

## St. Fursey's Life & Visions

### *St. Fursey's life and visions, and other essays*

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THERE appears to be no doubt that the Vision of St. Fursey is the oldest of all the Celtic legends treating of the experiences of the Christian soul in the regions beyond the grave. "Tracing the course of thought upwards, through the visions of Alberic and Owain Miles, and the other compositions of a like nature, we have no difficulty," says Sir Francis Palgrave, "in deducing the poetic genealogy of the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* to the Milesian Fursæus." [1]

Towards the close of the sixth century, according to the most trustworthy authorities, Fintan, the son of Finlog, king of a territory in southern Munster, found it necessary, on account of some troubles in the little State, to absent himself for a while, and took advantage of the opportunity thus afforded to make a tour in Erin, visit the provincial kings in their royal raths, form friendships with distinguished men of the day, and perfect himself in such branches of letters and polity as might be useful to him in after-life. He was an accomplished prince, as young men of his position were expected to be after a prolonged course of education in the schools of the Druids and the bards. Received with distinction in Leinster, he passed into Connaught, where a like success awaited him. Among the local magnates who gave him a hospitable welcome, was the Prince of Hy-Brinn or Breifne, Aedfind, the ancestor of the O'Rourkes and O'Reillys. While sojourning in this part of the country, he fell in love with Gelesia, the daughter of Aedfind. She, a Christian, won him over to the true faith, and then, under very romantic circumstances, though much to her father's displeasure, married him.

Authorities are not agreed in assigning the birthplace of Fursey, the illustrious issue of this alliance. Some will have it that he first saw the light in an island of Lough Orbsen (Corrib), whither his parents had fled to escape the wrath of Aedfind ; [2] while others, with more probability, state that Minister was his *patria* or country, and that he was not born until Fintan had brought his wife home to his native place.

However this may have been, his childhood was passed in the south, and his education carefully attended to in his father's house. Very early in life he received a call to dedicate himself to religion ; and when the proper time came, he set out for the shores of Lough Corrib, with a view to pursue his sacred studies in a district famous even then for the saintly men sojourning within its bounds, and for the monastic establishments flourishing on the bosky mainland, and in the islands dotting the broad expanse of the lake.

The goal of his pilgrimage was the island already alluded to, lying, with its primeval woods and holy solitudes, about a mile off the eastern shore. A special halo invested this sanctuary, owing to the fact that the great St. Brendan had chosen it for the home of his venerable age; and, after his voyage on the Western Ocean, his missionary wanderings in foreign countries, his apostolic labours in Erin, and his arduous government of immense monasteries and colleges, had built a chapel and a cell on the island, and retired thither

await the hour of death and of deliverance. The “ Patriarch of Monks” was not alone in this retreat. St. Moeni, who had been with him on his seven years’ voyage, was also with him on the island. St. Meldan likewise became his disciple, and took up his abode in the same retreat. Probably these were not the only companions of his solitude. But whether the cenobites were few or many, the place must still have been a solitude when compared with the religious and scholastic colony he had governed at Clonfert, where three thousand monks dwelt in one community, and a vast concourse of students attended the schools. [3]

After St. Brendan’s demise, the governance of the cœnobium devolved on Meldan Mac Ui Cuinn, under whose rule it grew into a large monastic establishment, famous throughout the country. Meldan was of royal extraction, being of the race of Con of the Hundred Battles, Monarch of Ireland in the second century. The sept of Hui Cuinn, as the descendants of Con were called, had possession of the country about Lough Corrib ; and the island we are speaking of was a part of their patrimony. Meldan therefore, “ Abbot and Bishop of Lough Orbsen, in Connaught,” was, in every sense of the word, on his own ground when he trod the pathways of the holy isle. Doubtless many of his kinsfolk joined the recluses, and dwelt under the abbot’s paternal rule. His brothers were undoubtedly of the number of his spiritual sons, for history records that the monastery was built about 580 by St. Meldan and his brothers.

