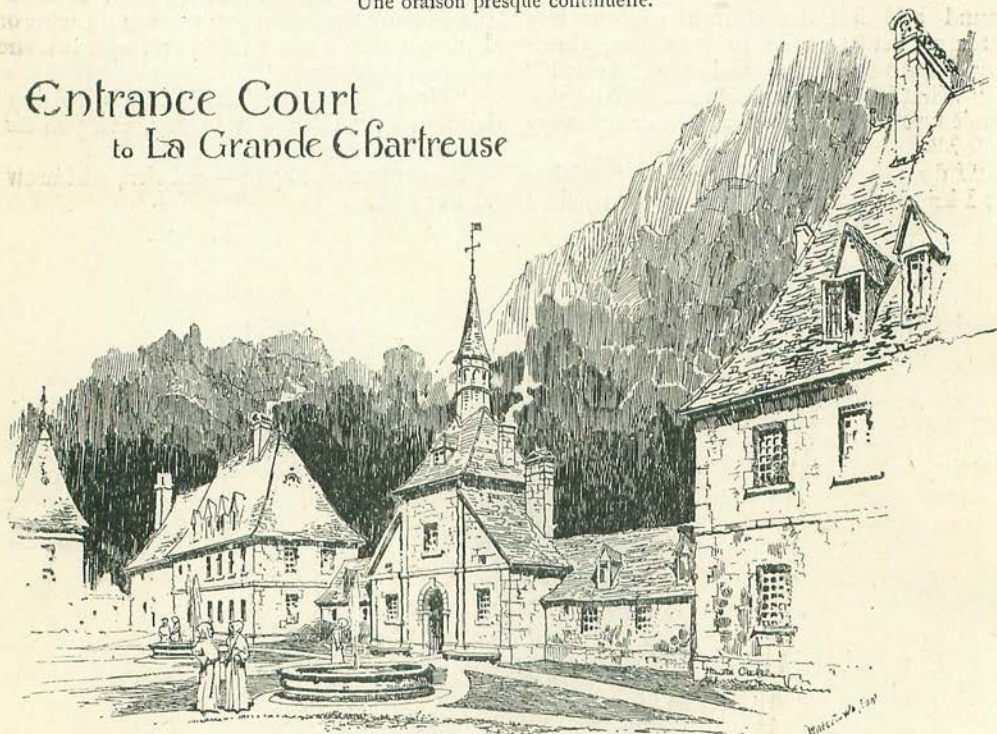


## *A Night at The Grand Chartreuse.*

By J. E. MUDDOCK.

“ La vie d'un bon Chartreux doit être  
Une oraison presque continuelle.”

### Entrance Court to La Grande Chartreuse



HE above is the legend that is painted on the door of every cell occupied by a monk of the silent Order of Carthusians. To pray always for those who never pray ; to pray for those who have done you wrong ; to pray for those who sin every hour of their lives ; to pray for all sorts and conditions of men, no matter what their colour, no matter what their creed ; to pray that God will remove doubt and scepticism from the world, and open all human eyes to the way of faith and salvation. Such is the chief duty of the Chartreux. That the lives of these men is a continual prayer would seem to be an undoubted fact ; but they are more than that—they are lives of silence, that must not be broken, save under exceptional circumstances. Time has been when they were surrounded by their families, their friends, when

perhaps they had ambitions like other men, hopes like other men, and, it may be, have given their love to women. But then something has happened to change the current of their lives, the course of their thought : the mundane world has become distasteful, and with heavy hearts and weary feet they have sought the lonely monastery, and, having once entered, the door has closed upon them for ever. Henceforth the horizon of their world is the monastery wall ; and the only sounds they will hear save the wind when it howls, or the thunder when it rolls, are the eternal tolling of the bell, and the wail and chant of the monotonous prayers. It is difficult to understand how men, young, rich, well-favoured, can seclude themselves in this busy and wonderful age ; and, renouncing all the pleasures and gaiety of the world, take upon themselves solemn vows of chastity and silence, which, once

