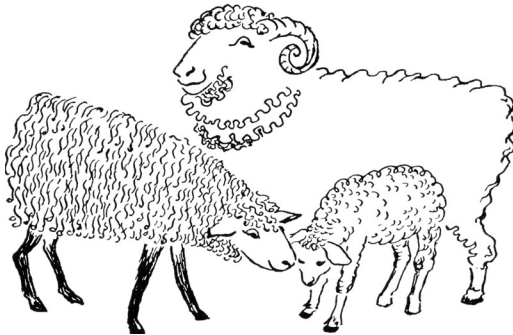


Catholic Tales for Boys and Girls

by Caryll Houselander

Illustrated by Renée George



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Terrible Farmer Timson

Jill and Audrey woke up in the farmhouse bedroom on the first morning of the summer holidays. At first they were not awake enough to know just why they felt so happy. Then the sounds and smells of the holidays gathered into the morning: the cock crowing (a scarlet sound like a pennon blown out curling on the wind), the sound of milk cans and hobnailed boots on flagstones, the sound of voices that were slow and burred and spoke words that were brown and velvet like the bees' backs, the smell of grass in the early sun and of clover in the grass.

All day their delight folded and took new shapes: getting the eggs for breakfast and feeling

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them warm and softly polished in the palm of one's hand, wearing old blue overalls and no shoes or stockings or gloves or hats, picking fruit and eating it outdoors, and at last evening, and night bringing a darkness that was gentle and moved along under the trees in the orchard like deep blue clouds, and stars among the branches like golden fruit.

Jill and Audrey remembered that all the loveliness of the day was God's gift, and then they remembered the promise they had made: that although they were alone, in the charge of Mrs. Brown, who was not a Catholic, they would ask George Brown to drive them to Mass in the pony cart every Sunday. For tomorrow was Sunday.

George, however, shook his head; the pony had gone lame. Jill said, "It doesn't matter. We could walk." But Mrs. Brown laughed at the very idea. "It's four miles there and four miles back," she said. "That's eight miles. You couldn't walk eight miles, and what's more, Almighty God would not expect it of you."

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Audrey said slowly, “No, perhaps He wouldn’t, and anyway it wouldn’t be a sin not to go; but really, we *do* walk eight miles in the fields, I’m sure, and if God doesn’t expect it, it would make Him all the happier, like giving Him a surprise.”

“Course,” said George, “if you be that set on going, it is a shortcut through Farmer Timson’s land — only, if he caught you, he’d carry on terrible: he don’t let no one cross his land; a fair caution he is!”

“Couldn’t we ask him?”

“Well, you *could*, but there’s no saying what he’d say.”

“Well, we’ll try,” said Audrey, and taking the candle from the kitchen table and holding it above her like a star, she climbed the wooden stairs to the bedroom.

Farmer Timson had had a miserable day. Saturday was always a black day with him. He sat in his little lovely wood and stared through the big leaves, and just because the leaves were all lovely with the light of the evening, he was all the more

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wretched. He picked a wildflower and crushed it between his big finger and thumb; it hurt him to see it looking so frail and lovely when he felt himself to be so rotten. Yes, rotten, that's what he felt!

When he was a boy, and even when he was a man, Saturday was Confession day, and he had looked forward to it — yes, looked forward to coming back along the white road into this very wood and feeling that now that he was free of all his sins, the flowers and the birds and all the lovely wild things were his friends.

Then the foolish man had quarreled with the priest, a priest who had been dead many years now, and so he had not gone to the church along the road anymore. And he had put notices up all around his fences, forbidding people to pass. And everyone had forgotten that old Timson had ever been a Catholic — everyone but he. He was a fair caution now, as George said, a man with his heart aching for something he couldn't have, just because his own silly self would not let him

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be humble enough to go and get it. But he was so unhappy that he simply had to pretend to himself that he was very fierce and terrible and didn't mind a bit. When people came to ask him timidly if they might take the shortcut through his land, he shouted, "No!" so angrily that in the end no one came anymore.

On this particular Saturday, he was lonelier than ever, so he crushed flowers in his fingers and tried to think of some notice to put up that would be even more alarming than the others. Sitting contentedly in the grass and the white clover, a red cow gazed at him with her quiet eyes. She sat in a field just beyond the wood; so still she was that she might have been one of those cardboard cows that gaze so gently across the manger in the crib at Christmastime.

"Idiot," said Farmer Timson, looking at her. "Idiot!" And when in return for this unprovoked insult, she gazed at him all the more softly, lying quite still, he went into the toolshed and prepared a new notice: "Beware of the Mad Bull!"

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Audrey and Jill stood a little doubtfully outside Farmer Timson's gate. It was useless to deny that their Sunday clothes lessened their courage. And when they discovered that they could pass through Farmer Timson's land only at the cost of persecution, their hearts sank. For there in front of them was the notice: "Trespassers will be Persecuted." That is what it seemed to say, but the letters were a little worn with weather and age. Audrey's eyes grew big.