It is not expressly mentioned that a school formed part of the establishment on the island ; but we may be tolerably certain that this settlement formed no exception to the general rule at a time when Irish monasteries were seats of learning, and when even anchorites in their lonely cells, and religious women secluded from the world, were subject to the visits, and not indifferent to the claims, of those who sought instruction at their hands. Strange it would have been if the abbot were not called upon to train the youth of his clan in sacred and secular knowledge. His insular domain was within easy access of the frail, hide-covered coracles in which the natives of that region skimmed the translucent waters. The sound of St. Meldan’s bell could be heard on the wood-fringed shore ; and across the placid lake the chant of the Gaelic monks—those masters in sacred song—was borne far and wide by the wandering wind. Not, indeed, that the convenient situation of their seminary made much matter to the eager students. When youths began their school-life, they encamped in wattle huts (the work of their own hands), close to the cashel or circular wall enclosing the group of monastic cells and the little church of primitive construction ; and there they remained until they had got the instruction they required in doctrine, in arts, and in industry. For, nurtured as they were on piety, poetry, and “ grammar,” they were, nevertheless, put through a healthful course of industrial training. They had all—the chieftain’s child as well as the clansman’s—to follow the example of the monks, and contribute by the labour of their hands to the support of the establishment. No college fees were exacted, nor was the community burdensome to any. Work and study, high thinking and low living, comprised the rule alike of professors and scholars in those old-world academies.

Meldan’s monastery became so celebrated that the island shared in the renown of the founder, and was distinguished from the neighbouring isles by the appellation of *Inis mac Hua Chin*, the Island of the Sons of Con. Even Lough Orbsen received a reflected honour, and was sometimes called by a name signifying that it was the lake that bore on its breast the island of Inchiquin. [4]

The monastery founded by the descendants of Con of the Hundred Battles was already in a flourishing condition when the youthful Fursey arrived from southern Munster to complete his education under the monks, and embrace the religious life in the island monastery.

Though the abbot may have early discerned the gifts, and augured well from the virtues, of his disciple, he could hardly have divined that he himself should become famous in far-distant lands as the spiritual father of St. Fursey ; or that his relics would be carried abroad and enshrined in the banks of the Somme by the loving hands of that illustrious son. Having remained for several years under St. Meldan's tutelage, Fursey, according to some authorities, repaired to the islands of Arran for study and edification, and sojourned for a while with the holy recluses dwelling in those ocean solitudes. Returning to Inchiquin a greater proficient in the science of the saints, he was advised by the abbot to build a monastery of his own and assemble a religious community around him. Following this counsel, Fursey, early in the seventh century, formed a settlement at a place called Rathmat, now identified as Killursa or Kill-Fursa (Fursey's Church), situated nearly opposite Inchiquin, and about two miles from the lake. To build a monastery in those days was by no means a stupendous undertaking. Nothing more was necessary than to clear a site, fell some trees, construct huts or cells of the wattles and timber, and encompass the cluster of rude edifices with a hedge or a wall, as the case might be. The little church, standing in the midst, would be of a superior style, constructed of planed timber, or, in rare instances, of cyclopean masonry. Of course, in districts where stone abounded, in exposed situations on the sea-coast, on the precipitous islands lashed by the Atlantic surge, the monastic settlements assumed a far greater solidity. But the wattle encampment was the usual style. It is quite possible that Fursey may have erected the small church, many ages ago incorporated with a larger structure, which, now in ruins, attracts the attention of the curious, and beguiles the feet of archæologists to Kill-Fursa. The original cyclopean west gable, with its Egyptian-looking doorway, is embedded in the later, yet still ancient, masonry ; and the learned in such matters are of opinion that this vestige of primæval architecture cannot be less than twelve hundred years old. [5]

When the settlement at Rathmat, or Kill-Fursa, was sufficiently established, the pious founder resolved to make a journey to the home in Munster, which he had left so many years before and had not since revisited. Some changes had taken place meanwhile in the little kingdom. Finlog had died, and his son Fintan, elected according to the custom of the country, reigned in his stead. In this expedition, the abbot's purpose seems to have been to promote the spiritual welfare of his own people, and to induce some of his kinsfolk to join him, on his return to Rathmat, and place themselves under instruction at the monastery.

