

Of the Churl Who Won Paradise

translated by Isabel Butler

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We find in writing a wondrous adventure that of old befell a churl. He died of a Friday morning, and it so chanced neither angel nor devil came thither, and at the hour of his death when the soul departed out of his body, he found none to ask aught of him or to lay any command upon him. Know ye that full glad was that soul for he was sore afraid. And now as he looked to the right towards Heaven, he saw Saint Michael the Archangel who was bearing a soul in great joy; forthright he set out after the angel, and followed him so long, meseemeth, that he came into Paradise.

Saint Peter who kept the gate, received the soul borne by the angel, and after he had so done, turned back towards the entrance. There he found the soul all alone, and asked him who had brought him thither:

"For herein none hath lodging and if he have it not by judgment.

Moreover, by Saint Alain, we have little love for churls, for into this place the vile may not enter." "Yet greater churl than you yourself is there none, fair Sir Peter," saith the soul, "for you were ever harder than a stone; and by the holy Paternoster God did folly when he made you his apostle, little honour shall be his thereby, in that three times you denied your Lord. Full little was your faith when thrice you denied him, and though you be of his fellowship, Paradise is not for you. Go forth, and that straightway, ye disloyal soul, but I am true and of good faith, and bliss is rightfully mine."

Strangely shamed was Saint Peter; quickly he turned away, and as he went, he met Saint Thomas, to whom he told all his misadventure word for word, and all his wrath and bitterness. Then saith Saint Thomas: "I myself will go to this churl; here he shall not abide, and it please God."

So he goeth into the square to the countryman. "Churl," quoth the apostle, "this dwelling belongeth of right to us and to the martyrs and confessors; wherein have you done such righteousness that you think to abide in it? Here you cannot stay, for this is the hostel of the true-hearted." "Thomas, Thomas, like unto a man of law ye are over quick to make answer; yet are not you he who, as is well known, spake with the apostles when they had seen the Lord after his resurrection?

Then you made oath that never would you believe it and if you felt not his wounds with your hands; false and unbelieving were ye." Then Saint Thomas hung his head, and yielded him in the dispute; and thereafter he went to Saint Paul and told him of his discomfiture. "By my head," quoth Saint Paul, "I will go thither, and try if he will argue."

Meantime, the soul who feareth not destruction taketh his delight down in Paradise. "Soul," quoth Saint Paul, "who brought thee hither, and wherein have you done such righteousness that the gate should be opened to you? Get you gone out of Paradise, you false churl." "How is this, Don Paul of the bald pate, are you now so wrathful who erst was so fell a tyrant? Never will there be another so cruel; Saint Stephen paid dear for it when you had him stoned to death. Well know I the story of your life; through you many a brave man died, but in the end God gave you a good big blow. Have we not had to pay for the bargain and the buffet? Ha, what a divine and what a saint! Do ye think that I know you not?" Then had Saint Paul great sorrow.

Swiftly he went thence, and met Saint Thomas who was taking counsel with Saint Peter, and privately he told him of the churl who had so vanquished him: "Rightfully hath he won Paradise of me, and I grant it to him." Then all three went to bring complaint to God. Fairly Saint Peter told him of the churl who had spoken shame of them: "By his tongue hath he silenced us, and I myself was so abashed that never again will I speak thereof." Then spoke Our Lord: "I will go thither, for I myself would hear this new thing."

He cometh to the soul and bespeaketh him, and asked how it chanced that he had come there without leave: "For herein without consent hath no soul, whether of man or woman, ever entered. My apostles you have slandered and scorned and outraged, yet none the less you think to abide here!" "Lord," saith the churl, "if judgment be accorded me, my right to dwell here is as good as theirs: for never did I deny you, or doubt you, nor did any man ever come to his death through me, but all these things have they done, and yet are now in Paradise. While I lived on earth my life was just and upright; I gave of my bread to the poor, I harboured them morning and evening, I warmed them at my fire, and saw that they lacked not for shirt or hose; I kept them even till death, and bore them to holy church: and now I know not if I did wisely.

Furthermore, I made true confession, and received your body with due rites; and we are told that to the man

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who so dies God forgiveth his sins.

Well know you if I speak the truth. I entered in and was not denied, and now I am here, why go hence? Were it so, you would gainsay your word, for surely you have declared that whoso entereth here goeth not out again; and you would never lie because of me." "Churl," saith the Lord, "I grant it. You have made good your case against Paradise, and have won it by debate. You were brought up in a good school; ready of tongue are you, and know right well how to turn a tale."

The countryman saith in proverb that many a man who hath sought wrong hath won it by argument; wit hath falsified justice, and falsity hath conquered nature; wrong goeth before and right falleth behind. Wit is mightier than force.