CHRISTIAN HEROES: THEN & NOW

C. S. LEWIS

Master Storyteller

JANET & GEOFF BENGE

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The British Isles

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Chapter 1

A Lively Imagination

Clive Staples Lewis, who since he was two years old had insisted everyone call him Jack, stamped his foot hard in a puddle. Mud splattered all over his brother Warren's coat.

"What did ye have to do that for, Master Jack?" his nursemaid Lizzie Endicott asked, using his preferred name. "You've got the wee popes all over Warnie."

Jack, who was only six years old at the time, understood perfectly what Lizzie meant by "wee popes." Lizzie used the word *pope* to mean anything dirty or ugly—a constant reminder to everyone that the Roman Catholic Church and anything associated with it was an abomination. Probably the only place in the world where this language would make any sense at the time was in Ireland, where Jack was born on November 29, 1898.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Ireland was a country fiercely divided along religious lines. In the seventeenth century, Protestant England began to assert its dominance over Catholic Ireland. As part of this subjugation, English monarchs "gave" grants of Irish land to their favorite English lords. Many of these lords built elaborate castles and homes in Ireland, but they seldom lived there. Instead, they sent others to manage their land and send the profits from it back to England, thus becoming absentee landlords, while the native Irish languished in extreme poverty. As was to be expected, this situation created great animosity in Ireland, and one of the ways it showed itself was in Protestant hatred of Catholics—and in Catholic hatred of Protestants.

The Lewis family was a player in this historic struggle. Jack's grandfather, Richard Lewis, was a Welshman whose family had moved to England and then emigrated to Belfast, Ireland, to become part of the booming shipbuilding industry there. And Jack's mother's parents, Thomas and Mary Hamilton, both came from wealthy English Protestant families who had been granted Irish lands in the 1700s. Grandfather Thomas Hamilton was an Episcopal vicar at St. Mark's in the Belfast suburb of Dundela, and he took every opportunity to rail against Catholics from his pulpit. In fact, he often preached that Catholics were possessed by the devil.

None of this seemed to bother young Jack too much—he was much more interested in the stories of Ireland than in the religious struggles the country faced. And his nursemaid Lizzie was a constant

source of such stories. Every night when she put Jack and Warren to bed, she told them some new tale from ancient Irish myths. There were tales of the famous seer-warrior Fionn MacCumhaill, who ate the "salmon of knowledge" to become wise and then fought giants and magicians as he made his way to a strange house, where he was told deep truths. And there was the champion Lugh, who slew his grandfather, a cruel man with a powerful eye that destroyed all it gazed upon.

Lizzie also told Jack that fairies were living in the mysterious dirt mounds around the outskirts of Belfast. Sometimes, she insisted, these fairies kidnapped people and brought them to their hidden palaces for nights of banqueting. Such tales fed Jack's young imagination. He loved to go for walks into the countryside, where he hoped to catch a glimpse of a fairy hurrying around the side of a hill.

Because Belfast was an unhealthy place, Jack's mother, Flora Lewis, was relieved that both her sons loved the countryside more than the city. An open sewer ran through Belfast, and damp fog lay over the city for days at a time. When Jack was born, the average life expectancy of a newborn in Belfast was nine years. As a result, concerned parents did all they could to keep their children from becoming infected with the prevailing diseases: diphtheria, whooping cough, cholera, scarlet fever, and especially typhoid, which had swept through Belfast the year before Jack's birth.

Flora was determined to do a more thorough job with her boys than most mothers. She banned her

sons from going outside when it rained, which was about two hundred days a year. Instead, Jack and Warren were held behind a specially designed "gate" at the back door. The gate was a series of boards placed across the bottom of the door opening so that the boys could see the wet world beyond the house but not get wet themselves. In the middle of December, the darkest period of the year, when the sun set at 3:50 in the afternoon, the boys were allowed to play in the attic, which was illuminated by oil lamps. And each summer, Mrs. Lewis took her two sons, along with several servants, to holiday beside the sea. Their destination was always the same: Castlerock in County Down. Although the place was only fifty miles northwest of Belfast, getting there was one big adventure to the Lewis brothers.

The trip began with a horse-drawn cab ride to the train station in Belfast, followed by a leisurely train journey through the green countryside. Jack loved to travel in the front carriage of the train, and sometimes he even managed to persuade the engineer to allow him to climb up into the steam locomotive with him.

