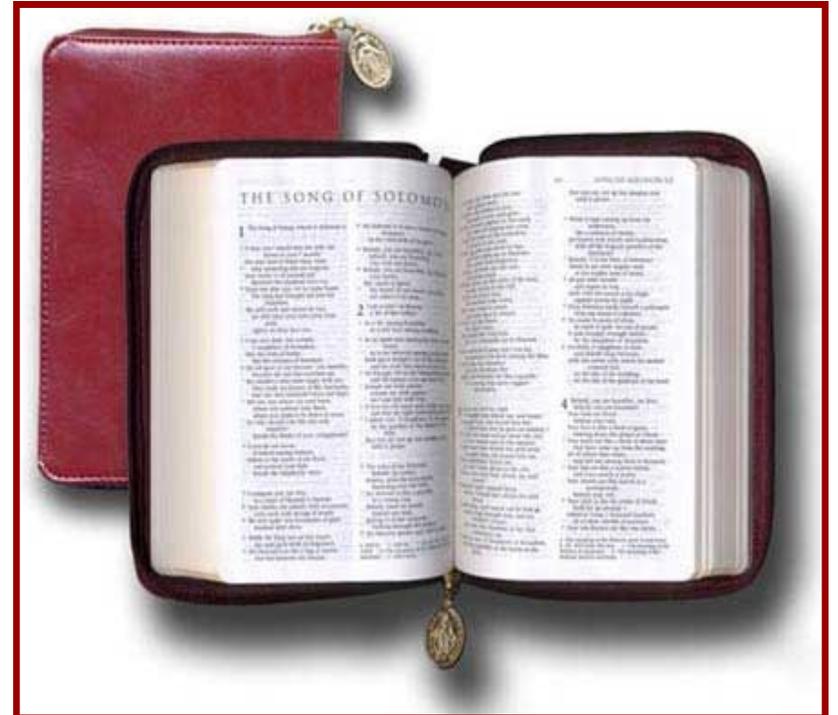




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SONG OF SONGS—27

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BLACKNESS OF THE BRIDE
COMPARED TO THE TENTS OF KEDAR***

BERNARD'S LAMENT FOR HIS BROTHER

The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.

The Blackness of the Bride Compared to the Tents of Kedar Bernard's Lament for his Brother

"As the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon." This is our starting-point, since it is where the last sermon ended. You are waiting to hear what these words mean, and in what way they are connected with the text of our previous discourse because they do bear comparison. They can be so connected that both parts of the comparison refer solely to the first clause of that text: "I am black;" or the two parts may correspond to the two parts there, one to each. The former interpretation is the more simple, the latter the more obscure. But let us try both, and for a start the one that seems more difficult. For the difficulty lies, not in the first term of the comparison, but in the last. It is obvious that Kedar, meaning darkness, corresponds to blackness; but not so obvious that the curtains of Solomon signify beauty. All must be able to see that tents can suggest the notion of darkness. For what is meant by tents but our bodies, in which we wander as pilgrims? "For we have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come." We even wage war in them, like soldiers in tents, like violent men taking the kingdom by force. In a word, "the life of man upon earth is a warfare," and as long as we do battle in this body "we are away from the Lord," away from the light. For "God is light," and to the extent that a man is not with him, to that extent he is in darkness, that is, in Kedar. Hence he may recognize as his own that tearful outcry: "Woe is me that my sojourning is prolonged! I have dwelt with the inhabitants of Kedar; my soul has been long a sojourner." Our bodily dwelling-place therefore, is neither a citizen's residence nor one's native home, but rather a soldier's tent or traveler's hut. This body, I repeat, is a tent, a tent of Kedar, that now intervenes to deprive the soul for a while of the vision of the infinite light, permitting that it be seen "in a mirror dimly," but not face to face.

13. In the same way, our weeping is not a sign of a lack of faith, it indicates the human condition. Nor do I rebuke the striker if I weep on receiving the blow, rather do I invite his mercy, I try to mitigate his severity. You hear the heavy note of sorrow in my words, but I am far from murmuring. Have I not been completely fair when I said that the one who was punished deserved it, the one who was crowned was worthy of it? And I still aver that the sweet and just Lord acted fairly to us both. "My song, O Lord, shall be of mercy and judgment." Let that mercy poured out by you on your servant Gerard sing to you; and let that judgment that I endure sing to you as well. I praise your goodness to him, your justice to me. Shall goodness alone merit praise, and not justice? "You are righteous indeed, O Lord, and all your judgments are right." You gave me Gerard, you took him away: And if his removal makes me sad, I do not forget that he was given to me, and offer thanks for my good fortune in having had him. My regret at his departure is but in accord with the need it has exposed.

