

THE ORCHARD BOOKS

THE  
SCALE OF  
PERFECTION

By Walter Hilton

*Translated into Modern English,  
with an introduction and notes  
by*

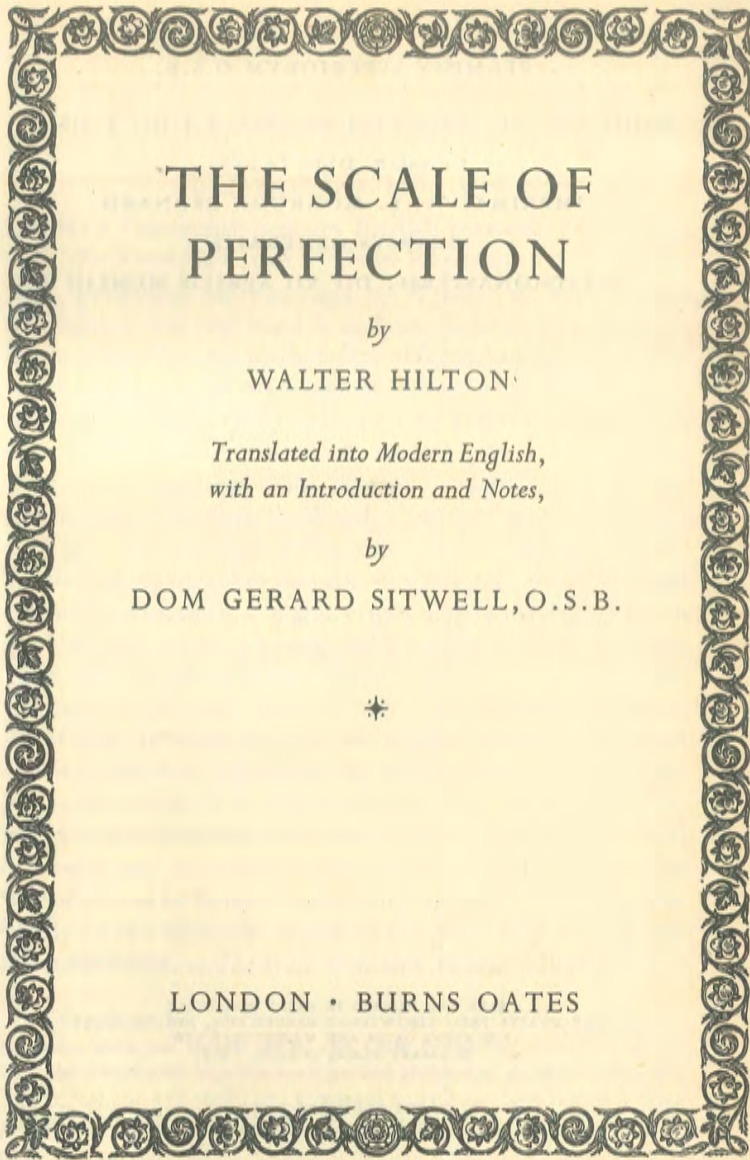
DOM GERARD SITWELL  
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"The Scale of Perfection" dates from the fourteenth century and copies of both the original English and a contemporary Latin version were rapidly multiplied. In 1494 King Henry VII's mother made Wynkyn de Worde print "this heavenly book, more precious than gold," and editions followed one another so rapidly that the eighth had already appeared by 1533. Its peculiar value lies in the fact that Hilton alone among the mystical writers of the period wrote specifically for the purpose of instruction and this treatise epitomizes the age in which he lived while borrowing whatever is best from the works of those who preceded him. It has, moreover, been said that "The Scale of Perfection" contains the very essence of the doctrine of St John of the Cross expounded several centuries later.

The present volume is a translation into modern English of the Middle English version printed by Wynkyn de Worde, and supplies a text intended for practical use, without archaisms yet not aggressively modern. The Introduction explains the aim of the edition and relates all one needs to know of the history of the book and of the author's life and the characteristics of his spirituality. There are notes at the end of each chapter which serve to illuminate the text.





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LONDON • BURNS OATES

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not exert himself, either interiorly only, by great fervour and constant desire and assiduous prayer and meditation, or else by both interior and exterior exercises, cannot be reformed in soul to the image of God.

## THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER

*That a man who will come to Jerusalem, that is the City of Peace, which is Contemplation, must have great humility and faith and suffer much hardship in body and soul*

SINCE you desire to know some way by which you can come nearer to reform in feeling, with the help of God I will tell you what seems to me to be the shortest and easiest way, and I will do so by taking the example of a pilgrim.<sup>1</sup>

A man wished to go to Jerusalem and, because he did not

<sup>1</sup> The comparison of the spiritual life to a pilgrimage is at least suggested in Scripture (Heb. xi. 13, and 1 Peter ii. 11), and it is found in St Augustine (*De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 4, 10 (P.L., xxxiv, col. 20, 21, 23)) though not developed at all in the way that it is here. We are perhaps apt to forget how relevant it was to the life of Hilton's day. For us the Canterbury Pilgrimage may appear little more than a literary device, but pilgrimage played a prominent part among the activities of fourteenth-century England. Remarkable evidence of the feats which the apparently most unlikely people could perform in this respect came to light with the publication of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London, 1936). Fr Baker incorporated this parable of the pilgrim in his *Sancta Sophia*, Tr. I, Sect. 1, chap. 6. Hilton stresses two points to which it is perhaps worth drawing attention: the necessity for (1) a strong determination to reach the goal; (2) humility and charity. The first is the whole point of the parable, the second is summed up in the saying that the pilgrim is recommended to repeat to himself: "Humility says, I am nothing, I have nothing. Charity says, I desire only one thing, and that is Jesus" (p. 194). With this should be compared what he says about the desire for Jesus in chap. 47 of Book I and about the necessity for humility and charity in chap. 51 of the same Book.

know the way there, he asked another man who, he hoped, would be able to tell him. This man replied that he would not be able to get there without great difficulty and labour, for the way, he said, is long and dangerous because of thieves and robbers, and there are many obstacles in the way of a man going there. Furthermore there are several roads that seem to lead to it, but every day men are slain and robbed and cannot reach their destination. There was however, he said, one road by which he would guarantee that a man should reach the city, Jerusalem, and never lose his life on the way. He would be robbed and beaten and suffer great distress, but his life would be saved. Then the pilgrim said, "As long as my life is spared and I come to the place I desire, I do not mind how much I have to suffer on the way. Whatever advice you give to me I will promise to carry it out." The other man replied, "Well, I will set you on the way. This is it, and you must carry out the instructions that I give you. Do not stop over anything that you hear, or see, or feel that would hinder you on your way. Make no pause for it, do not look at it, do not take pleasure in it, do not fear it. Keep on your way and have no aim but to be at Jerusalem, for that is what you desire and nothing but that. And if you are robbed, or beaten, or treated with contempt, do not resist, if you wish to keep your life. Put up with the harm you suffer and continue as though nothing had happened, lest you should suffer greater harm. And if men wish to keep you by telling you false tales to amuse you and turn you from your pilgrimage, do not listen and do not reply to them, but only say that you wish to be at Jerusalem. And if men offer you gifts and to make you rich with this world's goods, pay no heed to them, keep your mind always on Jerusalem. If you will keep to this way and do as I have said, I will answer for it that you will not be slain but that you will come to the place that you desire."

In the spiritual sense Jerusalem is the vision of peace<sup>2</sup> and represents contemplation in the perfect love of God. For contemplation is nothing else than the vision of Jesus, who is true peace. And if you desire to come to this blessed vision of true peace and to be a pilgrim to Jerusalem, I will put you on the way as far as I am able, even though I have never been there myself. The beginning of the way is reform in faith, and this, as I have said, is based on humility and faith and the laws of the Church. You can be assured that whatever sins you may have committed before, if you have been reformed by the sacrament of Penance according to the law of the Church, you are in the right way. Now if you wish to make good progress, there are two things that you must often have in mind, humility and charity. That is, I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire only one thing. The sense of these words must be your constant guide, even though the words themselves are not formulated in your mind, for that is not necessary. Humility says, I am nothing, I have nothing. Charity says, I desire only one thing, and that is Jesus. These two strings united by the thought of Jesus will produce harmony in the harp of your soul, when they are skilfully touched with the finger of reason. The lower you strike on one, the higher the other will sound. The less you feel that you are, or that you possess, through humility, the more you will desire to possess Jesus in love. I am not referring to the humility that a soul feels at the sight of its own sin or weakness and at the misery of this life, nor yet that which it feels at the sight of the virtues of other men, for though such humility is genuine and helpful, still it is harsh and worldly, not pure, and gentle, and charming. But I am referring to the humility that the soul feels through grace in the contempla-