Once they arrived at Castlerock, the family would settle into a furnished house beside the sea, and then Flora would let her sons explore. Jack and Warren loved to leap from rock pool to rock pool, turning over seaweed in search of crabs and digging giant holes that were filled with water by the incoming tide. Although Warren was three and a half years older than Jack, the two brothers were best friends and hardly noticed the age difference between them.

Lizzie pointed out many places with special mystical powers. She also told Jack and Warren about leprechauns and how they hid a crock of gold at the end of every rainbow. Her story made quite an impression on both boys, who determined to find out whether this was true. An opportunity to do this came back in Belfast after a vacation. While out on a short walk one day, Jack looked up and saw a huge rainbow, which appeared to end right in the front garden of the Lewis house. He ran inside, grabbed a shovel, and persuaded Warren, who was a little more cautious, that they had to dig in the front yard to find the crock of gold the leprechauns had buried. The two boys dug furiously. By the time the sun went down, they had excavated a large hole, but, alas, they found no gold.

Later that night Albert Lewis arrived home, tired and irritated from his day's work as a government lawyer. Unwittingly he walked right into the large hole in the front yard and became convinced that his sons had created it as a booby trap for him. Although Jack tried to explain why he and Warren had dug the hole, his father would not believe a word he said. He was so furious with them that he punished each of the boys severely. This was a tough lesson for Jack to learn—not everyone could enter into his imaginary world and appreciate his efforts to prove whether or not it was true.

As soon as he learned to write, Jack began recording stories. There was the story of Sir Peter Mouse, the "knight in waiting" of King Bunny; and Sir Ben,

a courageous frog. They all lived in Animal-Land in the fourteenth century and had many adventures, some of which Jack illustrated and made into crude books.

Jack liked to make things, too, as did Warren. A memory that was to stay with Jack all his life was of Warren presenting him with a tiny model garden. The garden had been assembled on a biscuit-tin lid with a pattern of moss, stones, and leaves that represented the wild Irish landscape. Jack was only six at the time, but the model created a strange surge of excitement in him, as if he had some memory of seeing it before. This feeling was something he would later come to call "joy."

Nothing much else exciting happened to Jack until he was seven years old. That was when his family and the servants moved into a new house. The Lewises employed five servants: a cook, a gardener, a governess, a nursemaid, and a housemaid. Jack's grandmother Lewis had died, and his grandfather wanted to come and live with the family, making the rented house in Belfast much too small for everyone to fit in comfortably. So Albert designed "Little Lea," a mansion on the outskirts of town. Or at least it seemed like a mansion to the two Lewis boys. The house, which was three stories high, was made of brick and had bay windows. The grounds were spacious and bordered on farmland so that the boys could walk or run in the fields.

From the window at the west end of the nursery in the new house, Jack and Warren had a wonderful view of the bustling Belfast shipyards on the Belfast

Lough. From there they could watch hundreds of ships and boats of all shapes and sizes navigating their way up and down the lough. The view gave both brothers endless hours of entertainment.

Beyond the lough to the north lay the green hills called the Glens of Antrim in County Antrim, and to the south, the Castlereagh Hills in County Down. They seemed so far off and mysterious to Jack, and he wondered what magical lands lay beyond them.

The best thing of all about the new house was the small attic rooms that ran the entire length of the house and were connected to each other by small doors. Together, the attic rooms formed a kind of narrow tunnel right under the roof tiles. The house was so big that the attic was not needed for storage, and since none of the adults had any particular interest in banging their heads against the low-hanging rafters, they never ventured up there. The attic was Jack and Warren's private domain. In one of the small rooms, trunks and suitcases were stacked; in another was a pile of old canvas and a mound of yellowing newspapers. In still another was a wobbly, three-legged table. The boys stocked this room with pencils, chalk, paint boxes, and all sorts of paper and set to work creating their own world. Jack created the imaginary country of Boxen, drawing and painting pictures of it and its inhabitants, as well as writing stories about the place. Meanwhile Warren created a fantasy India in his mind that he, too, drew and wrote about.

