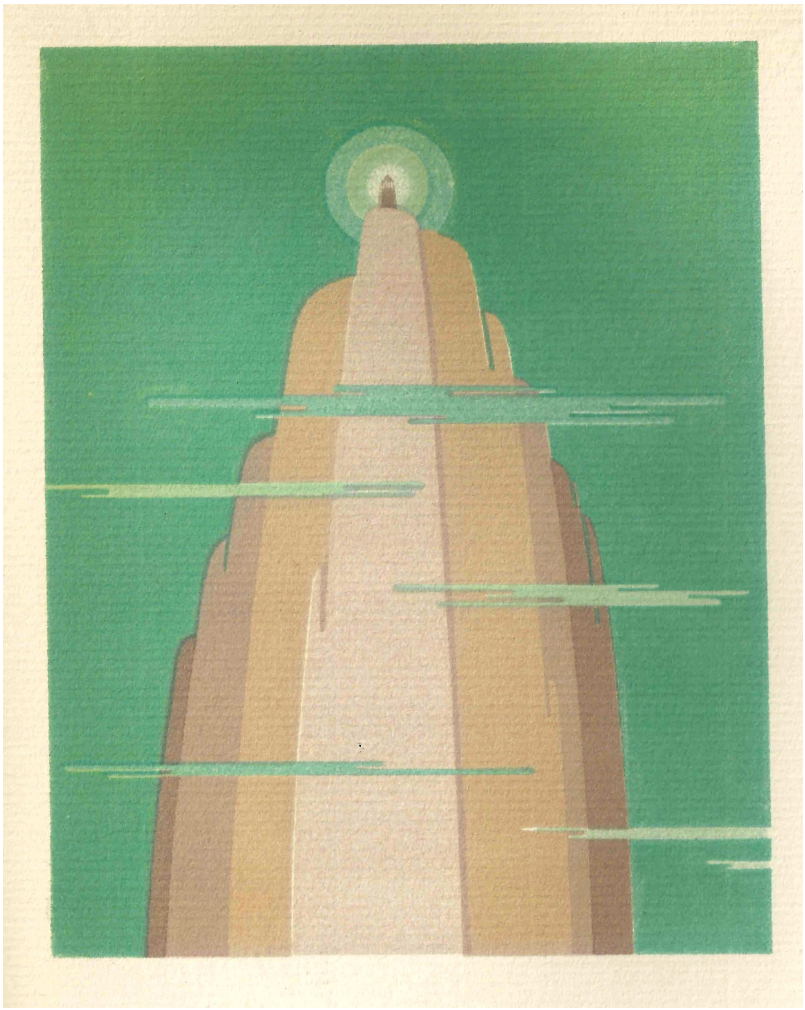
THE SAINT AND THE FOREST-GODS



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THE SAINT AND THE FOREST-GODS

NANROSSA TOWER is far and far in the wilderness; you should journey hundreds of miles from it in any direction before you came to cultivated land. And then only to forest villages, with their few acres of tilled clearing: mere islands on the great sea of trees or heather, and all governed by Forest Law, and subject to the Court Leet of the Verderors. Dear knows what law or ruling might hold between Nanrossa and the farther bounds of the mountain region Finismond westward: none human, certainly. None human, either, eastward thence over the Bog of Elfinmere, where no man comes; and whose writ shall run among coot and bittern and waterhen? Five hundred miles of reedy lakes, with here and there an eyot—aldered for the most part, but the larger of them oak-grown sometimes; leagues on leagues of mossland, emerald green or bronze or golden, and utterly treacherous to the footsole; yellow irises and quietude and the darting of the dragonfly; long desolations of black quagmire; pleasant places for the crane and the heron; rush-rimmed pools for the frog's diving, the waterfly's sliding, the glassing of heaven and its blueness and wandering clouds: this, and solitude for five hundred miles, and the silence of all human voices; lay eastward from Nanrossa, on the Babylon side, before you should come to any abode of man, or indeed, habitable region.