14. I will meditate, O Lord, on my covenant with you, and on your mercy, that you may be justified in passing sentence on me, and blameless in your judgments. Last year when we were at Viterbo on the Church's business, Gerard became ill, so ill that it seemed God was about to call him to himself. I felt it unthinkable that my companion on my journeys, and so wonderful a companion, should be left behind in a foreign land. I had to restore him to those who had entrusted him to me. All of them loved him because he was so utterly lovable. So I began to pray in the midst of my tears and said: "Wait O Lord, till we return home. Let me give him back to his friends, then take him if you wish, and I shall not complain." You listened to me O God, his health improved, we finished the work you had enjoined on us, and, laden with the fruits of peace, returned in great happiness. Since then I lost sight of my agreement with you, but you did not forget. I am ashamed of these sobs of grief that go to prove my unfaithfulness. What more shall I say? You entrusted Gerard to us, you have claimed him back; you have but taken what was yours. These tears prevent me speaking further; impose a limit on them O Lord, bring them to an end.

David rightly mourned for his parricidal son, because he knew all exit from the pit of death was denied to him forever by the greatness of his sin. Rightly he mourned over Saul and Jonathan, for whom, once engulfed by death, there seemed no hope of deliverance. They will rise indeed, but not to life: or if to life, only to die more miserably in a living death, though one must reasonably hesitate to apply this judgment to Jonathan. As for me, though my mourning may not be for this reason, it is not without reason. In the first place I bewail my own wounds and the loss this house has suffered; I bewail the needs of the poor, to whom Gerard was a father; I bewail above all the state of our whole Order, of our religious life, that derived no small support from your zeal, your wisdom and your example, O Gerard; and finally, though my mourning is not for you, it is because of you. My deepest wound is in the ardor of my love for you. And let no one embarrass me by telling me I am wrong in yielding to this feeling, when the kindhearted Samuel poured out the love of his heart for a reprobate king, and David for his parricidal son, without injury to their faith, without offending the judgment of God. Holy David cried out: "Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom!" And see, a greater than Absalom is here. Our Savior too, looking at Jerusalem and foreseeing its destruction, wept over it. And shall I not feel my own desolation that even now presses upon me? Shall I not grieve for the heavy blow so recently received? David's tears were tears of compassion, and shall I be afraid to weep in my suffering? At the tomb of Lazarus Christ neither rebuked those who wept nor forbade them to weep, rather he wept with those who wept. The Scripture says: "And Jesus wept." These tears were witnesses to his human kindness, not signs that he lacked trust. Moreover, he who had been dead came forth at once at his word, lest the manifestation of sorrow be thought harmful to faith.

2. Do you not see whence blackness appears on the Church's body, why persons of the greatest beauty are tainted by defects? It is because of the tents of Kedar, the waging of wearisome war, a life of prolonged misery, the distresses of bitter exile, in a word, a body that is both frail and burdensome: "for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthly tent burdens the thoughtful mind." Hence some souls long to die, that freed from the body, they may fly to the embraces of Christ. One of these unhappy people said out of his misery: "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" A man such as this is aware that one cannot dwell in a tent of Kedar and lead a pure life, free of stain, a life without a wrinkle, without some degree of blackness; so he longs to die and be divested of it. This is why the bride said she is black like the tents of Kedar. But how can she be beautiful like the curtains of Solomon? I feel that something beyond imagining, something sublime and sacred is so caught up in these curtains of Solomon, that I dare not approach them at all, except at the bidding of him who hid it there and sealed it. For I have read "he that is a searcher of majesty shall be overwhelmed by glory." So I shall not pursue the matter now, but leave it to another time. Meantime let it be your concern to ask this grace for me by your accustomed prayers, that we may return with greater confidence and greater eagerness to a subject that demands more than normal attention. And one may hope that a respectful knock will discover to us what rash curiosity could not achieve. Besides all that, the sorrow that oppresses me since my bereavement compels me to come to an end.

