

## *Marching To Zion*

A.E. Coppard

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In the great days that are gone I was walking the Journey upon its easy smiling roads and came one morning of windy spring to the side of a wood. I had but just rested to eat my crusts and suck a drink from the pool when a fat woman appeared and sat down before me. I gave her the grace of the morning.

“And how many miles is it now?” I asked of her.

“What!” said she, “you’re not going the journey?”

“Sure, ma’am,” said I, “I’m going, and you’re going, and we’re all going... aren’t we?”

“Not,” said she, looking at me very archly, “not while there are well-looking young fellers sitting in the woods.”

“Well, deliver me!” said I, “d’ye take me for the Angel Gabriel or the duke of the world!”

“It’s not anything I’m taking you to be, young man... give me a chew of that bread.”

She came and sat beside me and took it from my hands.

“Little woman...” I began it to her; but at that she flung the crust back in my face, laughing and choking and screaming.

“Me... that’s fat as a ewe in January!”

“Fat, woman!” says I, “you’re no fat at all.”

But, I declare it, she’d a bosom like a bolster. I lay on my back beside her. She was a rag of a woman. I looked up through the tree branches at the end of the shaw; they were bare, spring was late that year. The sky was that blue ... there wasn’t a cloud within a million miles ... but up through the boughs it looked hard and steely like a storm sky. I took my hat from her, for she had put it on her own head, and I stood on my feet.

“Fat, ma’am!” says I ... and she looked up at me, grinning like a stuffed fox.... “Oh no, ma’am, you’re slim as the queen of Egypt!”

At that she called out to another man who was passing us by, and I went to walk on with him. He had a furuncle on one side of his chin; his garments were very old, both in fashion and in use; he was lean as a mountain cow.

I greeted him but he gave me glances that were surly, like a man would be grinding scissors or setting a saw—for you never met one of that kind that didn’t have the woe of the world upon him.

“How many miles is it now, sir?” I asked, very respectful then. He did not heed me. He put his hand to his ear signifying deafness. I shouted and I shouted, so you could have heard me in the four kingdoms, but I might just have been blowing in a sack for all the reason I got from him.

I went on alone and in the course of the days I fell in with many persons, stupid persons, great persons, jaunty ones. An ass passes me by, its cart burdened with a few dead sprays of larch and a log for the firing. An old man toils at the side urging the ass onwards.

They give me no direction and I wonder whether I am at all like the ass, or the man, or the cart, or the log for the firing. I cannot say. There was the lad McGlosky, who had the fine hound that would even catch birds; the philosopher who had two minds; the widow with one leg; Slatterby Chough, the pugfoot man, and Grafton. I passed a little time with them all, and made poems about them that they did not like, but I was ever for walking on from them. None of them could give me a direction for the thing that was urging me except that it was “away on, away on.”

Walk I did, and it was full summer when I met Monk, the fat fellow as big as two men with but the clothes of a small one squeezing the joints of him together. Would you look at the hair of him—it was light as a stook of rye; or the face of him and the neck of him—the hue of a new brick. He had the mind of a grasshopper, the strength of a dray horse, the tenderness of a bush of reeds, and was light on his limbs as a deer.

“Look ye’re,” he said to me; he had a stiff sort of talk, and fat thumbs like a mason that he jiggled in the corners of his pockets; “look ye’re, my friend, my name is Monk.”

“I am Michael Fionnguisa,” said I.

“Well I never struck fist with a lad like you; your conversation is agreeable to me, you have a stride on you would beat the world for greatness.”

“I could beat you,” said I, “even if you wore the boots of Hercules that had wings on ’em.”

“It is what I like,” said he, and he made a great mess of my boasting before we were through. “Look ye’re, my friend, we needn’t brag our little eye-blink of the world; but take my general character and you’ll find I’m better than my... inferiors. I accomplish my ridiculous destiny without any ridiculous effort. I’m the man to go a-travelling with.” He had that stiff way of his talk, like a man lecturing on a stool, but my mercy, he’d a tongue of silk that could twist a meal out of the pantry of Jews and strange hard people; fat landladies, the wives of the street, the widows in their villas, they would feed him until he groaned, loving him for his blitheness and his tales. He could not know the meaning of want though he had never a coin in the world. Yet he did not love towns; he would walk wide-eyed through them counting the seams in the pavements. He liked most to be staring at the gallant fishes in the streams, and gasping when he saw a great one.