Fursey had not long arrived at his destination when a sudden illness seized him. He became so enfeebled that his friends fancied his last hour was at hand. Recovering himself, however, he arose, and, supporting himself with difficulty on the arm of a companion, went out, walked a few steps from the house, and began to recite the evening office. Completely absorbed in prayer, his lips murmured the words of the sacred psalmody. Suddenly he felt himself enveloped in darkness. All power of movement forsook him, and he was carried back into the house apparently in a dying state.

Presently, in the midst of the dense obscurity, he perceived that four hands stretched downwards towards him, caught him by the arms, and bore him aloft. After a while, becoming more accustomed to the darkness, he plainly discerned four wings expanded upwards, and white as the driven snow. The hands and wings he could now distinctly see, but the rest of the angelic forms were only dimly visible. But when they had ascended still higher, he was able to distinguish the beauteous faces of his conductors, illumined with a wondrous glory ; or rather his eyes were filled with the radiance emanating from their faces, though he could not, on account of the excess of brilliance, distinguish any corporeal form. At the same time he became conscious that a third angel walked on before him, clothed in luminous vesture, carrying a white shield, and armed with a sword keen as a flash of lightning. The marvellous splendour of the angels, the harmonious rustling of their wings, the

melody of their songs, and the divine beauty of their aspect, penetrated his soul with inexpressible delight. For, as they moved along they sang—the first angel intoning the opening phrase, the others joining in and continuing the chant. And the burden of their song was this—*The saints shall advance from virtue to virtue, the God of gods shall be seen in Zion*. Higher and higher rose the voices, the psalmody rolling on in ever-increasing power ; and then the music sank in dulcet modulation, and seemed to die away in the ethereal distance, until, caught up again by myriads of angelic voices, the strain burst forth into a resounding chorus, of which Fursey could distinguish one verse only—*They shall come out before the face of Christ*. All the heavenly faces which he now beheld seemed to him alike, but the light was so dazzling that it veiled the corporeal form and hid it from his view.

Fain would he have tarried in this world of indescribable splendour and harmony, but it could not be,—he must fill up the term of his earthly probation ; and the angels, promising to return to him before long, led him back to life.

Meanwhile the night had passed away, and the crowing of the cock announced the rising morn. The music of the heavenly choirs no longer filled his ear. Nothing was audible but the dissonance of human voices wailing and lamenting. At that moment those who were standing round the inanimate body uncovered the face ; a faint blush mantled the pale cheeks, and the servant of God, opening his eyes, addressed the mourners, and asked them wherefore they lamented and why so great a rout was made. Thereupon the men related all that had occurred, —telling him how on the previous evening he had expired, and how they had remained ever since in the same spot, watching beside his corpse. Then Fursey arose. The splendid and gracious presence of the angels came back to his remembrance, and, recollecting that they had promised to return, he regretted that he had not beside him some wise and prudent man to whom he might recount all that he had seen and heard. And in order that the angels on their return might not find him unprepared, he asked to receive the Communion of the Body and Blood of the spotless Lamb. Thus he remained all that day and the next in a state of great exhaustion.

But in the night, about the hour of tierce, while relatives, friends, and several of the neighbours were assembled in the house, he was again wrapped in sudden darkness. His feet grew stiff and cold ; and extending his hands in the attitude of prayer, he awaited death in joyful expectation, for he remembered the enchanting vision of which these signs had been the forerunners once before. Overpowered, as it were, with sleep, he fell back on his couch. Immediately his ears were assailed with terrific cries, as of countless voices shouting and bidding him depart out of the body and come away. But, opening his eyes, he saw only the three angels standing at his side. The voices of men were hushed, and their forms had vanished. Already the heavenly orchestra and the beauty of the celestial visitants filled him with delight. The angel at his right hand said to him : “ Be not afraid ; you shall be defended.”

