

The Purple Thunderbolt

In the year 1596 the purple thunderbolt turned up at the Council of Cardinals in Rome. That was the Council which declared that blasphemers should be struck down by lightning.

This being a matter falling within his professional competence, the purple thunderbolt appeared at the Council, as I have said, out of the blue.

When he got back upstairs afterwards, a complaint was laid against him that he had intruded somewhat too vigorously among the worthy Cardinals and that two of them were bound for the graveyard in consequence. He said that as a matter of fact, he would like to drop in at that funeral; he was sure it would be a really swell affair. It took Saint Peter a long time to explain to him that it would not look very nice if some fresh catastrophe were to occur at the funeral. If it were some secret heretic they were burying, then of course it would be his duty to come crashing down on it.

So the purple thunderbolt sat looking down from Heaven and feeling pleased with himself.

He looked down with contempt at the little thunderbolts playing and frisking about beneath him. Little whippersnappers, they hadn't attended the Council of Cardinals in Rome!

Then he was called before the Lord and came back with his tail between his legs. He had been confined to quarters for a period of six weeks for having blasted those Cardinals at the Council of Rome. And this in the summer-storm season!

In vain he pleaded that the Council had declared that blasphemers should be struck down by lightning and that this concerned him professionally.

When the Archangel Gabriel got round to talking to the purple thunderbolt, he said: 'It's just your rotten luck. You see, you killed that very fat one, the one who made a particularly deep impression on the faithful. You made a right cock-up.'

From that time forth, the purple thunderbolt was very much on his guard against further cock-ups. One day, a certain saint whom he

knew by sight only, not by name, came to his cloud, stretched out beside him and started to chat. He launched into an account of the way they had boiled him in oil and of the smell it had made.

This got on the purple thunderbolt's nerves and he said: 'Forgive me, but I've had this up to here. This morning, I must have bumped into at least five martyrs and every one of them described what he'd had done to him before he got here. We've all had a basinful of that stuff. It was all very nice and all very new to start with, but fifteen hundred years of it without any let-up: that's hardly the joys of Heaven!'

'But look here,' said the martyr, 'who else am I supposed to tell about it? I haven't told anyone else yet, because I couldn't remember what kind of oil it was, but today I remembered it was hemp-oil.'

'Oh, for God's sake leave me in peace,' snapped the purple thunderbolt angrily, 'it's enough to try the patience of a saint!'

'But it's really very interesting,' said the martyr. 'Which leg do you reckon got cooked first in that oil, the right one, or the left?'

The purple thunderbolt could stand no more of this nattering and took off down to earth to get away from it.

He travelled in a straight line and when he arrived over the roof of some church or other, was unable to stop himself. He went through the roof and struck the pulpit. Wishing to apologise to the preacher, he hung around for a while, but seeing that the latter was on fire, took fright, fled by way of a certain lady into the earth, and slipped inconspicuously away.

On the flight back to Heaven, he was on the verge of tears. 'Oh dear God,' he said to himself, 'here's another fine mess I've got myself into. I was in too much of a hurry; someone down there might just have had the idea of proclaiming that they had sent a fiery chariot down for him from Heaven, like they did that time it happened to that fellow Elijah. That was a real disaster: it was a relief when they did such a good job of hushing it up down on earth. This time though,' he sighed, 'the preacher will turn up in Heaven and there'll be a complaint made straight away about what I've done to him. Another black mark. Perhaps he'll be up there before I am.'

But the purple thunderbolt's fears were not realised. The following communication was received from the Infernal Information Service: 'A certain Jesuit preacher has just arrived here. It has not yet proved possible to interview him, as he is in a state of shock.'

'Hullo!' said Saint Peter when he heard this news. 'That's another

subscriber we've lost.'

Such was the joy of the purple thunderbolt that it had turned out so nicely that he sat for a whole day with a smile on his face, listening to some old fogey going on with relish about the time he had had his intestines drawn out. He made a meal of it, of course; three hundred and seventy-two metres was the figure he quoted.

Then a report came in from Hell to the effect that the preacher had been interviewed and was claiming that it was the purple thunderbolt that had done this thing to him.

But against his expectations, he got a commendation. 'He wasn't really worth the effort, the ruffian,' they told him at the hearing, 'but you did well. You've undermined confidence in the priesthood, it's true, but at any rate, you can look forward to a job with more satisfaction in future. We are appointing you to the permanent job of blasting blasphemers.'

'As laid down by the Council of Rome,' added the purple thunderbolt and set off on reconnaissance.

He found himself a nice dark cloud with a good view of the world below and excellent acoustics. He could hear every word spoken down there.

'Aha!' thought the purple thunderbolt after he had listened for a while. 'This looks like a job for me.' And he continued to observe developments.

In a cottage down below, a red-headed fellow was lying in bed and sitting beside him was a man who, by the look of him, was either a parish priest or a chaplain.

'Come now, Macoun, it's time you mended your ways. You can see that God has punished you: you can't move a muscle.'

'I've got it in the small of me back and I can't stand on me feet neither!'

'And yet you go on using bad language.'

'Well I ask you, sod the bloody thing; what sort of a life do you call this? Damn and blast it to Hell!'

The purple thunderbolt could contain himself no longer and launched himself downwards at the red-headed fellow.

'Wham!' He hit the cottage and the cottage fell down, but now he was sliding downwards along some slippery part of the bed, trying to stop himself and grabbing at His Reverence's hand. The latter went tumbling over and the purple thunderbolt panicked, fled into the pigsty and on up into the sky, where he paused and looked down to see

what he had done. They were carrying His Reverence out and tolling the funeral bell and Macoun was walking about in his parlour, saying: 'Well damn me if it hasn't gone!'

He told this to an old saint with many years of experience, who said to him: 'Don't you know that a man in a feather-bed can curse and blind as much as he likes? And don't you know that a feather-bed is a bad conductor while a priest is a good one?'

'But on top of everything, Macoun can walk!'

'Well, what do you expect,' said the saintly old-stager in a sour tone of voice, 'when you've just given him electric shock therapy.'

The purple thunderbolt burst into tears.