The boys' adventures in their fantasy worlds were cut short, however, a month after the family moved into Little Lea. Warren, at ten years of age, was sent

off to school in England. This was not unusual; many Anglo-Irish families sent their sons off to get a good education in England. But few of them sent their sons off to a place as hell-like as Wynyard House School in Watford, Hertfordshire. It sounded like a good school from the literature Mr. and Mrs. Lewis had read about the place, but in fact it was a very abusive place. Jack, though, would not learn of the true horrors of the school until years later, when he too was sent off to Wynyard House.

Meanwhile Jack found life at home dull without Warren. His father insisted that he spend more time downstairs. Every evening after dinner, Jack, his mother, and his father would all retire to the library, where they read for several hours. Jack was allowed to read any of the hundreds of books in the house, and he soon grew to love animal stories like *Black Beauty* and magical stories by Edith Nesbit, a prolific children's author. Jack was particularly entranced by her book *The Story of the Amulet,* which described how some children in London stumbled upon a magic amulet that could transport them back in time to fabulous lands.

During the day, a governess named Miss Harper tutored Jack. However, it was Flora Lewis, herself a graduate in mathematics from Queen's College, Belfast, who insisted on teaching Jack French, Latin, and math. These were the lessons Jack enjoyed the most. During this time Jack grew to admire his mother's wit and intelligence.

In the afternoons, when his lessons were over, Jack would climb upstairs to the attic and continue

making up his own stories. He also wrote letters to Warren keeping him informed as to what was going on in Boxen. "At present Boxen is SLIGHTLY CONVULSED," he wrote in one letter. "The news has just reached her that King Bunny is a prisoner. The colonists (who are of course the war party) are in a bad way: they dare scarcely leave their houses because of the mobs. In Tararo the Prussians and Boxonians are at fearful odds against each other and the natives. General Quicksteppe is making plans for the rescue of King Bunny."

To Jack's delight, during the summer of 1907, Mrs. Lewis decided that instead of Warren coming home to visit, she and Jack would collect Warren in London and the three of them would vacation on the northern coast of France. This was eight-year-old Jack's first time out of Ireland, and he enjoyed every minute of the trip. In London they visited the zoo, where Jack saw elephants and zebras, though he was most taken with a cage of white mice.

From London, Flora and her sons crossed the English Channel and made their way to the seaside village of Beneval, near Dieppe. Reunited, Jack and Warren enjoyed exploring the village and the seashore. And inspired by his trip to the zoo in London, Jack started writing a book he titled *Living Races of Mouse Land*.

Back in Belfast for another year without Warren, Jack continued reading many of the books in the Lewis house. He read *Paradise Lost* and decided he needed to spend time reflecting on what it was about. He was also spurred on to write more, and he

produced a wide variety of books that he inventoried on a sheet of paper, titled "List of My Books":

Building of the Promenade (a tale)
Man Against Man (a novel)
Town (an essay)
Relief of Murray (a history)
Bunny (a paper)
Home Rule (an essay)
My Life (a journal)

Jack had started keeping his journal at Christmas, just after his ninth birthday. In it he wrote a description of his servants and family. "I have a lot of enymays [enemies] however there are only 2 in this house they are called Maude and Mat. Maude is far worse than Mat but she thinks she is a saint. . . . Papy [father]," Jack went on to explain, "is the master of the house, and a man in whom you can see strong Lewis features, bad temper, very sensible, nice when not in a temper." His mother, Mamy, he wrote, is "like most middle aged ladys, stout, brown hair, spectacles, knitting is her chief industry." Jack then turned the attention on himself. "I am like most boys of nine, and I am like Papy, bad temper, thick lips, thin and generally wearing a jersey." Grandfather Lewis, who had moved into Little Lea after Jack's grandmother died, is also described. He is "a nice old man in some ways." But he indulged in self-pity, and Jack notes, "However all old people do that."

Jack's simple and predictable life changed in February 1908. Suddenly the adults in the house

began whispering among themselves and exchanging knowing looks. Over the years Jack had grown accustomed to his mother's being unwell, as she suffered from asthma and headaches. But this time she was sick with something much worse. The doctor diagnosed it as stomach cancer and ordered that she have an operation immediately.

Jack looked to the adults in his life for assurance that everything would be all right with his mother, but no one thought to speak to him about what might lie ahead for his mother and the whole Lewis family.