taken, are devoutly kept. To God and God's service they dedicate themselves; and though on the earth, they are scarcely of it. They live, but for them it is the beginning of eternity; the passion and fret of the world will never more disturb them, and their one longing is to change the finite for the infinite. It is surely no ordinary faith that impels men to enter into a living death of this kind, nor is it fanaticism, but a devotion too deep for words, too mysterious for ordinary comprehensions to grasp. One must go back to the eleventh century for the beginning of the history of this strange Order. It was founded by St. Bruno, of Cologne, who imposed upon his votaries "Solitude," "Silence," and "Fasting." For above eight hundred years the Carthusians have been true to their saint, and wherever they have established themselves they have lived their lives of silence, knowing nothing of the seductive and tender influence of women, or the love and sweetness of children; dying, when their time came, without a pang of regret at leaving the world, and with nothing to perpetuate their memories, save a tiny wooden cross, on which a number is painted. But in half a dozen years or so the cross rots away, and is never renewed, and the dead brother is referred to no more.

The lonely convent of the Grande Chartreuse is as old as the Order, although it has undergone considerable change. It is now a great building, occupying a considerable extent of ground, but originally it must have been a single small house. It stands in a defile, in a region of utter loneliness. Gradually it has grown and expanded, and in order to protect it against the attacks of thieves and marauders, it is surrounded by a massive wall that is loopholed and embrasured. For what purpose it is difficult to say, for these monks would never take human life, not even to save their own. So far, however, as I have been able to learn there is no record of the convent having been seriously attacked during any period of its history. But in the Revolution of 1792 the monks were cruelly expelled, and their most valuable library was destroyed. They separated in little groups, and found refuge in holy houses of their order in different parts of Europe, until the restoration of 1815—that memorable year—when they reunited and returned to their beloved monastery amid the solitude of the eternal mountains.

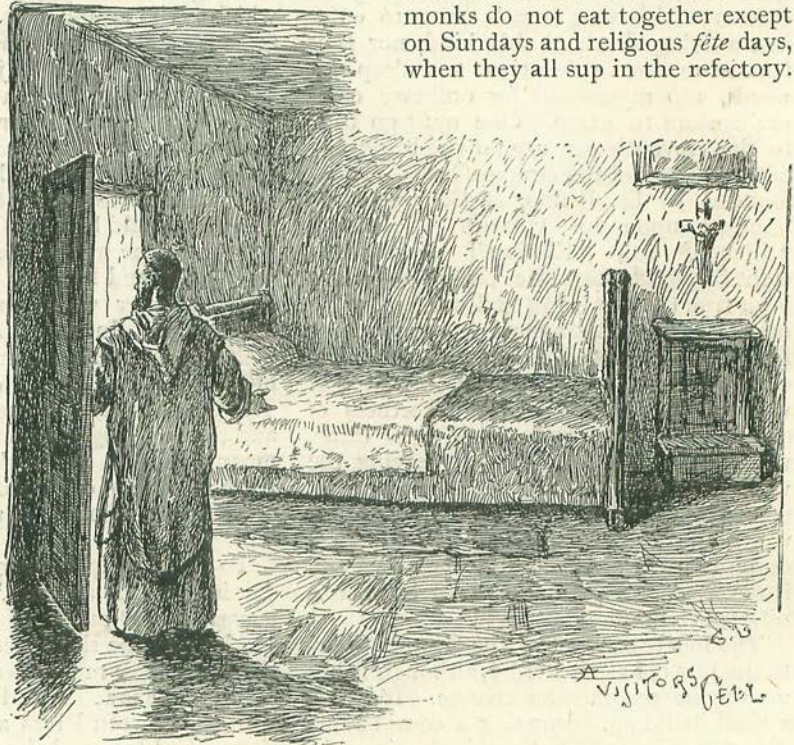
La Grande Chartreuse is situated amidst scenes of savage grandeur, 3,800 feet above the sea, at the foot of the Mont Grand Som, which reaches a height of 6,668 feet, and commands a view of surpassing magnificence. It is in the Department of Isère, France, and eight hours' journey from Grenoble, which is the capital of the Department, and famous for its gloves. The nearest railway station is a five hours' journey away, and there is no other human habitation within many miles of the convent. The approaches are by wild and rugged gorges, through which excellent roads have of late years been made, but formerly these gorges might have been held by a handful of men against a host. In the winter the roads are blocked with snow, and between the lonely convent and the outer world there is little communication. In summer the pine woods look solemn and dark, and the ravines are filled with the music of falling waters. There is a strange absence of bird melody, and the wind sighs amongst the pines, and moans around the rocks. And yet the region is one of entrancing beauty, and full of a dreamy repose that makes its influence felt.