3. How long shall I keep my pretense while a hidden fire burns my sad heart, consumes me from within? A concealed fire creeps forward with full play, it rages more fiercely. I, whose life is bitterness, what have I to do with this canticle? Overpowering sorrow distracts my mind, the displeasure of the Lord drains my spirit dry. For when he was taken away, he who enabled me to attend to the study of spiritual doctrine so freely and so frequently, my heart departed from me too. But up till now I have done violence to myself and kept up a pretense, lest my affection should seem stronger than my faith. While others wept, I, as you could not but see, followed with dry eyes in the wake of the cruel bier, stood with dry eyes at the grave side till the last solemn funeral rite was performed. Clothed in priestly vestments, with my own mouth I recited the accustomed prayers over him till the end; with my own hands I cast the clay over the body of him I loved, destined soon to be at one with the clay. The eyes that beheld me were filled with tears, and the wonder was that I did not weep, since all took pity, not so much on him who had gone as on me who had lost him. Who would not be moved, even with iron for a heart, at seeing me there living on without my Gerard. All had experienced the loss, but regarded it as nothing in comparison with mine. And I? With all the force of faith that I could muster I resisted my feelings, striving, against my will, not to be vainly upset by what is but our natural destiny, a debt that all must pay by the law of our condition, by the command of God and his just judgment; the God we must fear because it is he who strikes, his will we must accept. Since then all the time I have forced myself to refrain from much weeping, though inwardly much troubled and sad. I could control my tears but could not control my sadness; in the Scripture's words: "I was troubled and did not speak." But the sorrow that I suppressed struck deeper roots within, growing all the more bitter, I realized, because it found no outlet. I confess, I am beaten. All that I endure within must needs issue forth. But let it be poured out before the eyes of my sons, who, knowing my misfortune, will look with kindness on my mourning and afford more sweet sympathy.

11. Would that I have not lost you, but have sent you on before me! Would that one day, however far off, I may follow you wherever you go! One cannot doubt but that you have gone to those whom you invited to sing God's praise in the middle of your last night on earth, when with face and voice all joyful, to the astonishment of those about you, you burst into that hymn of David: "Let heaven praise the Lord, praise him in the heights." Even then, for you, dear brother, the midnight dark was yielding to the dawn, the night was growing bright like the day. Surely that night was your light in your pleasures! I was summoned to witness this miracle, to see a man exulting in the hour of death, and mocking its onset. "O death, where is your victory?" A sting no longer but a shout of joy. A man dies while he sings, he sings by dying. Begetter of sorrow, you have been made a source of gladness; an enemy to glory, you have been made to contribute to glory; the gate of hell, you have been made the threshold of heaven; the very pit of perdition, you have been made a way of salvation, and that by a man who was a sinner. Justly too, because in your rashness you wickedly grasped at power over man in his state of innocence and justice. You are dead, O death, pierced by the hook you have incautiously swallowed, even as the Prophet said: "O death, I will be your death; O hell, I will be your destruction." Pierced by that hook, you open a broad and happy exit to life for the faithful who pass through your midst. Gerard had no fear of you, shadowy phantom that you are. Gerard passes on to his fatherland through your jaws, not only secure but filled with overflowing joy. So when I arrived, and heard him finishing the last verses of the Psalm in a clear voice, I saw him look toward heaven and say: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Sighing frequently, he repeated the same word: "Father, Father;" then turning to me, his face lit up with joy, he said: "How great the goodness of God, that he should become a father to men! How great a glory for men, that they are sons of God, heirs of God! For if sons, then heirs too." This is how he sang, the man we mourn for; and he could well have changed my mourning into song, for with my mind fixed on his glory, the sense of my own misery had begun to fade.

12. But the pang of sorrow quickly recalls me to myself from that serene vision; I am roused, as from a light sleep, by a gnawing anxiety. I continue to lament, but over my own plight, because reason forbids me to mourn for him. I feel that given the occasion, he would now say to us: "Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves."