The tower stands high on its crag; yet before Saint Cilian came there I doubt if human eyes had lighted on it since ancient and forgotten times;—since the Soldan's Son of Babylon rode by there, for example, when he quested Mirath Grief-of-Hearts and the enchantment that withered the world; or at least since Varglon Fflamlas came there seeking the Secret Mountain of the Gods. From the face of the marsh one might see it; but from nowhere, I think, on the floor of the forest; by reason of the roofage of verdure or thick fretwork of winter tree-tops overhead, even on the highest of the hills; open glades there are none in those parts. To the heron, flying eastward from his high nest to his hunting-ground in the marsh, it would be the landmark of landmarks; but if any forester were to stray or venture so deep into the haunts of wizardry, he might pass right under it without dreaming of its nearness. But then, none ever did come into the Hills of Nanrossa; you are not to suppose it for an instant. There are places where human beings do not go; or so rarely that it is the same thing.

Sheer fell the crag two hundred feet from the bases of the tower down into the Gap of Nanrossa; through which, you will remember, ran the Old Road to Camelot; the stones wherewith the Giants of the elder world had paved it for King Arthur long since covered deep in green turf. The Gap itself is not so wide but that one might shoot an arrow from the tower to the hill-side opposite; and the great tide of the forest, that covers all these hills, flows down

through it to the very edge of the bogland, a quarter mile beyond; so that from the tower one sees nothing of the road, but only the rustling billows of leafage below, or in winter the bare purple-brown tops of the beeches and oaks. As for the Old Road, it goes right through Elfinmere; there, too, in places feet below the surface: which partly accounts for the fewness of the men who have come into the forest from Babylon, in these last two or three hundred thousand years.

But if men be few in those parts, of Immortals, why, there be lords many and gods many certainly. For this is all a very magical region; and you should hear, if you have the ears or the gift for it, strange windings of the horn, by day and night, among the wooded Hills of Nanrossa; you should feel at noonday the passage of serene presences among the great trees; and see at twilight, perhaps, shadowy flame-forms of azure and purple nimbussed marvellously passing a-gleam over shining meres in the marshland, setting a hush and quiver of adoration on reeds and rushes and alder-leaves. Or you might see wondrous beings, breathless, intent, beautiful, when dawn like a shining kingcup bloomed out of radiant soft mists of iris-grey and lavender: Gods of the marshes, wide-eyed and meditative; or again, you might see among the trees the little Rain-Gods of the forest, that go hurrying away for ever quietly over the gracious dripping fern and the dark greenness of the hollies. Always, if you were gifted for the seeing, of course! For these Nanrossa

Hills and this Bog of Elfinmere are, I think, the very archeus of all woodland God-dom; and therefore it is but fitting they should be shunned and feared by men. I cast about in my mind, and can think of no other part of the forest, so far as I have explored it, so thronged with the strange Masters of Woodland Beauty. Finismond is terrible; and the Mountains of the Dwarfs are wild and weird too, and will keep in your memory, once you have seen them, through perhaps a score of lives; and all the country round Mirath's Tower is very famous for the things of light and shadow and the wandering sparks or stars that whirl in dance through the dusk; but give me Nanrossa Hills for the Gods of the Forest . . . who keep their chosen places secret and sacred at all times, tempting no discoverers, offering no lure to trade, but to remain a blank on all maps—until the Gods desire to leave them in quest of new lands that have been prepared.

Who built Nanrossa Tower? That same vanished race, I think, that made the Old Road for Arthur between Camelot his city and foreign Babylon: giants or dwarfs that held the forest of old time, before the Gods came into Nanrossa and made the hills and marshes their own. There at any rate Saint Cilian found it, when driven by faith he journeyed out of the Great City to that (to him) westward far rim of the world; there, I think, you should find it now. But to go back to my saint: in his days Camelot was the merest tradition in Babylon, and perhaps even that only with the most superstitious. So westward

towards nothing, towards the end of things, seven years Saint Cilian journeyed, seeking a site for supreme spiritual adventures ; until at last there between the hills and the mere he knew he had come into the realm he sought.