To this lonely convent I travelled one day in the late autumn, when the falling leaves spoke sadly of departed summer glories, and the shrill blasts that came down the glens were messengers from the regions of ice and snow. I had gone by train to Voiron, between Rives and Grenoble, and thence had tramped through the beautiful gorges of Crossey for five hours. The afternoon had been sullen, and bitterly cold, and the shades of night were fast falling as, weary and hungry, I rang the great bell at the convent gate, and begged for hospitality. A tall, cowed monk received me, but uttered no word. He merely made a sign for me to follow him, and, closing the gate and shooting the massive bolts, he led the way across a court, where I was met by another monk, who was allowed to break the rigid vow of silence so far that he could inquire of strangers what their business was. He asked me if I desired food and rest, and on my answering in the affirmative he led me to a third and silent brother, and by him I was conducted to a cell with whitewashed walls. It contained a small bed of unpainted pine wood, and a tiny table, on which was an iron basin and a jug of water. A crucifix hung on the wall, and beneath it was a *prie-dieu*. The

cell was somehow suggestive of a prison, and yet I am not sure that there was as much comfort to be found in it as a prison cell affords in these humanitarian times. Everything about the Grande Chartreuse is of Spartan-like simplicity. There the body is mortified for the soul's sake, and nothing that could pander in the least degree to luxurious tastes is allowed. As I was to learn afterwards, even such barren comfort as is afforded by this "Visitor's Cell" is unknown in the cells occupied by the monks.

When I had somewhat freshened myself up by a wash, I went into the corridor where my attendant was waiting, and, following him in obedience to a sign he made, I traversed a long, lofty, cold passage, with bare walls and floor. At the end of the passage there was carved in the stone the Latin inscription, *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*. Passing through an arched doorway we reached the refectory. The great hall or supper room was cold, barren, and dismal. Everything looked ghostly and dim in the feeble light shed by two small swinging lamps, that seemed rather to emphasise the gloom than dispel it. Comfort there was none in this echoing chamber, with its whitewashed walls and shadowy recesses, from which I half expected to see the spirit forms of dead monks glide. Taking my seat at a small, bare table, a silent brother placed before me a bowl of thin vegetable soup, in which some chopped eggs floated. Fish followed, then an omelette, and the whole was washed down with a bottle of excellent red wine. It was a frugal repast, but an Epicurean spread as compared with the dietary scale

of the monks themselves. Meat of every kind is rigorously interdicted, that is, the flesh of animals in any form. Each brother only gets two meals a day. They consist of hot water flavoured with egg; vegetables cooked in oil; while the only drink allowed is cold water. The monks do not eat together except on Sundays and religious *fête* days, when they all sup in the refectory.



