Chapter I

The Simplicity of Father Happé

T IS GENERALLY SUPPOSED that Franciscans are cheerful, and unlike most popular notions, this one, in my experience, is accurate. The little Franciscan monastery at Shingle Bay on the south coast is an ugly, sunny landmark. It looks as though five or six cottages had had a collision, which time and some creepers had healed. The largest of the apparently runaway cottages is the church, and the rest of them house a few theological students, and some friars who are in charge of the parish. Ruling over the lot is the Father guardian, Father Matthew, whose laugh usually leads the rest as you may hear, if you happen to be passing at recreation time. Everyone in Shingle Bay, Catholic, Protestant, or pagan, likes him. Policemen, shop-keepers, ladies who let "Apartments" in the summer, the doctor and Mr. Forbes-Chippenham at the Manor would nod if you mentioned his name, and lay claim to know him very well indeed.

It would be safe to wager a large sum of money, that they would have been as astonished as was that young theologian Father Hilary, D.D., if they had been in his shoes, or rather sandals, on that morning in early December when, watching his Superior read his mail, he heard him give an immense groan and put his head in his hands. In fact, all he could think of for the moment was that the Catholic Church had been wound up and the Holy Father had gone out of business.

"B-b-but what in the world is it?" was all he could utter, the eloquence which was the pride of the community brought to nothing.

"Someone's dead?… Are you ill, Father Guardian?"

"Worse than that," was the dread response, and the hands in which the head was, scuffled its hair this way and that, as though searching for the best handful to begin tearing out.

"Not…not Mrs. Badger wanting to play the organ at the Guild meetings again?"

Father Guardian's head left his hands, but only to shake itself, and the hands raised themselves to heaven.

"Worse than *that*," he said, "The Provincial's thinking we can do with another to help with the parish, and he's sending us…"

"Not…?" began Father Hilary, who had an almost feminine ability of daring to think the very worst.

"Father Happy," said the Guardian, and going to the window threw it up, knowing they would both need air.

The sea-fog rushed in and swirled round them, like a *génie* come to gloat over their fate.

The Guardian slammed down the window again, and with a shiver that was only partially for the weather, went over to the microscopic fire in the archaic grate, and kicked the five pieces of coal to an extravagant blaze.

What was more, poking through the tin in which he kept postage stamps, he produced a couple of cigarettes, and, straightening the bends out of them, he handed the best of the two to Father Hilary.

"Light up," he said, "we need something for the nerves."

Now before you have any further thoughts on the uncharitableness of people in whom you would never suspect such a thing and the disedifying behaviour that goes on behind monastery walls if all were known—let me explain about Father Happy.

Of course that was not his name. It was actually Father Savinius. Father Savinius Happé. Ah, yes, I *do* mean to say *that* Savinius Happé—the great geologist and the man who wrote these two books on botany, one on beetles, five volumes on Etruscan civilisation, a monograph on two Alpine orchids and the last word on the

Father Happé

Waldensian heresy. But of course I have seen his photograph, and know what a round smiling face he has: dreaming eyes behind bent, steel spectacles, crooked nose, big mouth with a quirk of humour at one corner. Then was it fear lest the friary could not make such a great man sufficiently comfortable that dismayed the Guardian? I am quite sure it was not. Father Savinius was well known among his brethren for the extreme simplicity of his tastes. Was it a certain more or less understandable insularity which remembered that although Father Savinius had entered the English province of the Franciscan Order, having lived with his English mother at Camberwell Green from the age of twelve onwards, yet, born in Savoie and having passed his early years at the farm of his father's people, he could never master either the English grammar, nor its intonation? It was not that either. Franciscan houses of study contain a fine assortment of nationalities, and the Guardian himself spoke German and French and Italian and a little Spanish.

At this point I realise, that, like most explanations, this one has made things worse rather than better. You are convinced by now

that there was something very wrong indeed with Father Savinius, despite his photograph.

