

OUR LADY OF THE HILLS

When we were children we did not say at such a distance from the post-office, or so far from the butcher's or the grocer's, but measured things by the covered well in the wood, or by the burrow of the fox in the hill. We belonged then to God and to His works, and to things come down from the ancient days. We would not have been greatly surprised had we met the shining feet of an angel among the white mushrooms upon the mountains, for we knew in those days immense despair, unfathomed love—every eternal mood,—but now the draw-net is about our feet. A few miles eastward of Lough Gill, a young Protestant girl, who was both pretty herself and prettily dressed in blue and white, wandered up among those mountain mushrooms, and I have a letter of hers telling how she met a troop of children, and became a portion of their dream. When they first saw her they threw themselves face down in a bed of rushes, as if in a great fear; but after a little other children came about them, and they got up and followed her almost bravely. She noticed their fear, and presently stood still and held out her arms. A little girl threw herself into them with the cry, "Ah, you are the Virgin out o' the picture!" "No," said another, coming near also, "she is a sky faery, for she has the colour of the sky." "No," said a third, "she is the faery out of the foxglove grown big." The other children, however, would have it that she was indeed the Virgin, for she wore the Virgin's colours. Her good Protestant heart was greatly troubled, and she got the children to sit down about her, and tried to explain who she was, but they would have none of her explanation. Finding explanation of no avail, she asked had they ever heard of Christ? "Yes," said one; "but we do not like Him, for He would kill us if it were not for the Virgin." "Tell Him to be good to me," whispered another into her ear. "We would not let me near Him, for dad says I am a divil," burst out a third.

She talked to them a long time about Christ and the apostles, but was finally interrupted by an elderly woman with a stick, who, taking her to be some adventurous hunter for converts, drove the children away, despite their explanation that here was the great Queen of Heaven come to walk upon the mountain and be kind to them. When the children had gone she went on her way, and had walked about half-a-mile, when the child who was called "a divil" jumped down from the high ditch by the lane, and said she would believe her "an ordinary lady" if she had "two skirts," for "ladies always had two skirts." The "two skirts" were shown, and the child went away crestfallen, but a few minutes later jumped down again from the ditch, and cried angrily, "Dad's a divil, mum's a divil, and I'm a divil, and you are only an ordinary lady," and having flung a handful of mud and pebbles ran away sobbing. When my pretty Protestant had come to her own home she found that she had dropped the tassels of her parasol. A year later she was by chance upon the mountain, but wearing now a plain black dress, and met the child who had first called her the Virgin out o' the picture, and saw the tassels hanging about the child's neck, and said, "I am the lady you met last year, who told you about Christ." "No, you are not! no, you are not! no, you are not!" was the passionate reply. And after all, it was not my pretty Protestant, but Mary, Star of the Sea, still walking in sadness and in beauty upon many a mountain and by many a shore, who cast those tassels at the feet of the child. It is indeed fitting that man pray to her who is the mother of peace, the mother of dreams, and the mother of purity, to leave them yet a little hour to do good and evil in, and to watch old Time telling the rosary of the stars.