I met him in the hills and we were gone together. And it was not a great while before he was doing and doing, for we came and saw a man committing a crime, a grave crime to be done in a bad world leave alone a good one like this, in a very lonely lovely place. So Monk rose up and slew him, and the woman ran blushing into the woods.

I looked at Mr. Monk, and the dead man on the road, and then at Mr. Monk again.

“Well,” I said, “we’d ... we’d better bury this feller.”

But Monk went and sat upon a bank and wiped his neck. The other lay upon his face as if he were sniffing at the road; I could see his ear was full of blood, it slipped over the lobe drip by drip as neat as a clock would tick.

And Monk, he said: “Look ye’re, my friend, there are dirtier things than dirt, and I would not like to mix this with the earth of our country.”

So we slung him into an old well with a stone upon his loins.

And a time after that we saw another man committing crime, a mean crime that you might do and welcome in America or some such region, but was not fitting to be done in our country.

So Monk rose up and slew him. Awful it was to see what Monk did to him. He was a great killer and fighter; Hector himself was but a bit of a page boy to Mr. Monk.

“Shall we give him an interment?” I asked him. He stood wiping his neck—he was always wiping his neck—and Monk he said:

“Look ye’re, my friend, he was a beast; a man needn’t live in a sty in order to become a pig, and we won’t give him an interment.” So we heaved him into a slag pit among rats and ravel of iron.

And would you believe it, again we saw a man committing crime, crime indeed and a very bad crime. There was no withstanding Monk; he rose up and slew the man as dead as the poor beast he had tortured.

“God-a-mercy!” I said to him, “it’s a lot of life you’re taking, Mr. Monk.” And Monk he said: “Life, Michael dear, is the thing we perish by.” He had the most terrible angers and yet was kind, kind; nothing could exceed the greatness of his mind or the vigour of his limbs.

Those were the three combats of Monk, but he was changed from that out. Whenever we came to any habitations now he would not call at back doors, nor go stravaiging in yards for odd pieces to eat, but he would go gallantly into an inn and offer his payment for the things we would like. I could not understand it at all, but he was a great man and a kind.

“Where did you get that treasure?” said I to him after days of it. “Has some noble person given you a gift?”

He did not answer me so I asked him over again. “Eh!”

And Monk he said, “Oh well then, there was a lot of coin in the fob of that feller we chucked in the well.”

I looked very straight at Mr. Monk, very straight at that, but I could not speak the things my mind wanted me to say, and he said very artfully: “Don’t distress yourself, Michael dear, over a little contest between sense and sentiment.”

“But that was the dirty man,” said I.

“And why not?” said he. “If his deed was dirty, his money was clean: don’t be deethery, man.”

“’Tis not fitting nor honourable,” said I, “for men the like of us to grow fat on his filth. It’s grass I’d be eating sooner.”

“That’s all bombazine, Michael, bombazine! I got two dollars more from the feller we chucked in the pit!”

“Mr. Monk, that was the pig!” said I.

“And why not?” said he. “If his life was bad then his end must be good; don’t be deethery.”

“You can’t touch pitch,” I said....

“Who’s touching pitch?” he cried. “Amn’t I entitled to the spoils of the valiant, the rewards of the conqueror...”

“Bombazine!” says I to him.

“O begod!” he says, “I never struck fist on a lad the like of you, with your bombazine O! I grant you it doesn’t come affable like, but what costs you nothing can’t be dear; as for compuncions, you’ll see, I fatten on ’em!”

He laughed outright at me.

“Don’t be deethery, Michael, there was a good purse in the last man’s trousers!”

I could no more complain to him; how could I under the Lord! Dear me, it never was seen, a man with the skin of that man; he’d the mind of a grasshopper, but there was greatness in him, and Mary herself loved him for a friend.

What do I say about Mary! Ah, there was never in anything that had the aspects of a world a girl with her loveliness, I tell you, handsome as a lily, the jewel of the world; and the thing that happened between us was strange above all reckoning. We gave her the good will of the evening in a place that would be as grand as Eden itself, though the bushes had grown dim on the hills and the sod was darkening beside the white water of the streams.

“And are you going the Journey?” we asked of her.