Well, then, I shall not attempt any further explanation. I will simply say that, in his reply to the Provincial, Father Guardian said that he noted Father Savinius was arriving on the Saturday before the last Sunday in Advent, and that he would count on him to preach for the Sunday High Mass. He would do his best to make Father Savinius at home at Shingle Bay and to give him all the leisure that remained after his pastoral duties, so that he might continue his literary work.

No, I blame Father Guardian for nothing, except for the unguarded remark which was overheard by a young student and joyfully reported to the common-room. "Well, the parish will know the worst by noon on Sunday."

When one faces an audience, one is bound to notice certain people here and there — the girl with the red hat, the old man with the ear-trumpet, the boy eating sweets — who are landmarks in it. So, when one thinks of a parish, one is bound to have certain people in the forefront of one's mind. And I think that when he made that remark, Father Guardian was bound to have in mind such people as Doctor Deedle, Mr. and Mrs. Forbes-Chippingham, the Misses Brackett who kept the sweet-shop, the Lestranges who kept the Gift Shop, Mrs. Badger, Roger Campbell in his motor-chair (he lost both legs at Gallipoli), and the Gardens with their six children under ten.

It was Doctor Deedle who, coming from attending Brother Porter's sprained wrist, saw the notice on the church door, and told Mrs. Forbes-Chippingham when he met her in the post office, that she was in for a sermon about geology next Sunday.

But by Sunday morning, the news had gone round the village so many times that Doctor Deedle's conclusion, when he arrived late and found the church full, was that the village must have been suffering from a long suppressed desire for information about geology,

until then unsuspected. Having heard from his wife, who had been at the eight o'clock Mass, he knew that, for many of the congregation, this was a second attendance.

But the fact was, there is very little happening in Shingle Bay in the winter, and curiosity gets up an appetite.

When Father Guardian retired after giving out the notices, and sat down in the sanctuary, his attitude, hands on knees, was more than liturgically correct: it expressed a resignation redolent of the ages of persecution.

The sacristy bell tinkled, curiosity tingled, and the congregation, turning their heads with what they hoped was justifiable respect, were touched to an immobility like that of Tibetan worshippers, who do not breathe. Beaming upon them was the well-known face of Father Savinius Happé, but trundling underneath it was his body, which the photographer had always omitted, because it was completely spherical. In fact, with the assistance of his surplice and hood, he looked exactly like a tennis ball emerging, with a smile, from a twist of brown paper.

It is doubtful if any other preacher could have missed the gasp which greeted the audience's realisation of the fact that this bouncing dwarf was Father Savinius of literary, botanical and antiquarian fame; but Father Savinius had been so interested in the world in which he found himself from the moment when he looked up from his wooden cradle and blinked at his father's beard, that he had not got so far as discovering himself. He was, in fact, the most unself-conscious person who ever knew his own name and his own sins and was otherwise *compos mentis*.

Far from being discountenanced, his smile broadened with every step to the pulpit. His crooked nose seemed to join forces with the quirk of his mouth, and his large gray eyes to widen, in an effort to keep his satisfaction within bounds.

And when, by means of the extra stage in the pulpit, he appeared over it, and with an unexpectedly thin hand made the sign

of the cross as though it were an experiment, his first words came out resonantly.

"I," he said, "am Happé."

I have it on the evidence of the youngest student, that even Father Guardian's head jerked round like that of a marionette, and that, as for the congregation, you could have heard a pin drop.

Yet, without anything but satisfaction in his voice, Father Savinius went on:

"What else could I be?" And here he paused, and smiled round the church.

Someone in the front of the church swallowed and choked, but nobody else moved.

