

# HAPPY AND UNHAPPY THEOLOGIANS

I

A mayo woman once said to me, "I knew a servant girl who hung herself for the love of God. She was lonely for the priest and her society,<sup>1</sup> and hung herself to the banisters with a scarf. She was no sooner dead than she became white as a lily, and if it had been murder or suicide she would have become black as black. They gave her Christian burial, and the priest said she was no sooner dead than she was with the Lord. So nothing matters that you do for the love of God." I do not wonder at the pleasure she has in telling this story, for she herself loves all holy things with an ardour that brings them quickly to her lips. She told me once that she never hears anything described in a sermon that she does not afterwards see with her eyes. She has described to me the gates of Purgatory as they showed themselves to her eyes, but I remember nothing of the description except that she could not see the souls in trouble but only the gates. Her mind continually dwells on what is pleasant and beautiful. One day she asked me what month and what flower were the most beautiful. When I answered that I did not know, she said, "the month of May, because of the Virgin, and the lily of the valley, because it never sinned, but came pure out of the rocks," and then she asked, "what is the cause of the three cold months of winter?" I did not know even that, and so she said, "the sin of man and the vengeance of God." Christ Himself was not only blessed, but perfect in all manly proportions in her eyes, so much do beauty and holiness go together in her thoughts. He alone of all men was exactly six feet high, all others are a little more or a little less.

Her thoughts and her sights of the people of faery are pleasant and beautiful too, and I have never heard her call them the Fallen Angels. They are people like ourselves, only better-looking, and many and many a time she has gone to the window to watch them drive their waggons through the sky, waggon behind waggon in long line, or to the door to hear them singing and dancing in the Forth. They sing chiefly, it seems, a song called "The Distant Waterfall," and though they once knocked her down she never thinks badly of them. She saw them most easily when she was in service in King's County, and one morning a little while ago she said to me, "Last night I was waiting up for the master and it was a quarter-past eleven. I heard a bang right down on the table. 'King's County all over,' says I, and I laughed till I was near dead. It was a warning I was staying too long. They wanted the place to themselves." I told her once of somebody who saw a faery and fainted, and she said, "It could not have been a faery, but some bad thing, nobody could faint at a faery. It was a demon. I was not afraid when they near put me, and the bed under me, out through the roof. I wasn't afraid either when you were at some work and I heard a thing coming flop-flop up the stairs like an eel, and squealing. It went to all the doors. It could not get in where I was. I would have sent it through the universe like a flash of fire. There was a man in my place, a tearing fellow, and he put one of them down. He went out to meet it on the road, but he must have been told the words. But the faeries are the best neighbours. If you do good to them they will do good to you, but they don't like you to be on their path." Another time she said to me, "They are always good to the poor."

II

There is, however, a man in a Galway village who can see nothing but wickedness. Some think him very holy, and others think him a little crazed, but some of his talk reminds one of those old Irish visions of the Three Worlds, which are supposed to have given Dante the plan of the Divine Comedy. But I could not imagine this man seeing Paradise. He is especially angry with the people of faery, and describes the faun-like feet that are so common among them, who are indeed children of Pan, to prove them children of Satan. He will not grant that "they carry away women, though there are many that say so," but he is certain that they are "as thick as the sands of the sea about us, and they tempt poor mortals."

He says, "There is a priest I know of was looking along the ground like as if he was hunting for something, and a voice said to him, 'If you want to see them you'll see enough of them,' and his eyes were opened and he saw the ground thick with them. Singing they do be sometimes, and dancing, but all the time they have cloven feet." Yet he was so scornful of unchristian things for all their dancing and singing that he thinks that "you have only to bid them begone and they will go. It was one night," he says, "after walking back from Kinvara and down by the wood beyond I felt one coming beside me, and I could feel the horse he was riding on and the way he lifted his legs, but they do not make a sound like the hoofs of a horse. So I stopped and turned around and said, very loud, 'Be off!' and he went and never troubled me after. And I knew a man who was dying, and one came on his bed, and he cried out to it, 'Get out of that, you unnatural animal!' and it left him. Fallen angels they are, and after the fall God said, 'Let there be Hell,' and there it was in a moment." An old woman who was sitting by the fire joined in as he said this with "God save us, it's a pity He said the word, and there might have been no Hell the day," but the seer did not notice her words. He went on, "And then he asked the devil what would he take for the souls of all the people. And the devil said nothing would satisfy him but the blood of a virgin's son, so he got that, and then the gates of Hell were opened." He understood the story, it seems, as if it were some riddling old folk tale.

"I have seen Hell myself. I had a sight of it one time in a vision. It had a very high wall around it, all of metal, and an archway, and a straight walk into it, just like what 'ud be leading into a gentleman's orchard, but the edges were not trimmed with box, but with red-hot metal. And inside the wall there were cross-walks, and I'm not sure what there was to the right, but to the left there were five great furnaces, and they full of souls kept there with great chains. So I turned short and went away, and in turning I looked again at the wall, and I could see no end to it.

"And another time I saw Purgatory. It seemed to be in a level place, and no walls around it, but it all one bright blaze, and the souls standing in it. And they suffer near as much as in Hell, only there are no devils with them there, and they have the hope of Heaven.

"And I heard a call to me from there, 'Help me to come out o' this!' And when I looked it was a man I used to know in the army, an Irishman, and from this county, and I believe him to be a descendant of King O'Connor of Athenry.

"So I stretched out my hand first, but then I called out, 'I'd be burned in the flames before I could get within three yards of you.' So then he said, 'Well, help me with your prayers,' and so I do.

"And Father Connellan says the same thing, to help the dead with your prayers, and he's a very clever man to make a sermon, and has a great deal of cures made with the Holy Water he brought back from Lourdes."

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1. The religious society she had belonged to.
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