On other days every man has his meals alone, in the solitude of his cell, and but a brief time is allowed him, for it is considered sinful to spend more time in eating and drinking than is absolutely necessary to swallow down so much food as will hold body and soul together. That men may keep themselves healthy, even on such meagre diet as that I have mentioned, is proved by the monks of the Grande Chartreuse, for they enjoy excellent health, and generally live to a green old age. Even the weak and delicate grow strong and hardy under the severe discipline. The rasping friction of the nervous system, which annually slays its tens of thousands in the outer world, is unknown here. All is calm and peaceful, and the austerity of the life led is compensated for by the abiding and hopeful faith. It is a brief preparation for an eternal life of unsullied joy in a world where man's sin is known no more.

Surely nothing else but such a faith could sustain mortal beings under an ordeal so trying.

This strange community of Carthusians is divided into categories of "Fathers" and "Brothers." The former wear robes of white wool, cinctured with a girdle of white leather. Their heads and faces are closely shaven, and the head is generally enveloped in a cowl, which is attached to the robe. They are all ordained priests, and it is to them the rule of silence, solitude, and fasting, more particularly applies. The fasting is represented by the daily bill of fare I have given, and it never varies all the year round, except on Fridays and certain days in Lent, when, poor as it is, it is still further reduced. The solitude consists of many hours spent in prayer in the loneliness of the cell, and the silence imposed is only broken by monosyllabic answers to questions addressed to them. Sustained conversation is a fault, and would be severely punished. Aspirants for the Fatherhood have to submit to a most trying novitiate, which lasts for five full years. After that they are ordained, and from that moment they renounce the world, with all its luring temptations and its sin. Their lives henceforth must be strictly holy in accordance with the tenets of their religion. The Brothers are the manual labourers, the hewers of wood and drawers of water. They do everything that is required in the way of domestic service. They wear sandals on their bare feet, and their bodies are clothed in a long, loose, brown robe, fastened at the waist by a rope girdle. On both branches of the Order the same severe régime is compulsory, but on Fridays the

Brothers only get a morsel of black bread and a cup of cold water. The attention to spiritual duties is all-absorbing, and under no circumstances must it be relaxed. Matins commence in the chapel at twelve o'clock at night, and continue until about two o'clock. After a short rest, the Divine service is resumed at six o'clock. But all the monks do not attend the matins

at one time. While some sleep others pray. And it is doubtful if amongst the religious orders of the world anything more solemn and impressive than this midnight service could be found. To witness it was my chief aim in going to the convent, and so I left my cell after a short sleep, and proceeded to the chapel as the deep-toned bell struck twelve with sonorous sounds that rolled in ghostly echoes along the lofty corridors. The passage through which I made my way was a vast one, and a solitary lamp ineffectually struggled to illumine the darkness. I groped along until I reached a door that swung silently open to my touch. Then I stood

within the chapel, where all was silent, and a Cimmerian gloom reigned. Far in the depths of the darkness was a glimmering, star-like lamp over the altar, but its beams, feeble and straggling, revealed nothing; it only accentuated the pitchy blackness all around. The feeble lanterns of the monks, one to every third stall, were invisible from my position. Everything was suggestive of a tomb far down in the bowels of the earth—the silence, the cold, the damp earthy smell that filled one's nostrils, all seemed to indicate decaying mortality. Suddenly, with startling abruptness, a single voice broke into a plaintive, monotonous chant. Then others took up the cadence