10. My sons, forgive me; or better still, as sons, grieve for your father's misfortune. "Have pity on me, at least you my friends," for you can see how heavy the penalty I have received from God's hand for my sins. With the rod of his anger he struck me, justly because I deserve it, harshly because I can bear it. Can any man lightly say that I can get along without Gerard, unless he be ignorant of all that Gerard meant to me? I have no wish to repudiate the decrees of God, nor do I question that judgment by which each of us has received his due; he the crown he had earned, I the punishment I deserved. Shall I find fault with his judgment because I wince from the pain? This latter is but human, the former is impious. It is but human and necessary that we respond to our friends with feeling: that we be happy in their company, disappointed in their absence. Social intercourse, especially between friends, cannot be purposeless; the reluctance to part and the yearning for each other when separated, indicate how meaningful their mutual love must be when they are together.

I grieve for you, my dearest Gerard, not for the sake of grieving, but because you have been separated from me. Perhaps my grieving should be on my own account, because the cup I drink is bitter. And I grieve by myself because I drink by myself: for you cannot join me. All by myself I experience the sufferings that are shared equally by lovers when compelled to remain apart.

4. You, my sons, know how deep my sorrow is, how galling the wound it leaves. You are aware that a loyal companion has left me alone on the pathway of life: he who was so alert to my needs, so enterprising at work, so agreeable in his ways. Who was ever so necessary to me? Who ever loved me as he? My brother by blood, but bound to me more intimately by religious profession. Share my mourning with me, you who know these things. I was frail in body and he sustained me, faint of heart and he gave me courage, slothful and negligent and he spurred me on, forgetful and improvident and he gave me timely warning. Why has he been torn from me? Why snatched from my embraces, a man of one mind with me, a man according to my heart? We loved each other in life: how can it be that death separates us? And how bitter the separation that only death could bring about! While you lived when did you ever abandon me? It is totally death's doing, so terrible a parting. Who would dare refuse to spare so sweet a bond of mutual love -- who but death, that enemy of all that is sweet! Death indeed, so aptly named, whose rage has destroyed two lives in the spoliation of one. Surely this is death to me as well? Even more so to me, to whom continued life is more wretched than any form of death. I live, and I die in living: and shall I call this life? How much more kind, O cruel death, if you had deprived me of life itself rather than of its fruit! For life without fruit is a more terrible death. The tree that bears no fruit is faced with a twofold doom: the axe and the fire. And because you envied the works that I performed, you removed beyond my reach him who was both friend and neighbor; for if these works were fruitful it was because of his zeal. How much better for me then, O Gerard, if I had lost my life rather than your company, since through your tireless inspiration, your unflinching help and under your provident scrutiny I persevered with my studies of things divine. Why, I ask, have we loved, why have we lost each other? O cruel circumstance! But pity pertains to my lot only, not to his.

And the reason, dear brother, is that though you have lost your loved ones, you have found others more lovable still. As for me, already so miserable, what consolation remains to me, and you, my only comfort, gone? Our bodily companionship was equally enjoyable to both, because our dispositions were so alike; but only I am wounded by the parting. All that was pleasant we rejoiced to share; now sadness and mourning are mine alone: anger has swept over me, rage is fastened on me. Both of us were so happy in each other's company, sharing the same experiences, talking together about them; now my share of these delights has ceased and you have passed on, you have traded them for an immense reward.

5. What a harvest of joys, what a profusion of blessings is yours. In place of my insignificant person you have the abiding presence of Christ, and mingling with the angelic choirs you feel our absence no loss. You have no cause to complain that we have been cut off from you, favored as you are by the constant presence of the Lord of Majesty and of his heavenly friends. But what do I have in your stead? How I long to know what you now think about me, once so uniquely yours, as I sink beneath the weight of cares and afflictions, deprived of the support you lent to my feebleness! Perhaps you still give thought to our miseries, now that you have plunged into the abyss of light, become engulfed in that sea of endless happiness. It is possible that though you once knew us according to the flesh, you now no longer know us and because you have entered into the power of the Lord you will be mindful of his righteousness alone, forgetful of ours. Furthermore, "he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him," his whole being somehow changed into a movement of divine love. He no longer has the power to experience or relish anything but God, and what God himself experiences and relishes, because he is filled with God. But God is love, and the deeper one's union with God, the more full one is of love. And though God cannot endure pain, he is not without compassion for those who do; it is his nature to show mercy and pardon. Therefore you too must of necessity be merciful, clasped as you are to him who is Mercy; and though you no longer feel the need of mercy, though you no longer suffer, you can still be compassionate. Your love has not been diminished but only changed; when you were clothed with God you did not divest yourself of concern for us, for God is certainly concerned about us. All that smacks of weakness you have cast away, but not what pertains to love. And since love never comes to an end, you will not forget me for ever.