I cannot say how or why the unseen guardians of the place—I do not mean the Gods—came to let him pass. Certainly his faith was transcendent—and unselfish, as you shall hear; perhaps there was a quality in it that disarmed or even appealed to them. At any rate he found the tower, and found it weather-tight and habitable, as it is (I doubt not) to this day. Three storeys, and a stone staircase within: first, a room like a cave, half underground, with a kind of hearth and opening in the wall for a flue on the western side; no casements here, but all the light through the doorless doorway on the south. Here one could make one's fire, do such cooking and eating as might be necessary, live during the daytime (on wet days), and entertain stray wanderers should any chance to seek shelter in passing. Above, and reachable by the uneven staircase built out from the wall in the lower room, a cell-like bare chamber where one might lay one's bedding of dry bracken; a trap-door over the opening by which one entered secured one by night from over-lusty visitations of the wind, and from such prowling things as can climb stairs; there were no casements here again, but light—such as it was—from the stair-opening into the floor above. For there, in that topmost room, was light in plenty: the peak of the sloped in-curving roof was all a vast crystal,

and the walls were open to the winds, a matter of pillars and arches. One could look forth thence over half a hundred miles of the marsh or the whole length of the great range of forest hills: it was the chamber of chambers for Saint Cilian's devotions, as you shall hear; and for them, and for them only, he used it.

They were by no means of a common kind; nor had been at any time since he came to Nanrossa to fight the battles of the Lord. He was a young man then: too nervously high-strung, and his heart all in the other-world. There had been kindly women-folk about him at home: a mother who fain would have persuaded him to do his battling in Babylon—as if that were possible; a young wife who watched his inward unpeace with agonized anxiety; gentle sisters, Muriel, Elaine and Rosemary. There were strong forbearing brothers also: tall Philibert, Vanfred and Egan: soldiers the two younger, and the eldest a merchant; all three, very kindly and patiently, trying to win him into the unillumined, or as they said into the *sane* walks of life. All in vain! Nothing would serve Cilian but sainthood; which, heaven knew (or Cilian did), was not to be won in Babylon. In that rose-hued gorgeous opulence of shame and glory there was no peace to fight the battles of the Lord; you must have loneliness and the desert where the demons are. You must look deeper for the root of evil than in mere human sins and splendours: *Good and Evil* was as much as to say *Churchdom and Pagandom*. Here were the saints and angels of

the one; there, the Gods—say devils—of the other: which were, thought young Cilian, the two eternal elements in the Battles of the Lord; and therefore would he seek out the Gods of the pagan in their own haunts, and in the name of Monotheos blast and wither them with daily curses. By multiplied anathema he doubted not—possessing faith to shame any grain of self-respecting mustard-seed,—either to make existence much too hot for them, or else to drive them penitent into the folds of the Church. Then would the Lord have triumphed for ever; sin would wilt upon its broken stalk; and humanity, by no effort of its own so to say, would be irretrievably redeemed. I declare to you that such was Saint Cilian's idea when he set forth from the great city, and when he came at length to my Nanrossa Hills and Tower, and went to work.

Every dawn would find him in that topmost chamber, his face turned eastward towards the marsh, busily cursing the Gods whose homes were in Elfinmere; every sunset would find him there, facing the splendour or quietude above the hills, and fulminating wrathful hot comminations against the Masters of the Forest's Beauty. At first it produced a mighty eloquence in him, such as none nowadays might hope to rival. The words leaped from his lips lurid and blasting; it was at least a year before any squirrel within earshot became used to it, and unafraid. A terrible time, one would think, for the poor deities; and a marvel that any one of them should have survived a month of it; since the Church knew no dreadful formula but Saint Cilian rolled

it forth twice daily, all in that rich, turgid, bristling ' Babylonish dialect ' of the priestly hierarchy which is so effective in such cases; and besides these he had a many, and choicely bloodcurdling ones, of his own. It should have been fearfully effective, you would say; but the truth is the Gods have much business to attend to; and their ears, I take it, are not attuned to all kinds of hearing. It was forty years before they discovered him at all.

Forty years of Their sweet rain and sunshine and mists, Their nights starry or storm-ridden; forty years of wandering in the hallowed places, seeking whinberries and wortleberries, cranberries and blackberries and mushrooms, or gathering bracken for his bed, or fallen boughs for his firing; or of paddling on the mere in his hollowed log, or wading after eels; forty years of silence (save for the daily anathematizing), and of solitude (save for the wild things of the forest): had wrought a deal of change in Saint Cilian. He was no longer the sickly neuropath, but physically strong and wholesome; the Church was separated from him by infinite horizons; churchly bitterness had grown quite dim in him; the daily cursings had become mechanical. Had you listened, you should have heard the words jumbled not a little, one stumbling against the other: faith no longer prompted them, but mindless habit. Indeed, thought (or what commonly goes by the name) was coming to be silenced in him entirely, and giving place to the moods we share with the Mighty Mother. Slowly the forest influences penetrated him; slowly the wonder of