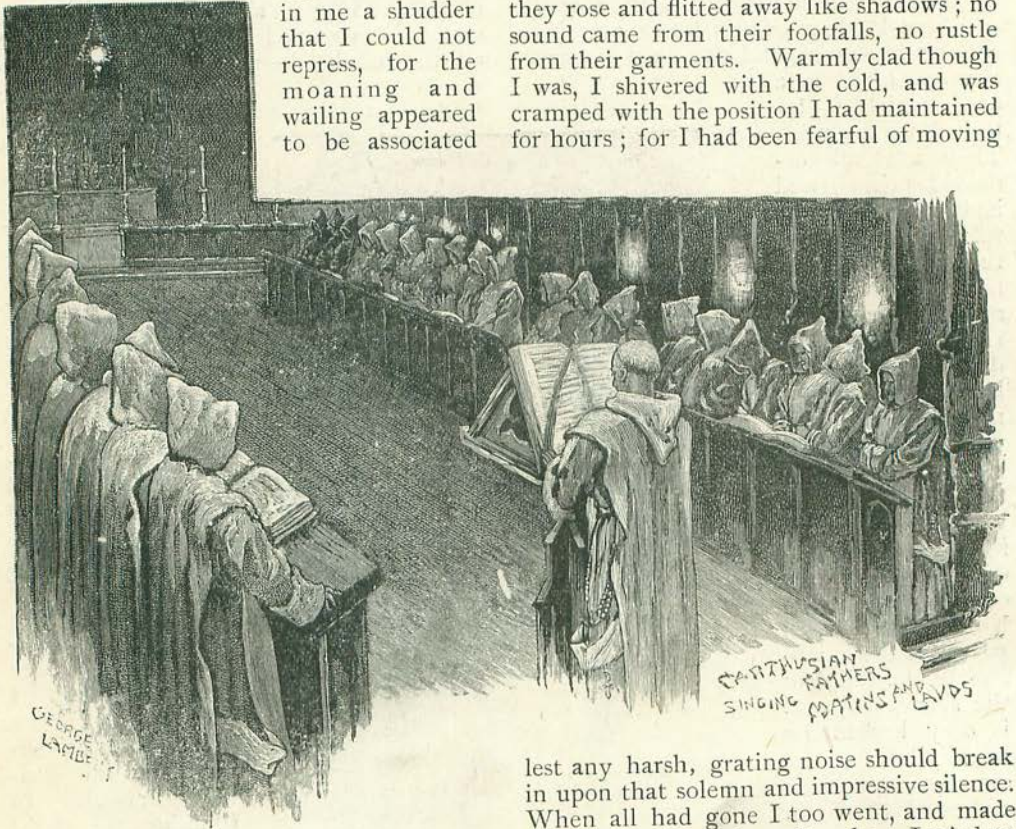


CARTHUSIAN  
FATHER  
GOING TO  
MIDNIGHT  
OFFICE

with a moaning wail that gradually died away until there was unbroken silence again. There was something strange and weird in this performance, for the impenetrable darkness, the star-like lamp, the wailing voices of unseen figures, seemed altogether unnatural.

It begot in me a shudder that I could not repress, for the moaning and wailing appeared to be associated

day, when their anguish should cease for ever and rest be found. At last, to my great relief, I saw the beams of a new morn steal in at the chapel windows. The bowed forms of the cowled monks were faintly discernible, kneeling before the altar, where still burned the watch-lamp. One by one they rose and flitted away like shadows; no sound came from their footfalls, no rustle from their garments. Warmly clad though I was, I shivered with the cold, and was cramped with the position I had maintained for hours; for I had been fearful of moving



GEORGE  
LANTIER

CARTHUSIAN  
FATHERS  
SINGING MATINS AND LAUDS

IN THE CHAPEL: DAYBREAK.