They bore him upwards, ascending higher and higher, until the roof of his dwelling sank out of sight. Onwards he went, amidst the outcries and howlings of demons calling to one another to stop his progress, while he could distinctly hear one of the infernal spirits summoning the rest to come on and wage war before his face. On his left he saw, as it were, a dark cloud sweeping onwards—a whirlwind of hellish shapes twisted together in horrible confusion. Presently these writhing forms became disentangled, and marshalled their ranks in battle array before him. As far as his eye could reach, the figures of the demons showed black and terrible ; while their long distended necks, their lean visages, and great bullet heads awakened feelings of the utmost loathing. When they flew hither and thither, or rushed to battle, he could distinguish nothing but a sinister shadow, an incompact mass of dreadful

shapes, enough to make the soul wither away with fear. Moreover, their features were obscured by the denseness of the shadow in which they were immersed ; just as, on the other hand, he had not been able to discern the traits of the angelic faces in the excess of light that surrounded them.

Forthwith began the onslaught of the satanic hosts. The demons shot their fiery arrows against the servant of God ; but the darts struck the white buckler of the warrior angel, and fell away, innoxious and extinguished. In the presence of the angel equipped for the contest, the hostile ranks were over-thrown. “ Bar not the passage,” said the angel, remonstrating with his adversaries ; “ it is of no avail. This man has no part in your perdition.” But the devils, awfully blaspheming, clamoured for their prey, crying out that it was unjust of God to save sinners from damnation when it was written, that : *Not only they who sin, but they who agree with sinners are worthy of death.* Still the contest continued, and it seemed to Fursey that the thunder and clash of the combat must be heard throughout the whole earth.

Satan, though vanquished, raised his head again like a serpent crushed but venomous. “ Many times,” he shrieked, “ has this man spoken idle words, and he must not enjoy eternal life without expiating his sins.” “ Not so,” replied the guardian spirit ; “ if you can bring up no capital accusations against him, he shall not perish for venial faults.” Then urged the reviler : “ *If you will not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive you your sins.*” “ When did He take revenge ?” replied the angel ; “ or whom did He ever injure ?” “ It is not written,” said the demon, “ that you must not revenge yourself, but *If you do not forgive from your heart.*” “ Forgiveness was in his heart,” answered the angel, “ though, yielding somewhat to a human custom, he did not outwardly show it.” Then, persisted Satan : “ Since he has contaminated himself with the sinful habits of men, he shall receive sentence from the Supreme Judge.” “ Be it so,” concluded the angel. “ He shall be arraigned before the Lord.”

Repulsed for the third time, the old serpent’s venom was not yet exhausted. “ If God is a just God, this man shall never enter into eternal life ; for it stands recorded : *Unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.* Fursey has by no means fulfilled this precept.” “ He shall be judged before the Lord,” was again the angel’s answer. And then the signal for the fight once more was given, and the battle raged until the hosts of hell were overthrown.

Then the angel on the right desired Fursey to look back upon the world. Casting his eyes downward, he beheld a dark and obscure valley underneath him, and saw four great fires kindled there at some distance from one another. And as he could not, in answer to the angel’s query, tell what these fires might signify, his heavenly conductor said : “ These are the four fires that consume the world, even though all sin was effaced by baptism, by faith in Christ, and by renouncing Satan with all his works and pomps. The first is falsehood ; for men fail to fulfil the engagement they made in baptism to renounce the devil and his works. The second is covetousness, which sets a higher value on the riches of the world than on heavenly things. The third is dissension ; for men do not hesitate, even in needless matters, to injure the soul of their neighbour. And the fourth is iniquity ; for they think little of dealing deceitfully and despoiling the poor.”