Therefore my request to every good man is that he look on me with kindness, and in a spirit of gentleness which is spiritual support to me in my lament. And I implore you, let not mere conventional respect, but your human affection, draw you to me in my sorrow. Day after day we see the dead bewailing their dead: floods of tears, but all to no purpose. Not that I condemn the affection they show, unless it be out of all proportion, but the reason that inspires it. The former springs from nature, the disturbance it causes is but a consequence of sin; the latter however is sinful vanity. Their weeping, if I mistake not, is solely for the loss of earthly glory, because of the misfortunes of the present life. Those who so weep should themselves be wept for. Can it be possible that I am one of them? My emotional outburst is certainly like theirs, but the cause, the intention, differs. I make no complaint at all about the ways of this world. But I do lament the loss of a loyal helper, one whose advice on the things of God was ever reliable. It is Gerard whom I weep for. Gerard is the reason for my weeping, my brother by blood, but closer by an intimate spiritual bond, the one who shared all my plans.

9. My soul cleaved to his. We were of one mind, and it was this, not blood relationship, that joined us as one. That he was my blood-brother certainly mattered; but our spiritual affinity, our similar outlooks and harmony of temperaments, drew us more close still. We were of one heart and one soul; the sword pierced both my soul and his, and cutting them apart, placed one in heaven but abandoned the other in the mire. I am that unhappy portion prostrate in the mud, mutilated by the loss of its nobler part, and shall people say to me: "Do not weep"? My very heart is torn from me and shall it be said to me: "Try not to feel it"? But I do feel it intensely in spite of myself, because my strength is not the strength of stones nor is my flesh of bronze. I feel it and go on grieving; my pain is ever with me. He who chastises me will never be able to accuse me of hardness and insensibility, like those of whom it was said: "You have struck them; they have not felt it." I have made public the depth of my affliction, I make no attempt to deny it. Will you say then that this is carnal? That it is human, yes, since I am a man. If this does not satisfy you then I am carnal. Yes, I am carnal, sold under sin, destined to die, subject to penalties and sufferings. I am certainly not insensible to pain; to think that I shall die, that those who are mine will die, fills me with dread. And Gerard was mine, so utterly mine. Was he not mine who was a brother to me by blood, a son by religious profession, a father by his solicitude, my comrade on the spiritual highway, my bosom friend in love? And it is he who has gone from me. I feel it, the wound is deep.

8. Alas! You have been taken away and these good offices too. All my delights, all my pleasures, have disappeared along with you. Already cares rush in upon me, troubles press about me on every side; manifold anxieties have found me companionless, and, since you departed, have stayed with me in my solitude. In my loneliness I groan under the burden. Because your shoulders are no longer there to support it, I must lay it down or be crushed. O, if I could only die at once and follow you! Certainly I would not have died in your stead, I would not deprive you of the glory that is yours. But to survive you can mean only drudgery and pain. My life, if you can call it that, will be one of bitterness and mourning; it will even be my comfort to endure this painful grief. I shall not spare myself, I shall even cooperate with the hand of the Lord: for "the hand of the Lord has touched me." It is I who am touched and stricken, not he, for it has but summoned him to repose; in cutting short his life it has brought me death. One can scarcely speak of him as dead! Was he not rather transplanted into life? At least what was for him the gateway to life is simply death to me; for by that death it is I who died, not he; he has but gone to sleep in the Lord. Flow on, flow on, my tears, so long on the point of brimming over; flow on, for he who dammed up your exit is here no longer. Let the floodgates of my wretched head be opened, let my tears gush forth like fountains, that they may perchance wash away the stains of those sins that drew God's anger upon me. When the Lord shall have been appeased in my regard, then perhaps I shall find the grace of consolation, but without ceasing to mourn: for "those who mourn shall be comforted."

6. It seems to me that I can almost hear my brother saying: "Can a woman forget the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet I will not forget you." This is how it must be. You know how I am situated, how dejected in spirit, how your departure has affected me; there is none to give me a helping hand.