the sky, the mystery of the marshland, sunk into his being. The murmur of the trees wrought in him more than peace; when the evenings of August brooded golden over the beech-tops he heard the Ancient breathing amidst the hills. When the faint rose dawns of winter blushed over the dim whiteness of mists and snows, he knew what wizard divinity broods pondering over the faint world. He forgot the battles of the Lord, and came instead into that ' which passeth all understanding '; the acridity of religion, transmuted, had become in him kindliness and wonder. The wounded wolf would limp into his day-chamber, and he would tend it and heal its wounds; the rabbits would patter in, in the quiet of the evening, creep on to his knees or under his hands, and nestle against him as he sat before his fire; and they would watch the flame or red glow without fear, and nourish upon his silent friendliness heaven knows what dim rabbitish cogitations, as though they had been children listening to fairytales from him. The squirrels he had frightened so at first, now might be found at any time a-perch upon his shoulder. The shyest of fawns would walk beside him in the woods, his arm caressingly about the neck of her; the great red stag, coming upon him brooding among the many mossy roots of a beechtree, would nuzzle him, appealing to be stroked, or to have its splendid head patted or scratched. Even the wild boar would take crab-apples friendlily from his hand; and the mother beasts would bring their young about him, and be quite untroubled when he picked up the little ones to pet them.

He had become clean, whole and natural; wholesome part and parcel of the life of the forest and the mere.

Then at last, when all religious taint had gone from him, and he knew no emotion but forest wonder and worship and love, the Gods became aware of his existence. Borion of the Golden Flame, who rides westward over the marshes at daybreak, heard his voice at the jargonned cursing in Nanrossa Tower, and stopped and looked curiously at him: 'A saint, to judge by crucifix and rosary,' mused Borion; 'and yet——' Then at last, when Cilian went up to the high ridge to gather cones, Phenit Fireheart, the Fir-God, saw him—walking side by side with a wild sow, and cooing and chuckling very amicably to her piglings. Then at last wise Darron the Aged discovered him—asleep one summer afternoon under the oaks of Darron's own inmost and holiest grove; Cilian must have dozed or meditated there a thousand times before, but this was the first the Oak-God had seen of him. And Taimaz the Dew-Queen became aware of him, among the bracken on the margin of the marsh; and far out on the mere, Gwernlas, Lady of the Alders, learnt to discern his presence as he paddled his log among her islands, fishing, or as he waded in the shallow places after the eels;—and for the Gods to be aware of a man, is for the Gods to love him, as I guess. And from these the rumour went up to the council of the Major Deities that there was one in the forest, not immortal of race as they were; that spoke, when he spoke at all—at daybreak and sunset—in a tongue incomprehensible even

to those Gods who knew all human languages;—one whose cross and beads proclaimed him a saint, but who was quite harmless and fit for the forest nonetheless.

Thereafter word went forth that note should be taken of this strange Saint Cilian, and a measure of inspiration lent him. So divine visitants sometimes would gather and listen whilst he cursed them: they would hover unseen about the tower as he launched his jumbled anathemas, and guess at his meaning:—they were of course but local and lesser deities: the Masters of the Stars were otherwhere. 'It is clear that he prays not for his own salvation,' they said, 'or he would have polluted the forest before now.' They perceived that he desired the good of the world, after his fashion; and therefore that he was on their side with them. 'This is a marvellous thing in a saint,' they said.

And at such times Saint Cilian, for his part, would feel a wonderful glow in his heart. The air about him would dance and be like diamonds with joy and quickened life; he felt vaguely that he had done great things for the Lord and for man. Language was becoming an unfamiliar thing to him now: had a human being met him in the forest, Saint Cilian would scarcely have found words wherewith to greet or answer him: would probably have cooed and grunted and chuckled, as he did to the fawns and piglings, thereby pouring out, as well as he was able, the good will, the delight and affection, he held for all living and visible things . . .