“I am going,” said she, “everybody is going, why not me too?”

“Will you go along with us?” I asked of her.

She turned her eyes upon me like two sparks out of the blowing dusk that was already upon us.

“Yes, I will go with you.”

At that she rested her hand upon my arm and we turned upon the road together.

She was barefooted and bareheaded, dressed in a yellow gown that had buttons of ivory upon it.

And we asked her as we went along the streams: Had she no fear of the night time?

“When the four ends of the world drop on you like death?” says I.

“... and the fogs rise up on you like moving grief?” says he.

“... and you hear the hoofs of the half god whisking behind the hedges,” says I.

“... and there are bad things like bats troubling the air!” says he.

“... or the twig of a tree comes and touches you like a finger!” says I.

“... the finger of some meditating doom!” says he.

“No, I am not,” cried Mary, “but I am glad to be going with you.”

Her hand was again resting upon my arm.

I lay down among the sheaves of wheat that night with no sleep coming to me, for the stars were spilling all out of the sky and it seemed the richness of heaven was flowing down upon us all.

“Michael!” Monk whispered, “she’s a holy-minded girl: look, look, she’s praying!”

Sure enough I could see her a little way off, standing like a saint, as still as a monument. Fresh as a bird was our gentle comrade in the dawn and ready to be going. And we asked her as we went by the roads together: What was it made her to come the Journey alone?

“Sure there is no loneliness in the world,” she said.

“Is there not?” asked Monk.

“I take my soul with me upon this Journey,” said Mary.

“Your what!”

“My soul,” she said gravely, “it is what keeps loneliness from me.”

He mused upon that a little. “Look ye’re, Mary, soul is just but the chain of eternal mortality, that is what I think it; but you speak as if it were something you pick up and carry about with you, something made of gutta-percha, like a tobacco pouch.”

She smiled upon him: “It is what covers me from loneliness... it’s... it’s the little garment which sometime God will take upon him—being God.”

Seven days only and seven little nights we were together and I made scores of poems about her that were different from any poems that have come into the world, but I could never sing them now. In the mornings she would go wash herself in the pools, and Monk and I would walk a little way off from her. Monk was very delicate about that, but I would turn and see the white-armed girl rolling up her dark hair, and her white feet travelling to the water as she pulled the gown from her beauty. She was made like the down of doves and the bloom of bees. It’s like enough she did love me in a very frail and delicate sort of way, like a bush of lavender might love the wind that would be snaring it from its root in the garden, but never won a petal of it, nor a bloom, only a little of its kind kind air.

We asked her as we went upon the hills: Had she no fear of getting her death?

“Not if I make a wise use of it.”

“A use of your death—and how would you do that, tell me,” says I.

And she told us grand things about death, in her soft wonderful voice; strange talk to be giving the likes of him and me.

“I’d give the heart out of my skin,” said I, “not to be growing old—the sin and sorrow of the world, with no hope of life and despair in its conclusion.”

But Monk was full of laughter at me.

“Ha! ha! better a last hope than a hopeless conclusion,” says Mr. Monk; “so try hope with another lozenge, Michael, and give a free drink to despair.”

“Have you no fear of death?” Mary asked of him.

And Monk, he said: “I have no unreasonable regard for him; I may bow before the inevitable, but I decline to grovel before it, and if I burn with the best of ’em—well, I’d rather be torrid than torpid.”

“It would be well,” said Mary, “to praise God for such courage.”

“Is that what you praise him for?” we asked her.

“I praise God for Jesus,” Mary said to us: strange talk to be giving the likes of him and me.

We found the finest sleeping nooks, and she could not have rested better if there had been acres of silk; Monk, God-a-mercy, spent his money like a baron. One night in the little darkness he said:

“Look ye’re, Mary, tell us why you pray!”

“I pray because of a dream I had.”

“A dream! That’s strange, Mary; I could understand a person dreaming because of a prayer she has prayed, but not praying because of a dream she has dreamed.”

“Not even supposing,” I said to him, “you had dreamed you were praying prayers?”

“If I did,” said he, “I might pray not to dream such dreams.”

“I pray,” said Mary, “that my dream may come true.”

And Monk, he said, “So you build your life on a prayer and a dream!”

“I do not build my life at all,” said Mary; “it’s my death I am building, in a wonderful world of mountains....”