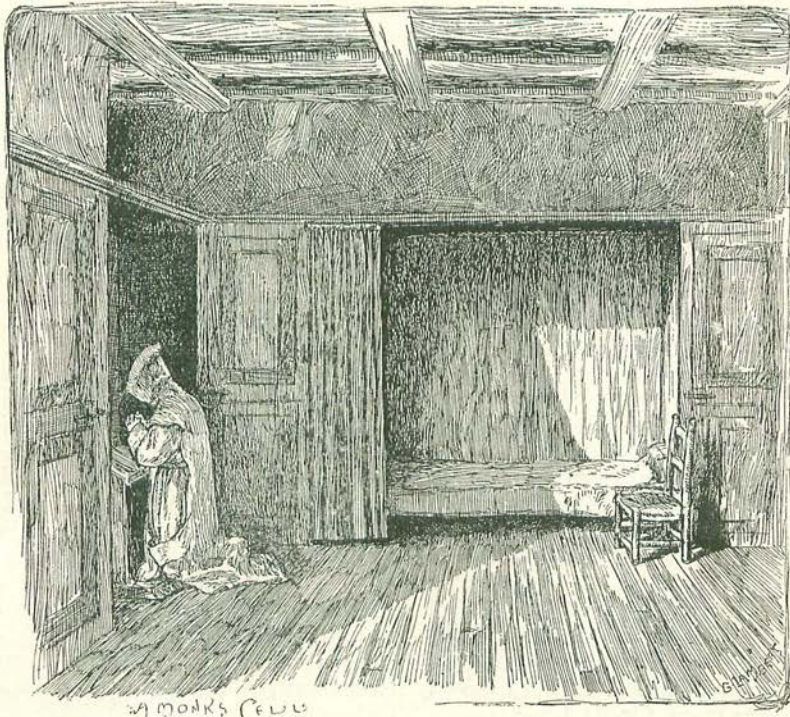
with death rather than life. There was nothing in the whole ceremony indicative of joy or hope, but rather their converse—sadness and despair. Throughout those weary hours the wailing chant and the silence alternated. I wanted to go away, but could not. Some strange fascination kept me there, and I recalled some of the wonderful descriptive scenes in Dantè which were irresistibly suggested. My imagination was wrought on to such an extent that I pictured that vast gloomy space as filled with unquiet spirits condemned to torture; and the lamp as typical of the one ray of hope that told them that after a long period of penance they should pass from the gloom of woe to the lightness and joy of eternal

lest any harsh, grating noise should break in upon that solemn and impressive silence. When all had gone I too went, and made my way back to the cell, where I tried to snatch a few hours' sleep, but it was all in vain, for my mind seemed as if it had been upset by a strange and terrible dream. Although I have had a wide and varied experience of men and manners in all parts of the world, I never witnessed such a strange scene before as I witnessed that night. It was like a nightmare picture, a poem evolved from a distorted imagination. I say a poem because it had the elements of poetry in it, but it was the poetry of ineffable human sadness.

Truly it is singular that men can so strengthen their faith, so enwrap themselves, as it were, in a gloomy creed, that they are willing to deny themselves every pleasure in life, to shut themselves off from all that is joyous and beautiful in the world, in order to submit to an endless sorrowing

for human sins ; a sorrowing that finds expression every hour of their lonely, saddened lives. For from sunset to sunrise, and sunrise to sunset again, they are warned by the mournful tolling of the iron

fact that the monastic vows are faithfully and religiously kept ; and there is no record of a Carthusian monk ever having broken his vow. Surely then there must be something strangely, even terribly



A MONK'S CELL

bell, every quivering stroke of which seems to say "death," to pray without ceasing.

Many of the monks at the Grande Chartreuse are still in the very prime of their manhood, and not a few of them are members of distinguished and wealthy families. Yet they have renounced everything ; all the advantages that influence and wealth could give them ; all the comforts of home ; the love of wife and children ; the fascination of travel and of strange sights—every temptation that this most beautiful world could hold out has been resisted, and they have dedicated themselves to gloom, fasting, and silence. Verily, human nature is an unfathomable mystery. One may well ask if these monks are truly happy ? If they have no longings for the flesh-pots of Egypt ? If they do not sometimes pine and sigh for the busy haunts and the excitement of the great towns ? Such questions are not easily answered, unless we get the answer in the

attractive in that stern life which is so full of hardship and trial, and from year's end to year's end knows no change, until the great change which comes to us all, sooner or later, whether we be monks or revellers.

