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The Priest's Supper

Father Horrigan was riding home one evening along a lane in County Cork. The good priest remembered that all he had to eat at home was a single crust of bread. When he was about half a mile from the village, he began to wonder which house he might call on for his supper. While he was lost in these thoughts, he did not notice the shadow of a little fellow sitting on a boulder by the roadside. Nor did he hear his voice chirp out:

“Cease, cease with your drumming

By my smell,

I can tell

That a priest is coming.”

As you have probably guessed, this lad was one of the fairy folk, a lookout for the Good People (or Duine Matha [din-nah ma-hah] as they are called in Irish). His friends were making merry, as was their custom. They tripped and danced over the boggy ground and alongside the icy river, but when the warning sounded, they

scattered. If you had seen them, you might have thought that they were shiny leaves caught up by a sudden gust of wind. Very soon, they were hidden behind brambles, stones, and clods of earth. The priest passed by the Good People on his pony without so much as a 'Hail Mary'. His thoughts were still inside his stomach.

Father Horrigan had the fondest memories of a chicken stew that Moira Leary had made back in the spring. Her husband had gone out into the yard for their last hen, even though they depended on her eggs for breakfast. The couple gladly underwent hardships in return for the priest saying grace at their table. Like all the villagers, they had the greatest respect for the Father, who could answer any question about Heaven, Earth or in between.

The priest had intended to save his next visit to the Leary family for a special occasion, such as his birthday. However, that night the hunger pangs of his stomach led him to the door of the good couple. He lifted the latch saying: "Blessings on all who live in this house." He stepped into the cottage and his gaze fell upon the pot that was bubbling merrily above the fire.

"Reverend father, this is an honour," exclaimed Moira Leary. Her husband sprang to his feet and bid the priest to sit down on his chair, for there were only two places around the table. After Michael Leary had welcomed the priest to the house, he excused himself and slipped out through the back door, just as he had done the previous spring when he had gone to fetch the hen. This time there were no birds clucking in the yard. Indeed Michael was quite ashamed that they did not have so much as a sprig of parsley to sprinkle on the

potatoes that were boiling in the pot. There was just one chance of providing a meal worthy of the priest. Earlier that evening, he had set a net in the stream, and perhaps it was just possible that he had caught a fish. He hurried to the place where he had left it, and there he found not just any fish, but a huge salmon, its pink back glistening in the moonlight.

"Musha, you're a fine fish to feed a priest," he whispered to the captive. The salmon wriggled and splashed in disagreement, and Michael thought he was the most magnificent creature that he had ever set his eyes on. He unfastened the net and began to haul in his catch.

"Stop that struggling just this moment!" commanded Michael.

"Don't you know that Father Horrigan is waiting in my parlour for his supper?" The fish did not share Michael's respect for the Reverend Father, and continued to do his best to pull away.

"It's no use, you can't win, so you might as well make your peace now," said Michael. However, in this he was mistaken, because he was not counting on the fairy folk coming to the aid of the fish. All of a sudden, someone or something pulled his feet from under him, and he landed with a sharp thud in the stream. He was shocked, bruised, and soaked, and what was worse, he saw that Father Horrigan's supper was free from the net, jumping, and dancing with glee among the rocks and whirlpools.

"Come back you blaspheming fish!" called out Michael as he shook his fist. "You will surely pay in the next world for your insolence!"

However, the fish took no notice and in a trice, he vanished from view.

“Dear, oh deary me, how shall we feed the priest now?” cried Michael as he stood up, his clothes dripping in the stream.

His question was answered by a little voice, which said, “do not fret, reset your net, and you shall get your fish yet.”

“Who said that?” asked Michael. Then he noticed a little fellow standing on the bank of the stream.

“I see it all clearly now,” called out Michael angrily. “It was you, wasn’t it? You’re the little devil who tripped me up.”

“I am one of the Good People and you would do well to speak to me with civility,” replied the fairy. “But I see that you are angry, and I will pretend this one time that I did not hear your rudeness. We wish to help you. We shall fill your nets with two, no wait, with three salmon, each as big as the one who escaped, but first you must do us one small favour.”

“And what would that be?” asked Michael suspiciously, for he had heard on his mother’s knee that the Good People were full of bad intentions, and the less a man or woman had to do with them, the better it would turn out in the end.

“Our only request,” said the little man, “is that you go to Father Horrigan and ask him this one question. “Will the souls of the Good People be saved on the Last Day, just as the souls of the faithful Christians shall be?”

Michael considered the matter, and decided that the information would be a fair exchange for the three fine fish. He returned to the cottage and said:

“Reverend Father, it is a happy coincidence that you have come to our house this night, for I have a question to ask you. Is it true or not that the souls of the Good People will be saved on the Last Day, just as those of the faithful Christians shall be?”

Now Father Horrigan chuckled because he knew that Michael Leary was not a man to be curious about such matters. “Tell me son, and tell me truthfully,” he replied. “Was it none other than the Good People who sent you to ask me this question?” “I cannot tell a lie,” said Michael, “and I always tell the truth, so it was, just as you say, good Father.”

The priest looked him in the eye and said firmly, “then go and give the fairy folk my reply. I shall gladly answer their question if they come and ask it to me in person.”

Michael nodded, and did as the good Father said. He returned to the stream where the little man was waiting, no longer on his own, but with row upon row of the Good People, all glowing with glistening lanterns.

“Good People,” called out Michael. “I have returned with the reply of the Priest, who is the most honoured and respected human alive in these parts. He bids that one or all of you come to my parlour and put your question to him in person.”

No sooner had he spoken than the air was filled with a great throbbing, like the beat of swans wings, and the lights of the Good People scattered this way and that like so much stardust.

A few moments later Michael stood looking at the stream running and dancing over the rocks in the moonlight, and there was not a fairy in sight.

He returned to the cottage, and said nothing, for it was not necessary. The priest ate boiled potatoes for his supper, without so much as a sprig of parsley to go with it, and he rode home that night with a full belly, and a smile playing on his lips as he thought of the respect that all, including the fairy folk, held for one who had taken Holy Vows.

And that was the story of The Priest's Supper, which Bertie freely adapted from a book called Fairy Folk and Tales of the Irish Peasantry that was edited over 100 years ago by the poet, WB Yeats.

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