“... that can never be climbed,” cried Monk.

“... and grand rivers....”

“... that stand still and do not flow,” says he.

“... and bright shining fields....”

“... that will never come to the reaping,” says he again.

“... and if the climbing and the flowing and the reaping are illusions here, they are real in the dreams of God.”

And Monk, he said: “If God himself is the illusion, Mary, there’s little enough reward for a life of that kind, or the death of it either. The recompense for living is Life—not in the future or merely in the present, but life in the past where all our intuitions had their mould, and all our joys their eternal fountain.”

“Yes, yes,” I added to him, “beauty walks in the track of the mortal world, and her light is behind you.”

She was silent. “Mary,” said I, “won’t you tell me now that dream of yours?”

“I will not tell you yet, Michael,” said she.

But on a day after that we came to a plain, in it a great mountain; and we went away on to the mountain and commenced to climb. Near the top it was as if part of the cone of the mountain had been blown out by the side and a sweet lake of water left winking in the scoop. We came suddenly upon it; all the cloven cliffs that hung round three sides of the lake were of white marble, blazing with a lustre that crashed upon our eyes; the floor of the lake, easy to be seen, was of white marble too, and the water was that clear you could see the big black hole in the middle where it bubbled from the abyss. There were beds of heather around us with white quoins of marble, like chapels or shrines, sunk amid them; this, and the great golden plain rolling below, far from us, on every side, almost as far away as the sky. When we came to this place Monk touched my arm; we both looked at Mary, walking beside the lake like a person who knew well the marvel that we were but just seeing. She was speaking strange words—we could not understand.

“Let us leave her to herself awhile,” said Monk.

And we climbed round behind the white cliffs until we left each other. I went back alone and found her lying in the heather beside a stone shaped like an altar, sleeping. I knelt down beside her with a love in my heart that was greater than the mere life beating in it. She lay very still and beautiful, and I put into her hand a sprig of the red rowan which I

had found. I watched the wind just hoisting the strands of her hair that was twisted in the heather.

The glister was gone from the cliffs, they were softly white like magnolia flowers; the lake water splashed its little words in the quarries. Her lips were red as the rowan buds, the balm of lilies was in the touch of them.

She opened her eyes on me kneeling beside her.

“Mary,” said I, “I will tell you what I’m thinking. There is a great doubt in my mind, Mary, and I’m in fear that you’ll be gone from me.”

For answer she drew me down to her side until my face was resting against her heart; I could hear its little thunder in her breast. And I leaned up until I was looking deeply in her eyes.

“You are like the dreaming dawn,” I said, “beautiful and silent. You’re the daughter of all the dawns that ever were, and I’d perish if you’d be gone from me.”

“It’s beautiful to be in the world with you, Michael, and to feel your strength about me.”

“It’s lonely to be in the world with you, Mary, and no hope in my heart, but doubt filling it.”

“I will bring you into my heaven, Michael.”

“Mary, it’s in a little thicket of cedar I would sit with you, hearing the wild bee’s hymn; beautiful grapes I would give you, and apples rich as the moon.”

We were silent for a while and then she told me what I have written here of her own fine words as I remember them. We were sitting against the white altar stone, the sun was setting; there was one great gulf of brightness in the west of the sky, and pieces of fiery cloud, little flukes of flame shaped like fishes, swimming there. In the hinder part of the sky a great bush-tailed animal had sprung into its dying fields, a purple fox.

“I dreamed,” said Mary, “that I was in marriage with a carpenter. His name was Joseph and he was older than I by many years. He left me at the marriage and went away to Liverpool; there was a great strike on in that place, but what he was to do there or why he was gone I do not know. It was at Easter, and when I woke in my bed on the first morning there was bright wind blowing in the curtains, and sun upon the bed linen. Some cattle were lowing and I heard the very first cuckoo of the year. I can remember the round looking glass with a brass frame upon the table, and the queer little alabaster jar of scented oil. There was a picture of some cranes flying on the wall, and a china figure of a man called O’Connell on the shelf above the fire-place. My white veil was blown from its hook down on the floor, and it was strewed over with daffodils I had carried to my marriage.

