

St. Patrick's Purgatory.

1798

Robert Southey

THIS Ballad was published (1801) in the Tales of Wonder, by Mr. Lewis, who found it among the wefts and strays of the Press. He never knew that it was mine ; but after his death I bestowed some pains in recomposing it, because he had thought it worth preserving.

It is founded upon the abridged extract which M. le Grand has given in his Fabliaux of a Metrical legend, by Marie de France.

1.

“ ENTER, Sir Knight,” the Warden cried,
“ And trust in Heaven whate'er betide,
Since you have reach'd this bourn ;
But first receive refreshment due,
'T will then be time to welcome you
If ever you return.”

2.

Three sops were brought of bread and wine ;
Well might Sir Owen then divine
The mystic warning given,
That he against our ghostly Foe
Must soon to mortal combat go,
And put his trust in Heaven.

3.

Sir Owen pass'd the convent gate,
The Warden him conducted straight
To where a coffin lay ;
The Monks around in silence stand,
Each with a funeral torch in hand
Whose light bedimm'd the day.

4.

“ Few Pilgrims ever reach this bourn,”
They said, “ but fewer still return ;
Yet, let what will ensue,
Our duties are prescribed and clear ;
Put off all mortal weakness here,
This coffin is for you.

5.

“ Lie there, while we with pious breath
Raise over you the dirge of death,
This comfort we can give ;
Belike no living hands may pay
This office to your lifeless clay,
Receive it while you live !”

6.

Sir Owen in a shroud was dress'd,
They placed a cross upon his breast,
And down he laid his head ;
Around him stood the funeral train,
And sung with slow and solemn strain
The Service of the Dead.

7.

Then to the entrance of the Cave
They led the Christian warrior brave ;
Some fear he well might feel,
For none of all the Monks could tell
The terrors of that mystic cell,
Its secrets none reveal.

8.

“ Now enter here,” the Warden cried,
“ And God, Sir Owen, be your guide !
Your name shall live in story :
For of the few who reach this shore,
Still fewer venture to explore
St. Patrick's Purgatory.”

9.

Adown the Cavern's long descent,
Feeling his way Sir Owen went,
With cautious feet and slow ;
Unarm'd, for neither sword nor spear,
Nor shield of proof avail'd him here
Against our ghostly Foe.

10.

The ground was moist beneath his tread,
Large drops fell heavy on his head,
The air was damp and chill,

And sudden shudderings o'er him came,
And he could feel through all his frame
An icy sharpness thrill.

11.

Now steeper grew the dark descent ;
In fervent prayer the Pilgrim went,
'T was silence all around,
Save his own echo from the cell,
And the large drops that frequent fell
With dull and heavy sound.

12.

But colder now he felt the cell,
Those heavy drops no longer fell,
Thin grew the piercing air ;
And now upon his aching sight,
There dawn'd far off a feeble light,
In hope he hasten'd there.

13.

Emerging now once more to day
A frozen waste before him lay,
A desert wild and wide,
Where ice-rocks in a sunless sky,
On ice-rocks piled, and mountains high,
Were heap'd on every side.

14.

Impending as about to fall
They seem'd, and had that sight been all,
Enough that sight had been
To make the stoutest courage quail ;
For what could courage there avail
Against what then was seen ?

15.

He saw, as on in faith he past,
Where many a frozen wretch was fast
Within the ice-clefts pent,
Yet living still, and doom'd to bear
In absolute and dumb despair
Their endless punishment.

16.

A Voice then spake within his ear,
And fill'd his inmost soul with fear,—
“ O mortal Man,” it said,
“ Adventurers like thyself were these !”
He seem'd to feel his life-blood freeze,
And yet subdued his dread.

17.

“ O mortal Man,” the Voice pursued,
“ Be wise in time ! for thine own good
Alone I counsel thee ;
Take pity on thyself, retrace
Thy steps, and fly this dolorous place
While yet thy feet are free.

18.

“ I warn thee once ! I warn thee twice !
Behold ! that mass of mountain-ice
Is trembling o'er thy head !
One warning is allow'd thee more ;
O mortal Man, that warning o'er,
And thou art worse than dead !”

19.

Not without fear, Sir Owen still
Held on with strength of righteous will,
In faith and fervent prayer ;
When at the word, “ I warn thee thrice !”
Down came the mass of mountain ice,
And overwhelm'd him there.

20.

Crush'd though, it seem'd, in every bone,
And sense for suffering left alone,
A living hope remain'd ;
In whom he had believed, he knew,
And thence the holy courage grew
That still his soul sustain'd.

21.

For he, as he beheld it fall,
Fail'd not in faith on Christ to call,—
“ Lord, Thou canst save !” he cried ;

O heavenly help vouchsafed in need,
When perfect faith is found indeed ;
The rocks of ice divide.

22.

Like dust before the storm-wind's sway
The shiver'd fragments roll'd away,
And left the passage free ;
New strength he feels, all pain is gone,
New life Sir Owen breathes, and on
He goes rejoicingly.

23.

Yet other trials he must meet.
For soon a close and piercing heat
Relax'd each loosen'd limb ;
The sweat stream'd out from every part,
In short quick beatings toil'd his heart,
His throbbing eyes grew dim.

24.

Along the wide and wasted land
A stream of fire through banks of sand
Its molten billows spread ;
Thin vapours tremulously light
Hung quivering o'er the glowing white,
The air he breathed was red.

25.

A Paradise beyond was seen,
Of shady groves and gardens green,
Fair flowers and fruitful trees,
And flowing fountains cool and clear,
Whose gurgling music reach'd his ear
Borne on the burning breeze.

26.

How should he pass that molten flood ?
While gazing wistfully he stood,
A Fiend, as in a dream,
“ Thus !” answer'd the unutter'd thought,
Stretch'd forth a mighty arm, and caught
And cast him in the stream.

27.

Sir Owen groan'd, for then he felt
His eyeballs burn, his marrow melt,
His brain like liquid lead,
And from his heart the boiling blood
Its agonizing course pursued
Through limbs like iron red.

28.

Yet, giving way to no despair,
But mindful of the aid of prayer,
“ Lord, Thou canst save !” he said ;
And then a breath from Eden came,
With life and healing through his frame
The blissful influence spread.

29.

No Fiends may now his way oppose,
The gates of Paradise unclose,
Free entrance there is given ;
And songs of triumph meet his ear,
Enrapt, Sir Owen seems to hear
The harmonies of Heaven.

30.

“ Come, Pilgrim ! take thy foretaste meet,
Thou who hast trod with fearless feet
St. Patrick's Purgatory,
For after death these seats divine,
Reward eternal, shall be thine
And thine eternal glory.”

31.

Inebriate with the deep delight,
Dim grew the Pilgrim's swimming sight,
His senses died away ;
And when to life he woke, before
The Cavern-mouth he saw once more
The light of earthly day.

Westbury, 1798.

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