'He even helps us in our work,' said the Gods. 'He

understands the great language: the sky and the winds and the waters communicate with him: and thus in his way he is a link between us and the human race to which he belongs.'

So now, after fifty, after sixty years of it, Saint Cilian felt the Holy Presences about him always on his wanderings. He considered, in an undefined sort of way, that the angels of God were passing amongst the ancient trees: that heavenly messengers went by him, whispering the mysteries of the kingdom, as he paddled his log on the waters. He went to his devotions with new avidity: using the wreckage of churchly anathema for words, but pouring out through it worship of the beautiful, desire for the salvation of the world—for the Forest-Spirit, that nourished the un-self-conscious God in him, to make conquests where men congregate, to become present, potent, dominant, in the thoughts of men. . . .

Seventy years passed, and he was a very old man: driving on his hundred, and failing. Borion, riding up out of the east at dawn, often heard no pleasant imprecations as he passed the tower; Gwernlas Alder-Queen missed him in the marsh; Phenit looked for him in vain in the fir-woods, except rarely. Then came a terrible winter; and old Saint Cilian found it too much even to crawl up to his bedchamber at nightfall, there to spend the dark hours shivering and coughing; much less could he mount higher to curse. But he was beyond being troubled, now, by these temporal things.

He would fall asleep before his fire; day and night alike he would sit there nodding; waking a little and sleeping again; always adream. Beasts with shaggy coats would come in, stand over him and nestle against him, lick his face and hands, doing their utmost to keep him from the cold and wind. Not even the bright fire on the hearth scared them; and their predatory instincts slept in his presence. You might have seen at the same time, wolf acting as couch for him, and fallow deer as screen to shelter him from the draught.

But how was it that the fire was always burning: what unseen hands replenished it day and night with logs? And how was it that the little store of beans and dried vegetables from his garden, and honey from his skeps, never gave out; that the stone flags of his day-chamber were thickly carpeted always with dry bracken and pine-needles; that there was always food and drink ready to his hand when he needed it? He did not know; it never appeared to him to call for surprise.

. . . . . .

It was night; outside, below and on the hill-tops, the trees were frantic billows tossing on the wind; great branches, and often giant trunks and all, went crashing to the ground; thick snow was whirling on the maniac storm. Saint Cilian nodded and dreamed. He was ill . . . or he had been ill, and was now recovering . . . was in that stage of recovery when one makes no effort, thinks of nothing, but lies back and enjoys painless ease: one's body light as the

air, one's mind content with vacuity. 'Mother,' says he, 'how soft the bed is.' 'Yes, my darling,' she answers; and lays the hand of cool peace on his brow. 'Ah, and there art thou, my Mary; I thought—I dreamed——' It is the young wife that has his hand in hers. And there in the gloom and flicker he sees Muriel and Elaine and Rosemary; and tall Philibert and Vanfred and Egan his brothers: all their faces full of care and kindliness and love. He smiled at each of them, wonderfully happy to have them about him. 'I thought—I dreamed——' he began; 'it seems such ages since——' 'Hush, hush!' they murmur; 'thou wilt be well anon, dear one!'

He lies in great peace and ease, watching the flame leap and flicker and cast its light on their beautiful faces . . . that change as he watches them, growing more beautiful, more august, and still more kindly. . . . Suddenly he raises himself up, triumph shining out upon his face. 'Ah, no!' he whispers; 'that was a dream . . . a dream of very long ago; and I am an old man . . . and I am dying; and ye are . . . ah, Beautiful and Gracious Ones, ye are the Angels of the Lord!'

. . . . . .

The flame died on the hearth, quite suddenly; and with it, all warmth and glow out of the ashes. The rabbit that had been nestling at his bosom leaped down from him and scuttered away with little runs and pauses into the night of storms. The old she-wolf on whose shaggy side he had been pillowed, rose, sniffed at the fallen corpse,

howled dismally, and trotted out. The stag, whose body had been sheltering him from the wind, had made a dash for the safety of the out-of-doors already.

But Phenit Fireheart, and Darron Hên, and Borion of the Golden Flame, and the Dew-Queen and the Lady of the Alders and their companions, went out upon their rainbow path from the silence of the tower, through the radiance of their own world beyond the darkness and the tempest. 'Poor little child-soul of a saint!' they said; 'he was wonderfully harmless and kindly. . . .'