“And at that a figure was in the room—I don’t know how—he just came, dressed in strange clothes, a dark handsome young man with black long hair and smiling eyes, full of every grace, and I loved him on the moment. But he took up some of my daffodils only—and vanished. Then I remember getting up, and after breakfast I walked about the fields very happy. There was a letter at the post office from my husband: I took it home and dropped it into the fire unopened. I put the little house into its order and set the daffodils in a bowl close upon the bedroom window. And at night in the darkness, when

I could not see him, the dark man came to my bed, but was gone before the morning, taking more of my daffodils with him. And this happened night upon night until all my flowers were gone, and then he came no more.

“It was a long time before my husband came home from Liverpool but he came at last and we lived very happily until Christmas when I had a little child.”

“And did you have a child?” I asked her.

“No,” she said, “this was all my dream. Michael, O Michael, you are like that lover of the darkness.”

And just then Monk came back among us roaring for food.

I gave him the bag I had carried and he helped himself.

“I do not feel the need of it,” said Mary.

“I do not feel the need of it,” said I.

When he had told us his tales and the darkness was come we went to rest among the heather.

The wild stars were flowing over the sky, for it was the time of the year when they do fall. Three of them dropped together into the plain near the foot of the mountain, but I lay with the bride of dreams in my arms and if the lake and the mountain itself had been heaped with immortal stars I would not have stirred. Yet in the morning when I awoke I was alone. There was a new sprig of the rowan in my hand; the grand sun was warm on the rocks and the heather. I stood up and could hear a few birds in the thickets below, little showers of faint music. Mary and Monk were conversing on a ridge under the bank of the lake. I went to them, and Monk touched my arm again as if to give me a warning but I had no eyes for him, Mary was speaking and pointing.

“Do you see, Michael, that green place at the foot of the mountain?”

“I do, I see a fine green ring.”

“Do you see what is in it?”

“Nothing is in it,” I said, and indeed it was a bare open spot in the ring of a fence, a green slant in the stubbles.

She stared at me with strangely troubled eyes.

“It’s a little green terrace, a little sacred terrace; do you not see what is on it?” she asked of Monk.

“There is nothing in it, Mary, but maybe a hare.”

“O look again,” she cried out quickly, “Michael, there are three golden crosses there, the crosses of Calvary, only they are empty now!”

“There are no crosses there?” I said to Monk.

“There are no crosses there,” he said.

I turned to the girl; she took me in her arms and I shall feel her cold cold lips till the fall of doom.

“Michael, dear, it has been so beautiful....”

She seemed to be making a little farewell and growing vague like a ghost would be.

“O lovely lovely jewel of the world, my heart is losing you!... Monk! Monk!” I screamed, but he could not help us. She was gone in a twink, and left me and Monk very lonely in the world.

### Story Notes

"Marching To Zion" is a quietly remarkable piece of work – a short story that reads more like a prose poem or a folk legend, and is all the richer for refusing to settle into either category comfortably.

Coppard's narrator, Michael Fionnguisa, moves through a dreamlike landscape populated by vivid eccentrics, and the story's great structural intelligence is in how it pairs him with two such contrasting companions. Monk is a force of nature – physically enormous, morally unorthodox, philosophically earthy – while Mary is ethereal, visionary, and ultimately otherworldly in a way the reader suspects long before Michael does. Their triangular relationship drives the story's real argument, which is essentially a debate between matter and spirit, between the appetite for life and the longing for transcendence.

Coppard handles this thematic tension with genuine lightness of touch. Monk's speeches, with their rolling comic bravado ("I'd rather be torrid than torpid"), never feel merely satirical – he is too warm and human for that. And Mary's religious devotion is treated with unusual delicacy, neither mocked nor sentimentalized.

The story's masterstroke is the dream Mary recounts near the end – a thinly veiled retelling of the Annunciation, displaced into a commonplace Irish domestic setting with a striking, almost brazen matter-of-factness. The sacred intrudes into the ordinary without ceremony, which is precisely Coppard's point. Her disappearance at the close, beside a vision of the empty crosses that only she can see, confirms what the story has been gently suggesting throughout: that she was never quite of this world to begin with.

The prose itself is the story's greatest pleasure – rhythmically Irish, warm without being cloying, and capable of sudden lyrical beauty. It is a story about the journey as much as any destination, and it leaves you with the sense of something genuinely strange and lovely having passed through.