And while they were yet speaking, the fires spread far and wide, until, uniting in one vast conflagration, the flames approached to where Fursey and the angels stood. Filled with dread, he cried to the guardian spirit : “ See, the fire rushes on to destroy me !” But the angel, reassuring him, bade him have no fear. “ The fire you have not kindled,” he said, “ never will consume you. Great and terrible as these flames are, they burn only in proportion to the measure of each man’s sins. For all iniquity shall be consumed in him ; and as the body is

inflamed with sinful desires, so shall the soul feel the scorching pain in just retribution.” Then one of the angels, going before, opened a way through the furnace,—the flames rising up like a wall on either hand,—and the other protecting spirits, spreading their wings and shielding him, on each side. The fires were alive with unclean spirits flying about, exciting a horrible commotion in the midst of the flames, and arming for a new contest. Immediately the battle began again. One of the devils, raising his voice, cried out : “ Surely, *The servant who knows the unit of his Lord, and doth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes ?* ” “ And in what,” inquired the angel, “ has this man failed to do the behests of his Master ? ” “ He has accepted the gifts of the wicked,” was the rejoinder. “ But he believed they had repented of their sins,” said his defender, “ he ought to have waited,” retorted the accuser, “ until they proof of the sincerity of their repentance before he received their presents ; for *Gifts blind the eyes of the wise, and destroy the words of the just.* ” The angel answered : “ He shall be judged before the Lord.”

Once more the arch-deceiver, worsted in his attack, vomited forth blasphemies against the Creator. “ Hitherto we used to believe in a God of truth,” he shrieked, “ but we were mistaken. Did not the prophet Isaiah affirm that the sin which was not punished on earth should be purged in the next world when he cried to the Jews : *If you be willing and will hearken to me, you shall eat the good things of the land. But if you will not, and provoke me to wrath, the sword shall devour you ?* Now this man did not expiate his sins while on earth, and he is not receiving chastisement here. Where, then, is God’s justice ? ” “ Cease to blaspheme,” broke in the indignant angel ; “ you know not the secret judgments of the Lord.” “ What secret is there here ? ” persisted Satan. “ As long as there is hope of repentance,” rejoined the angel, “ the Divine Mercy never abandons the human soul.” “ But there is no time here for repentance,” objected the Evil One. “ Perchance there may be,” observed the heavenly spirit ; “ you cannot fathom the depth of the mysteries of God.” Then the demon, silenced on this side also, shouted to his satellites to depart and leave them, since there was no justice to be expected.

But another of the accursed troop broke in : “ Wait ; there is still a narrow gate, which few succeed in passing through. Let us lie in ambush for him there. It is written : *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* ” The angel answered, that Fursey had done good to his neighbour ; but the adversary rejoined, that it was not enough to do good, unless he loved his neighbour as himself. To which it was replied, that the performance of good deeds was the fruit of charity, and that God would render to everyone according to his works. But the demon insisted that the man’s charity did not fulfil the precept, and that he had earned damnation. Then the infernal host hurried forward to give battle. But the heavenly spirits came off victorious in the contest.

Defeated for the sixth time, the demon, still according to his wont, flew into a passion of impious rage, saying that if God was not unjust, if falsehood and the breaking of promises were really displeasing in His sight, Fursey could not escape condemnation ; for though he engaged to renounce the world, he had loved the world, contrary to the precept of the apostle when he said : *Love not the world, nor the things which are in the world ;* he had been deterred neither by his own promise nor by the command of the apostle. To which the angel replied, that Fursey valued not the goods of the world for his own advantage, but that he might distribute them to the needy. “ No matter in what way the riches of the world are prized,” insisted the the old serpent, “ it is against the law of God and contrary to the Christian obligation of baptism.”