"I am *very, very* happy indeed," said Father Savinius, "to come to you so that I have time to keep with you, the feast of Christmas." And while his congregation began to come out of their trance with stirrings and glances grins exchanged between those who were young enough to like to have their ears deceive them, he continued. "My Provincial, who stands for me in the place of Divine Providence has sent me to join your pilgrimage to Bethlehem. You know, it is a steep ascent. To understand it, it is like we climb a mountain!" His voice was vibrant and he pointed above his head to the iron supports of the roof, but even the boys did not find it funny, for in his eyes was the memory of the Alps, and they, who had never seen anything higher than the South Downs, knew, nevertheless, that he was thinking of some great dignity.

Then came the words for which Father Guardian was waiting, for in the houses of the Order they were a by-word.

"If we are to understand, we must be very simple. How God became a Babe, it is the great Mystery. I think I tell you a little story."

Father Guardian bent his head; and not one of his flock took it for a gesture of anything but humble attention. As a matter of fact he was praying. "O Lord," he prayed, "don't let him tell one of his worst!"

"When I was a boy in Savoie," said Father Savinius, "my father had a mule. You know what a mule is like, *hein*? They are not easy to teach, isn't it? Well, and this mule of my father, we could not teach him. So my uncle, who is a priest, he say we shall call me Nescio, which means 'Know Nothing.'

"One day in the winter, when it was very cold, and when I was ten years old, I must take him to the mill for some flour. And we set out early because there was long to go and the darkness came down soon And we went troo the forest up and up by the little paths, up to the mill.

"When we turn back, it is already past two o'clock, and it is a dark afternoon. That was not very good. But much worse is Nescio. He will not keep to the path. I beat him, I back him, I talk with him, but when I am so tired that I am nearly in tears, for it was so cold, Nescio trows up his back heels, and he goes straight down the mountain, troo the trees, troo the thorns, over the rocks, troo the streams, and on his back I am beaten by all the branches, scratched by all the thorns, very much frightened and very, very cold, and I think that Nescio is mad."

There was not a boy in the church, nor anyone who had once been a boy, or knew how a boy feels, who was suffering from distractions. They had possibly forgotten that they were listening to a sermon, but they knew they were listening to a true story, told in a voice like a bell.

"And at last, when I was sobbing with the pain and with the fear, when it was very dark, there came the snow. It fell fast, in big flakes. I could not see the branches to push them aside, and so they struck me till I was fainting. And then, of a sudden, there were no branches, and Nescio's hoofs were on the road, and there was an open door, and I was in the arms of my uncle. I did not know anything more for a long while, and when I do, I was in a chair by the fire, and down the chimney there was coming the long flakes of snow of the greatest snowstorm that had been in Savoie for years.

There was not a boy
in the church — who
was suffering from distractions.

"My mother said to me then: 'We will not call him Nescio any more.' And my uncle said, when he came back from giving him a grand supper: 'Nescio knows just one thing: he knows what he needs and he flies from the darkness. He knew that great storm was coming.'"

Father Savinius paused and hunted in his sleeve for his handkerchief; but even when he produced it, with its hem half off and indications of pen-wiping on it, it did not distract his congregation.

"My children," he said, "what mules we are!"

He gazed affectionately at those he so apostrophised, and seemed to look at them one by one.

"We know nothing, and we are not easy to teach. We have what we call 'our own ideas.' We do not like if we are told we go the wrong way to work, isn't it? We are not simple, like the little donkeys who just stand by the Crib, and who learn to bear Our Lord to Jerusalem. We are stupid, not simple. We only know one thing. We know what we need, and we fly from the darkness, and so we save ourselves from the death of the soul. Good. It is a great thing to be not'ing more than we are. We will not ask to be the donkeys of the Lord, to be the donkey at Bethlehem, but only to come there, out of the darkness, because we need to be sheltered and to be fed. We shall not be hypocrites if we do that, for none of us," his gaze wandered over the pious and respectable congregation "is so bad that we are too bad to be a mule, or so ignorant that we do not know this need.

"And so," said Father Savinius, "we shall begin."

With which, he ended.