In every emergency I look to Gerard for help, as I always did, and he is not there. Alas! then I can only sigh in my misery, like a man deprived of all resources. To whom shall I turn for advice when perplexed? In whom shall I confide when fortune is against me? Who will carry my burdens? Who will save me when danger threatens? Were not Gerard's eyes an unfailing guide to my feet? Were not my worries, O Gerard, better known to your heart than to mine, their inroads more penetrating, their pressure more acute? How often did you not free me from worldly conversations by the adroitness of your gifted words, and return me to the silence that I loved? The Lord endowed him with a discernment that enabled him to speak with due propriety and this prudence in his responses, accompanied by a certain graciousness given to him from above, made him acceptable both to his fellow monks and to people in the world, and anybody who spoke to Gerard had rarely need to see me. He made a point of meeting visitors to forestall and prevent them from inopportune intrusion on my solitude. When he did lack the competence to satisfy the needs of some, he brought them to me; the others he dealt with and dismissed. What a busy man he was! What a trustworthy friend!

Though always glad to be in the company of friends, he was never thereby prevented from answering the call of charity. Who ever went away from him empty-handed? The rich found enlightenment, the poor were given alms. Nor did he seek his own advantage, he who shouldered every burden that I might be free. In his great humility he hoped for more fruit from our quiet than if he himself had leisure. Yet he did sometimes ask to be discharged from his office, that a more efficient administrator might take over. But where could such a man be found? Charity alone, and not, as so often happens, mere wanton desire for position, detained him there. Nobody worked so hard as he, and nobody received less in return; and quite often, after he had supplied everybody's needs, he himself stood in need in many ways, for example in food and clothing. And when he knew that he was close to death, this is what he said: "O God, you know that in as far as it was possible for me I have wanted a tranquil life, the freedom to be with you. But fear of you, the community's will and my own desire to obey, and above all my deep love for one who was both my abbot and my brother, kept me involved in the business of the house. That is how it was. So I may thank you, dear brother, for what fruits may result from my studies of the things of God. What progress I have made, what good I have done, I owe to you. Your involvement in the business of the house gave me the leisure and privacy for more prayerful absorption in divine contemplation, for more thorough preparation of doctrine for my sons. Why should I not rest secure in my cell when I knew that you were my spokesman with the people, my right-hand man, the light of my eyes, my heart and my tongue? A tireless hand, a candid eye, a wise heart, a judicious tongue, just like Scripture says: "The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom and his tongue speaks what is right."

7. But why have I described Gerard as a mere external worker, as if he were ignorant of the interior life and devoid of spiritual gifts? Spiritual men who knew him knew that his words bore a spiritual aroma. His comrades knew that his dispositions and propensities were anything but worldly, they were alive with a spiritual power. Who was more uncompromising than he in the maintenance of discipline? Who were more austere in bodily mortification, more absorbed in contemplation, more skilled in discussion? How often when talking with him have I increased my knowledge; I who approached to enlighten him came away enlightened instead!

And no surprise that I should experience this, since men of learning and consequence testify to similar experiences when meeting with him. He had no knowledge of literature; but he possessed the intelligence that is its source and the Holy Spirit who is the mind's light. And whether the occasion was small or great, he displayed an equal standard of excellence. For example, did anything ever escape the skilled eye of Gerard in the buildings, in the fields, in gardening, in the water systems, in all the arts and crafts of the people of the countryside? With masterly competence he supervised the masons, the smiths, the farm workers, the gardeners, the shoemakers and the weavers. And yet, he whom all esteemed as supremely wise, was devoid of wisdom in his own estimation. One could mightily wish that so many people, all of them less than wise, would cease to expose themselves to that scriptural reproach: "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes." I speak to men who are aware of these facts, who know that finer things still might be said of him. I shall not say them however, because he is my blood-brother. But I do say without a qualm: I found him helpful above all others and in every situation, helpful on small occasions and great, in private and in public, in the world and in the cloister. It was only right that I should depend entirely on him, he was all in all to me. He left me little more than the name and honor of provider, he did the work. I was saluted as abbot, but he was the one who watched over all with solicitude. I could not but feel secure with a man who enabled me to enjoy the delights of divine love, to preach with greater facility, to pray without anxiety. I must repeat that through you, my dear brother, I enjoyed a peaceful mind and a welcome peace; my preaching was more effective, my prayer more fruitful, my study more regular, my love more fervent.