, and when the soul itself has been touched and wounded in them all, and has been inspired with passion, what shall we understand the movements and digressions of all these energies and desires to be, if they find themselves enkindled and wounded with strong love and without the possession and satisfaction thereof, in darkness and doubt? They will doubtless be suffering hunger, like the dogs of which David speaks as running about the city; finding no satisfaction in this love, they keep howling and groaning. For the touch of this love and Divine fire dries up the spirit and enkindles its desires, in order to satisfy its thirst for this Divine love, so much so that it turns upon itself a thousand times and desires God in a thousand ways and manners, with the eagerness and desire of the appetite. This is very well explained by David in a psalm, where he says: 'My soul thirsted for Thee: in how many manners does my soul long for Thee!--that is, in desires. And another version reads: 'My soul thirsted for Thee, my soul is lost (or perishes) for Thee.'

6. It is for this reason that the soul says in this line that it was 'kindled in love with yearnings.' For in all the things and thoughts that it revolves within itself, and in all the affairs and matters that present themselves to it, it loves in many ways, and also desires and suffers in the desire in many ways, at all times and in all places, finding rest in naught, and feeling this yearning in its enkindled wound, even as the prophet Job declares, saying: 'As the hart desireth the shadow, and as the hireling desireth the end of his work, so I also had vain months and numbered to myself wearisome and laborious nights. If I lie down to sleep, I shall say: "When shall I arise?" And then I shall await the evening and shall be full of sorrows even until the darkness of night.' Everything becomes cramping to this soul: it cannot live within itself; it

cannot live either in Heaven or on earth; and it is filled with griefs until the darkness comes to which Job here refers, speaking spiritually and in the sense of our interpretation. What the soul here endures is afflictions and suffering without the consolation of a certain hope of any light and spiritual good. Wherefore the yearning and the grief of this soul in this enkindling of love are greater because it is multiplied in two ways: first, by the spiritual darkness wherein it finds itself, which afflicts it with its doubts and misgivings; and then by the love of God, which enkindles and stimulates it, and, with its loving wound, causes it a wondrous fear. These two kinds of suffering at such a season are well described by Isaias, where he says: 'My soul desired Thee in the night'--that is, in misery.

7. This is one kind of suffering which proceeds from this dark night; but, he goes on to say, with my spirit, in my bowels, until the morning, I will watch for Thee. And this is the second way of grieving in desire and yearning which comes from love in the bowels of the spirit, which are the spiritual affections. But in the midst of these dark and loving afflictions the soul feels within itself a certain companionship and strength, which bears it company and so greatly strengthens it that, if this burden of grievous darkness be taken away, it often feels itself to be alone, empty and weak. The cause of this is that, as the strength and efficacy of the soul were derived and communicated passively from the dark fire of love which assailed it, it follows that, when that fire ceases to assail it, the darkness and power and heat of love cease in the soul.