"You've often said," remarked Jill, "that you would like to be persecuted."

"Ye-es," said Audrey doubtfully, "I did use to think perhaps I'd like to be a martyr. I'm sure I would *after* I'd been eaten by the lion, only I've never thought of how it would be *before*."

"Sometimes the lions turn out to be tame, like Daniel's."

"Yes, but not *always*."

"Well, we'd better go on."

They went on to the gate and there across the top bars they read, "Beware: Savage Dogs."

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“Oh! That’s worse than lions!” said Audrey.

“No, it isn’t. Dogs don’t eat you.”

“No, but they bite; and then instead of being a martyr who’s forgotten he was ever eaten, you’re a bitten person who’s not in Heaven.”

Jill felt she must stop Audrey from talking. “When you aren’t worthy to be eaten,” she said, “God might be pleased to allow you to be only bitten.”

And very firmly she opened the gate. Just then a dog came slowly out of the bushes wagging its tail, a fat, white, smiling dog. “Look,” said Jill. “God *is* making the dogs tame. We’d better have more faith. Come on.”

So with the dog trotting beside them, they crossed the first field and came into the small wood. It was very still and filled only with the sound of bird notes and bird wings and the crackling of the twigs where they walked. Their white kid shoes became green with moss, and once or twice their dresses were torn on thorns. As to their gloves, they became filthy, but otherwise

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they went safely and began to feel quite brave again about martyrdom. But they were unaware that Farmer Timson himself was hidden among the trees at the far edge of the wood.

“You see,” said Jill, patting the dog’s head, “it’s all right after all; there aren’t any savage dogs or lions.”

“Well, I think,” Audrey answered, “that God softened the dog’s heart for our sakes, so it may be He’ll soften the farmer’s, too.”

“Well, George said he is a fair caution.”

“Yes, but a fair caution isn’t awfuller than a savage dog. Poor old man. I feel sorry for him, being so angry when all the things around him are so gentle.”

Farmer Timson, hiding in the trees, scowled. “So I’m being run down behind my back,” he thought to himself. But he waited, and suddenly Jill and Audrey stood stock still and gasped.

Audrey spoke first, in a very small voice. “Jill,” she said, “do you see? ‘Beware of the *Mad Bull!*’ ”

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Jill nodded. Her throat had gone dry. As a matter of fact, she was a *little* afraid even of cows when George Brown wasn't there. "What shall we do?"

This time Audrey was braver. "Let's pray to God to turn the bull sensible and gentle, and then go on."

"But suppose God doesn't!"

"Then —" said Audrey suddenly, drawing a deep breath and holding it in, "let's go on and offer it up for Farmer Timson to be turned gentle and sensible."

"We-ell," said Jill, doing the same kind of breath, "I suppose we'd better."

Farmer Timson leaned forward among the leaves. Until now, these two children had been just voices to him. Now, very softly, he parted leaves with his big fingers and peeped at them. What he saw was two small girls who looked smaller still to him because he was a big man.

Jill and Audrey held hands tightly and stepped into the field, just like the martyrs used to step

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into the Colosseum at Rome. Little girls were an unusual sight in this field, and the red cow was an inquisitive old animal. She twitched a fly from her ear, whisked her tail, and prepared to stand up. Audrey and Jill began to run.

Farmer Timson, who was suddenly overcome with shame at his own mean trick, ran too, out of the green wood, after them. One glance over their shoulder showed a more awful sight than even a standing-up bull. It showed a huge, red-faced man, who could be no other than the terrible farmer, in full chase. Jill and Audrey ran the faster. Behind them a voice thundered, "There are *no* savage dogs; there are *no* mad bulls!" But "Savage dogs, mad bulls" was all that they heard.

They ran on, stumbling on the tufts of grass. Their hats blew off, and they never thought of picking them up. Farmer Timson yelled again, "There are only kind dogs, gentle cows." But still they ran. Then quite close they heard again, "*Kind* dogs, *gentle* cows," and a huge hand seized each child by the shoulder.



Ten minutes later, Audrey and Jill, their hats held carefully for them by Farmer Timson, were washing their faces under the tap in Farmer Timson's scullery. Then he prepared two mugs of milk. Certainly God had heard their prayer, for a more gentle and sensible old man they had never met.

"You sit down," he said, "and drink your milk while I get out the pony trap. I'll drive you to Mass, and you'll be there in fine time."

"I don't think we're fit to go into church now," said Audrey.

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“It’s *I* who am not fit to go,” said the farmer. “Would you believe it? I’ve let my soul get all muddied up like your dresses and shoes, just because I was too big a coward to say I was sorry to God. But there’s time to put that right before Mass, too. So come along.”

“You, a coward?” said Jill. “I thought you were a caution!”

“Aye, and maybe I was that, too; but when I saw you little scraps going past what you thought was a mad bull because you wanted to help me, I just gave up being a coward and a caution, too. So hurry up now, for the priest is busy on a Sunday and I’ve got to make my confession before Mass.”