I have already mentioned that notwithstanding their sparse and meagre diet, which seems to us ordinary mortals to lack nutritive and sustaining power, the monks of the Grande Chartreuse are healthy and vigorous. The Brothers labour in their fields and gardens, and they cultivate all the vegetables that they use, as well as grow most of their own corn for the bread. They do any bricklaying, carpentering, or painting that may be required, as well as all the washing and mending of the establishment, for a woman is never allowed to enter the sacred precincts. The furniture of each cell consists of a very narrow bed as hard as a board, and with little covering ; a small stove, for the rigours of the climate

render a fire indispensable at times, and yet the fires are used but sparingly; a little basin, with a jug of water for ablutions; and of course there is the *prie-dieu*, and the image of a saint. Attached to the convent is a cemetery, which cannot fail to have a very melancholy interest for the visitor. It is divided into two parts, one being for the Fathers, the other for the Brothers, for as the two branches of the Order are kept distinct in life, so they are separated in death. No mounds mark the last resting-places of the quiet sleepers; but at the head of each is a wooden cross, though it bears no indication of the name, age, or date of death of the deceased—only a number. Having played his little part, and returned to the dust from whence he sprang, it is considered meet that the Carthusian should be forgotten. And the cross is merely an indication that beneath moulder the remains of what was once a man.

As is well known, the monks distil the famous liqueur which finds its way to all parts of the world, and yields a very handsome revenue. The process of its concoction is an inviolable secret, but it is largely composed of herbs and cognac. It is said that the recipe was brought to the convent by one of the fathers, who had been expelled in 1792, and that at first the liqueur was used as a medicine and distributed amongst the poor. In the course of time, however, it was improved upon, for its fame having spread a demand for it sprang up, and it was resolved to make it an article of commerce. For this purpose a separate building was erected apart from the monastery, and placed in charge of one of the Fathers, who has a staff of brothers under him. The basis of the liqueur is supposed to be an indigenous mountain herb combined with the petals of certain wild flowers. These are macerated with honey until fermentation takes place. The liquid is then refined and brandy is added. Formerly it was made without brandy. The "green" is most favoured by connoisseurs, and its exquisite, delicate fragrance and flavour have never been imitated. More care is bestowed upon the "green" than the "yellow," which is somewhat inferior in quality and of a coarser flavour. On several occasions very large sums have been offered for the right to manufacture the chartreuse by financial speculators, but all such offers have been resolutely refused. Although I believe that the greater part of

the income of the convent is spent in deeds of charity, it may be doubted by some people whether it is not a somewhat questionable way for a religious Order to augment its funds by the preparation of an intoxicating liquor for which, according to their own doctrine, there is absolutely no need. The chartreuse has a strong rival in the well-known benedictine, made by the Benedictine Monks; and which, while being similar in character, is said by some to be superior. There is little doubt, however, that the chartreuse has much the larger sale of the two. Many attempts have been made from time to time by outsiders to manufacture both these liqueurs, but without success, and the exact secret of their decoction is as religiously preserved as are the secrets of Freemasonry.

Like the Great St. Bernard, the Grande Chartreuse, though not to the same extent, is a show place in summer. Perhaps this is hardly a fair way of putting it, for it would be a cruel injustice to let it be supposed that the Chartreux had the slightest desire to make an exhibition of their lonely convent. But the travelling facilities afforded the tourist nowadays enable him to penetrate to the remotest recesses of the earth. No place is sacred to him; and as he thinks nothing of going into a Continental theatre dressed in a tweed suit, so he does not hesitate, garbed in hob-nailed boots and knickerbockers, to demand entrance into the Grande Chartreuse, whose mystery he does not understand and cares nought for, and whose solemnity does not awe him. To refuse hospitality even to the irreverent curiosity-monger would be contrary to the Carthusian's creed, which teaches charity to all men, and to "turn no deaf ear to him who asks for bread and succour." And so anything of the masculine gender is admitted and fed with the frugal fare that is now specially provided for visitors; and very properly he who partakes of this hospitality, not being in actual want of it, is required to pay for his entertainment. The ordinary visitor is not allowed to pass the night under the roof of the convent, and therefore that strange and ghostly service in the chapel during the hours of darkness is rarely witnessed. The Grande Chartreuse boasts of a magnificent library, which numbers upwards of 20,000 volumes, for the most part of a theological nature. Many of these books are unique and of great age,

and to the theological student would probably prove a mine of wealth. Amongst the volumes are some very rare Bibles and Prayer-books of nearly every civilised country in the world. This library replaces the one that was destroyed, and has been collected during the present century.