Again the angels prevailed, and their adversaries retreated before them. But Satan returned to pursue his insidious attacks : “ *If thou wilt not announce to the unjust man his iniquity, I*

*will require his blood at thy hand.* Thus it stands written,” he said ; “ and this man has not preached repentance to sinners, as he was bound to do.” Answering him, the angel said : “ Yet also it stands written : *The prudent shall keep silence at that time, for it is an evil time ;* and when hearers despise the word, the teacher’s tongue is tied.” But the wily enemy urged : “ The truth must be preached despite of suffering, despite of death. One should neither consent nor hold his peace.”

Thus, fiercely disputing and fighting, the demons raged, until at length, by the judgment of God, victory remained with the angels, and their adversaries were utterly routed.

Then around the saint a flood of light was shed ; and the angels and the elect burst forth into a canticle, singing of the shortness of time and the lightness of labour when compared with the eternity of glory that is won by the faithful soul. Fursey was transported with delight ; and raising his eyes, he beheld a multitudinous host resplendent as the sun ; and the shimmer of their wings was like the rippling of waves on a luminous sea. These blessed ones drew near and surrounded him ; and the trouble and the terror into which the fire and the demons had thrown him were banished far away. And also appeared two venerable men of his own nation, whom he knew on earth and thought were dead. Approaching, they told him they were Beoan and Meldan, and entered familiarly into conversation with him.

At this moment, in the serene distance of the heavens, an ethereal gate opened wide its portals. Two angels entered in through the opening ; and immediately the celestial radiance encircled them with a still greater intensity, while the pure spirits abiding in that inner heaven sang, in four alternate choirs,—*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts.* And while his soul was inebriated with the ineffable joys and enchanting psalmody of paradise, the bright cohorts of the celestial army marshalled their ranks on each side of him. One of the blessed spirits asked him if he knew whence issued these joyous acclamations ; and as he could not tell, the angel said : “ It is in the choirs of heaven, of which we form a part.” The song meanwhile rose higher and higher, with a more thrilling and penetrating harmony ; and Fursey, bewildered with joy, supposed that the music was for his delectation, said to the guardian spirit : “ My soul is enraptured in listening to these heavenly sounds.” “ It is a delight,” replied the angel, “ of which we are oftentimes deprived while engaged in the service of men. And yet, after all our labour, the Evil One destroys our work by corrupting the human heart. In this realm of peace and purity,” he added, “ no judgment is pronounced except against the wickedness of mankind.” Fursey’s soul was completely absorbed in the transports and festivities of heaven.

And now, from the invisible paradise, came forth Meldan and Beoan, clothed in glory like the angels ; and, drawing near to Fursey, they directed him to return to the earth and resume his mortal life. In speechless tribulation this order was received ; and while the angels were engaged in restoring their sorrow-stricken charge, the saints said to him : “ Why are you afraid ? Your earthly course will seem no more than a single day’s journey. Go forth and announce to mankind that the day of justice draws nigh.” Fursey then inquired of them whether the dissolution of the world was at hand. They replied that the time had not yet come, though it was not far off ; that famine and pestilence would first afflict mankind ; and that a sign should be seen in the sun.

Beoan continued for a long time speaking to Fursey, showing how the anger of God was hanging over the people, threatening especially their princes and teachers. In grave discourse, worthy of God and of heaven, he imparted salutary counsels and instruction, which he charged Fursey to transmit to Ireland. “ Depart now,” he said in conclusion, “ and tell the princes of the land that they must renounce iniquity, do penance, and work out their salvation.

Declare to the rulers of the Church that God is a jealous God when the world is preferred before Him, and that to neglect the care of souls is to serve the world.”

Then the multitude of the blessed who had been with Fursey vanished, and he remained alone with his three angels. Immediately they began their earthward journey, and soon approached the fiery furnace. As on the first occasion the angel walked in advance, opening a passage and driving back the flames on the right hand and the left. But behold ! from the midst of the flames a human form, hurled by the demons, struck against the saint's shoulder, and the reprobate's cheek touched the living man's jaw. Fursey felt his shoulder and

cheek burn, and he understood that this was the person who on his deathbed bequeathed to him a garment. The angel seized the lost one and cast him back into the fire. But the malign spirit cried : “ Why do you reject what you once accepted ? You had a share in this one's goods ; take now your portion of his punishment.” The angel replied, that it was not from avarice that Fursey had accepted the gift, but for the good of the man's soul. The fire approached no nearer.