<sup>2</sup> *Sicut Jerusalem interpretatur visio pacis, ita Sion speculatio, id est visio et contemplatio.* St Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.*, Ps. lxiv, n. 3 (P.L., xxxvi, col. 774).

tion of the infinite being and the great goodness of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> If you cannot yet see this with the eyes of your spirit, believe that it is so. For the knowledge of His being that comes through perfect faith or through contemplation will make you consider yourself not only the most miserable creature in existence, but as absolutely nothing, even though you had never committed a sin. And such humility is beautiful. For in comparison with Jesus, who is in truth all, you are nothing. And in the same way you ought to judge that you possess nothing, but are like an empty vessel that has no power to fill itself. For however many exterior and interior good works you perform, till you are conscious of the love of Jesus, you have nothing. For with that precious liquor only may your soul be filled and with no other. For since that alone is so precious, consider anything that you have and do as unable to satisfy you without the contemplation and the love of Jesus. Put everything else behind you and forget it that you may have that which is best.

A real pilgrim going to Jerusalem leaves house and lands, wife and children, and strips himself of all his possessions that he may go easily on his way without hindrance. In the same way, if you wish to be a spiritual pilgrim, you must strip yourself of all your possessions; good works as well as bad, you must put them all behind you, and make yourself so poor in spirit that you rest in no work of your own, but are always desiring the grace of greater love and are always seeking the spiritual presence of Jesus. If you do this then you are setting your heart wholly on being at Jerusalem and nowhere else but there. Your heart is wholly intent on having nothing but the love of Jesus and what spiritual vision

<sup>3</sup> Hilton will develop the distinction he makes here between humility which is the product of reason and that which is the result of contemplation in Bk. II, chap. 37. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chap. 13, has substantially the same teaching.

of Himself He will give you. It is for that alone that you were created and redeemed; that is your beginning and your end, your joy and your happiness. And therefore, whatever you possess, that is, however rich you may be in good works, hold it as nothing as long as you have not experienced this love of which I am speaking. If you keep this purpose before you and cling to it earnestly, it will bring you safe through the perils of your journey. Thieves and robbers may despoil and beat you, that is the evil spirits may attack you with various temptations, but your life will always be spared. In a word, if you will follow my instructions, you will escape all dangers and quickly come to the City of Jerusalem.

Now you are on the road and you know the name of the place to which you are going, so you may proceed with your journey. The setting-forth is nothing else than spiritual effort, and bodily too, as far as there is need. You may act, with discretion, in this way. Any bodily or spiritual occupation which is in accordance with your state of life, I consider suitable for you<sup>4</sup> provided that it furthers this desire to love Jesus that grace inspires in you, that it makes it more complete, more agreeable, and more effective in producing virtue. It may be praying<sup>5</sup> or meditating, reading or working, but as long as it strengthens your will to love Jesus and withdraws your mind and your affections from love of the world, it is good for you. And if it happens that through custom its virtue grows less, and you think another occupation will help you more, and that grace inspires you to it, then

<sup>4</sup> "What work that it be that thou should do, after the degree and the state that thou standest in bodily and ghostly." I have taken *bodily* and *ghostly* to refer to the work and not the state. The fifteenth-century Latin translation interprets the passage in the same way.

<sup>5</sup> The printed texts have *preaching*, which is evidently not a suitable occupation for an anchoress. There is, however, manuscript support for *praying* (Bodleian MS., Rawlinson C 285, and very likely others), and the Latin translation has *oratione*.

take it up and leave your former one. For though the desire of your heart for Jesus should be always unchanged, the spiritual exercises that you use in prayer or meditation to feed this desire may be various, and may well be changed according to the dispositions you find in yourself through grace.

The more sticks are laid on a fire the larger it is, and so the more different spiritual exercises that a man makes use of to enkindle his desire for God, the stronger and more burning it will be. If then you are free and are not bound by any particular rule, consider carefully the occupation that is best fitted to you and that furthers most this desire for Jesus, and give yourself to that. Do not tie yourself unchangeably to bodily practices that might hinder your freedom of heart in loving Jesus, if grace visits you in a special way. Anything that leads to the acquirement of virtue and hindering of sin is always good and must not be given up, for you must always practise humility and patience, temperance and chastity, and the other virtues. But any practice that gets in the way of a better is to be left when time and opportunity offers. For example, if a man is accustomed to say so many rosaries, or to meditate in a certain way for a certain time, or to watch or kneel for so long, or to perform any other bodily action, these practices are to be omitted sometimes for a reasonable cause, or if a different and greater grace is given.

## THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER

*How a man who is on this road will have enemies to fight against, and how he must overcome them by the knowledge of our Lord Jesus, by confession, and contrition, and satisfaction*

Now that you are on the way and know how you ought to go beware of enemies who will do their best to hinder you if they can. What they seek is to put out of your heart this desire and longing that you have for the love of Jesus, for there is nothing that pains them more. And they will endeavour to drive you back to the love of temporal pleasures. These enemies are principally the desires of the flesh and vain fears which arise in your heart because of the corruption of human nature. These things will hinder your desire for the love of God and engross your heart, and they are your greatest enemies. There are others too; evil spirits that are full of tricks to deceive you. But there is one remedy, as I said before; whatever they say, do not believe them, but keep steadily on and desire nothing but the love of Jesus. Always answer: I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire only one thing, and that is the love of Jesus.

Do not believe these enemies of yours, if to begin with they disturb you by suggesting that your confessions have not been good, that there is some former sin unconfessed that you are unaware of, and therefore that leaving your desire you must turn back on the road and go and make a better confession. They are not speaking the truth, and there is nothing wrong with your confessions. Believe firmly that you are on the right road and that there is no need for you to examine your past confessions. Hold on your way and fix your mind on Jerusalem. And again, if they say that you are not worthy to have the love of God, and why should you desire

that which you cannot obtain and do not deserve to obtain, do not pay any attention to them. Continue on your way and say, "Not because I am worthy but because I am unworthy, I desire the love of God; for if I had it, it would make me worthy. And since I was created for this end, I will seek it even though I never attain it, and will pray for it and believe that in the end I may come to it." If your enemies see that you are growing bold and confident in your effort, they will begin to be afraid of you.

But as long as you are on the road they will not cease to trouble you—threatening and menacing you on the one hand, and flattering you and offering false pleasures on the other, to make you give up your purpose and turn back. They will say, "If you continue to strive after this desire for Jesus with as much effort as you began, you will become ill, or fall into delusions or madness, as you see happens to some; or you will be reduced to poverty, or suffer some physical mishap, and no one will be willing to come to your aid; or you will be assailed by secret temptations which you cannot surmount. It is a dangerous thing for a man to leave the world and give himself wholly to the love of God, and to seek nothing else. Many unknown dangers may overwhelm him. Return therefore and give up this desire, which you will never be able to achieve, and act like other men in the world."

This is what your enemies will say, but do not believe them. Continue in your desire and repeat always that it is Jesus that you would have and Jerusalem where you would be. They will see then that you are determined, that you will not give up because of sin or illness, delusions or madness, fear of spiritual temptations, misfortune or poverty, not for life or for death. They will see that you seek only one thing and are deaf to all they have to say, that you keep firmly to your prayers and other spiritual exercises without any re-

laxation, but with discretion according to the advice of your superior or of your spiritual director, and they will be angered and begin to attack you more vigorously. They will rob you and beat you and put you to all the shame they can. You will begin to experience this when all your actions, however good they may be, are judged to be bad by other men, and taken amiss. Anything that you wish to do, whether for the good of your body or of your soul, will be thwarted, and you will fail in all your most reasonable aims.<sup>1</sup> And their hope in all this is that you will be moved to anger or melancholy or ill-will against your neighbour.

But against all these troubles, or any others that may come on you, use this remedy. Think of Jesus, do not get angry over your trials, do not dwell on them, but recall your teaching that you are nothing, you have nothing, anything that you lose of temporal goods is in fact no loss, and you desire nothing but the love of Jesus. Keep on your way to Jerusalem without making any change in your way of acting. And if at times you are troubled by your own weakness and the inconveniences that arise through the ill-will of men or the malice of the devil, as soon as you can, recollect yourself, cease thinking about your difficulties and continue with your work. Do not dwell too long on your troubles lest your enemies profit by them.

<sup>1</sup> The general difficulties described in this and the following chapter are to be connected with the suffering described in chap. 28 which will occur in what Hilton calls the period of justification (see n. 4 to that chapter). In particular it may be noted that the experience of failure and misrepresentation described in this passage is frequently met with in the lives of the saints.