What is known as the Chapter-room is

a Chapelle des Morts, built about the end of the thirteenth century. Here the bodies of the dead monks rest during the religious services that are held over them before they are finally consigned to the little cemetery to which I have already made reference. Nor must I forget to mention what is known as the Map-room, where

there is a very valuable collection of maps of different parts of the world, but particularly of France. There is also a small museum of insects and butterflies indigenous to the mountains of the region in which the convent is situated. That region is the southern group of the singularly interesting limestone Alps of Savoy, and the convent stands in about the middle section of the group which culminates in the Pointe de Chamchaude, 6,845 feet high.

In choosing the site for the convent, there is little doubt that isolation as well as a position of natural defence were aimed at. Isolated it truly is, and up to a couple of hundred years ago it must have been absolutely impregnable. But it is well known that the monks of old had an eye also to beauty of surroundings, and it is doubtful if the faithful followers of St. Bruno could have found

a site commanding a view of more magnificent beauty

in all France than that which the Grande Chartreuse occupies, and by ascending to the summit of the Grand Som, which throws its shadow over the convent, a panorama of unsurpassed grandeur is unfolded to the wondering gaze. To the west it embraces the valley of the Rhône, the town of Lyons, and the mountains of Ardèche and Forez; to the east the chain of glittering Alps that stretches from Mont Visio to Mont Blanc; to the north is the Mont du Chat of Chambéry, the Lake of Bourget, and that part of the Rhône Valley which is bounded by the rugged peaks of the purple Jura, while to the south are smiling valleys and rolling uplands.



CARTHUSIAN  
BROTHERS  
IN THE  
KITCHEN

an exception to the rest of the place, inasmuch as it is hung with portraits of the Father Superiors from the very foundation of the Order. There are about fifty of these portraits altogether, and some of the earlier ones are more curious than artistic. The "Superiors" are the only men of the Order whose memory is thus kept alive.

The Grand Cloister is the largest apartment in the building. It is a not quite perfect square, and is lighted by a hundred and thirty windows. A portion of this cloister dates back to the early part of the thirteenth century. There are two main corridors, seven hundred and twenty-two feet long, and abutting on these corridors are the cells, thirty-six in number. There is also



This view of the outer world is all the monks ever obtain, for, having once taken the vows, they leave the convent no more ; and they know little of what goes on in the busy haunts of men, where the passion of life reaches fever heat, save what they gather from the chattering of the throngs of summer idlers. In winter they live in a silent, white world, and the face of a stranger is very rarely seen.

Before leaving the neighbourhood I paid a visit to the Chapelle de St. Bruno, which is within half an hour's walk of the monastery. It is erected in a very wild spot, said to be the site of the saint's original hermitage. There is nothing particularly interesting in the chapel, which is in a state of dilapidation. But it is curious to speculate that here dwelt, in what was little more than a cavern, the man who, by

the austerity of his life and his gloomy views, was able to found a religious Order which has endured for many ages, and is one of the few that escaped destruction during the revolutions and upheavals of the last century. The situation of the Chapelle is one of singular loneliness and desolation, and for eight months of the year at least it is buried in snow.

As I turned my back upon the Grande Chartreuse, after that memorable night spent under its roof, and feeling grateful for the shelter and refreshment it had afforded me, the morning sun was gilding the glorious landscape, and I breathed a sigh of relief and gladness, for I seemed to have come from a region of sorrow and gloom, where the coldness of death was ever present, into the healthy, joyous life of the throbbing, breathing world.



CHAPEL OF ST. BRUNO