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Ireland
Awakening

Edward Rutherfurd

PLANTATION

1597

DOCTOR SIMEON PINCHER knew all about Ireland.

Doctor Simeon Pincher was a tall, thin, balding man, still in his twenties, with a sallow complexion and stern black eyes that belonged in a pulpit. He was a learned man, a graduate and fellow of Emmanuel College, at Cambridge University. When he had been offered a position at the new foundation of Trinity College in Dublin, however, he had come thither with such alacrity that his new hosts were quite surprised.

"I shall come at once," he had written to them, "to do God's work." With which reply, no one could argue.

Not only did he come with the stated zeal of a missionary. Even before his arrival in Ireland, Doctor Pincher had informed himself thoroughly about its inhabitants. He knew, for instance, that the mere Irish, as the original native Irish were now termed in England, were worse than animals, and that, as Catholics, they could not be trusted.

But the special gift that Doctor Pincher brought to Ireland was his belief that the mere Irish were not only an inferior people, but that God had deliberately marked them out-along with others, too, of course-since the beginning of time, to be cast into eternal hellfire. For Doctor Simeon Pincher was a follower of Calvin.

To understand Doctor Pincher's version of the subtle teachings of the great Protestant reformer, it was only necessary to listen to one of his sermons-for he was already accounted a fine preacher, greatly praised for his clarity.

"The logic of the Lord," he would declare, "like His love, is perfect. And since we are endowed with the faculty of reason, which God in His infinite goodness has bestowed upon us, we may see His purpose as it is." Leaning

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forward slightly towards his audience to ensure their concentration, Doctor Pincher would then explain.

"Consider. It is undeniable that God, the fount of all knowledge- to whom all ages are but as the blinking of an eye-must in His infinite wisdom know all things, past, present, and to come. And therefore it must be that even now, He knows full well who upon the Day of Judgement is to be saved, and who shall be cast down into the pit of Hell. He has established all things from the beginning. It cannot be otherwise. Even though, in His mercy, He has left us ignorant of our fate, some have already been chosen for Heaven and others for Hell. The divine logic is absolute, and all who believe must tremble before it. Those who are chosen, those who shall be saved, we call the Elect. All other, damned from the first, shall perish. And so," he would fix his audience with a terrible stare, "well may you ask: 'Which am I?'"

The grim logic of John Calvin's doctrine of predestination was hard to refute. That Calvin was a deeply religious and well-meaning man could not be doubted. His followers strove to follow the loving teachings of the Gospels, and to live lives that were honest, hardworking, and charitable. But for some critics, his form of religion ran a risk: its practice could become unduly harsh. Moving from France to Switzerland, Calvin had set up his church in Geneva. The rules governing his community were sterner than those of the Lutheran Protestants, and he believed that the state should enforce them by law. Following their strict moral regime-and reporting their neighbours to the authorities for any failure to live according to God's law-his congregation did not only seek to earn a place in Heaven, but also to prove to themselves and to the world that they were indeed the predestined Elect who had already been chosen to go there.

Soon Calvinist communities had sprung up in other parts of Europe. If the Scottish Presbyterians were known for their somewhat dour adherence to the doctrines of predestination, the Church of England and its sister Church of Ireland had nowadays a Calvinistic air. "Only the Godly are part of the Church," its congregations would declare.

But could it be that certain amongst the community might in fact not be chosen to go to Heaven at all? Most certainly, the Calvinists would concede. Any moral backsliding might be an indication of it. And even then, as Doctor Pincher put it in one of his finest sermons, there remained a great uncertainty.

"No man knows his fate. We are like men walking across a frozen river, foolishly unmindful that, at any time, the ice may crack, and buckle, and drop us down into the frozen waters-below which, hidden deeper yet, burn the fiery furnaces of Hell. Be not puffed up with pride, therefore, as you follow the law of the scriptures, but remember that we are all miserable sinners and be humble. For this is the divine trap, and from it there is no escape. All is foretold, and the mind of God, being perfect, will not be changed." Then, looking round at his disconsolate congregation, Doctor Pincher would cry out: "And even though, if God has so ordained, you may be doomed, yet I beseech you, be of good cheer. For remember, no matter how hard the way, we are commanded, always, to hope."

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Might there, perhaps, be hope for some of those not in the Calvinist congregation? Perhaps. No man could know the mind of God. But it seemed doubtful. In particular, for those in the Catholic Church, the future looked bleak. Did they not indulge in popish superstitions and worship the saints as idols-things specifically prohibited in the scriptures? Hadn't they had opportunity to turn away from their errors? To Doctor Pincher it seemed that all followers of the Pope in Rome must surely be on their way to perdition, and that the natives of Ireland, whose bad character was so well known, were probably in the devil's clutch already. And might they not yet be saved if they converted? Could not their case be remedied? No. Their sin, to Doctor Pincher, was a clear sign that they had been selected to be damned from the first. They belonged, like the pagan spirits that infested the place, deep underground. Such were the thoughts that had strengthened the keen resolve of Doctor Pincher as he crossed the sea to Dublin.

Yet what of his own fate? Was Simeon Pincher sure, in the secret places of his heart, that he himself was one of the Elect? He had to hope so. If there had been certain sins, indiscretions at least, in his own life, might they be signs that his own nature was corrupt? He turned his face from the thought. To sin, of course, was the lot of every man. Those who repented might indeed be saved. If sins there had been in his life, therefore, he repented most earnestly. And his daily conduct, and his zeal for the Lord, proved, he hoped and believed, that he was, indeed, not the least amongst God's chosen.

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