However, the angel said : “ The fire you kindled has burned you ; if you had not accepted the present of the man who died in his sins, you would not have felt in your body the fire of his chastisement.” And then the heavenly guardian exhorted him in his turn to preach repentance to mankind.

Fursey now found himself near to the earth, and directly over his own dwelling ; yet he recognised neither the house nor the crowd of mourners, nor even his own body lying before him. And when the angel commanded him to assume again his mortal vesture, he feared to approach, not knowing in the least what corpse that was. “ Shake off this fear,” said the angel ; “ even in this earthly tenement you can keep yourself from infirmity and evil. You have triumphed, even now, over the assaults of the Wicked One; he shall never prevail against you.” Casting his eyes on the inanimate form, he saw the breast opening as if to receive his soul. Bidding him farewell, the angel said : “ Pour spring water over your limbs, and you will feel no pain, except in the place where the fire touched you. Devote yourself to good works all the days of your life. We shall follow your steps without ceasing, and in the end receive you with joy into our company in heaven.”

Awakening as if from the deep repose of death, Fursey arose, and looking around, saw a crowd of his relations and neighbours, and the people of the church, standing in the place. Then he sighed, thinking of the magnitude of human folly. And considering how perilous and difficult a passage death is, and how divine the reward of those who reach the abode of the blessed, he related in order all the things he had witnessed. He asked to have fresh water from the fountain poured over him, and this being done, the mark became visible of the burn which the damned one inflicted on him. Strange that the body should bear the mark of the pain which the soul alone had suffered ! [6]

Obedient to the instructions he had received in his marvellous vision, Fursey lost no time in retracing his steps to Lough Corrib, and preparing for the mission he now must undertake. His journey to South Munster had not been fruitless—a warm welcome had been given to him by his kinsfolk ; and on his departure from the principality, he had the consolation of being joined by his brothers Foillan and Ultan, who resolved to dedicate their life to the service of God under monastic discipline. Leaving these young men in the care of the monks, and resigning the government of Rathmat into competent hands, the abbot bade adieu to the solitudes he loved, and set forth to preach to princes and prelates, to gentle and simple alike, —exhorting all to do penance, save themselves from the evils to come, and aspire after the



blessedness of which he himself had lately had so astonishing a revelation. Eloquence, prompted by the awful experiences of a soul assailed by satanic wrath and wile, and inspired by the ineffable joys prepared for the victors over sin and sorrow, could not fail in power to exhort, entreat, arouse, and win to God. During a year he preached assiduously, spending himself in labours for the salvation of the people, and reaping a rich harvest wherever he sowed the good seed.

On the anniversary of the memorable day when the terrors that encounter the disembodied soul and the glory that awaits the just had been disclosed to him, he fell again into a trance, and, save for a feeble fluttering of the heart, he seemed to die. That night the angel of the Lord appeared to him, instructed him minutely in the manner of announcing the doctrine of salvation, and informed him that his labours in Ireland should be continued for twelve years. Strengthened and consoled by converse with God's messenger, Fursey was able to receive the divine command, and to face the difficulties, the toils, and the long-enduring course of this onerous apostolate. Traversing a great part of the country, he carried on his ministry with the zeal of an apostle and the self-oblation of a saint,—the multitude hanging on his words, and miracles confirming the doctrine which he taught. Trials, however, were not wanting. Envy stirred up hostility in certain quarters, seeking to frustrate the efficacy of his mission ; while, on the other hand, the pressure of the crowd, insatiable in their desire to hear his exhortations, and urgent for his help and counsel, became so excessive as to be well-nigh unendurable. When, therefore, the appointed term of his missionary labours in Ireland had been accomplished, he was glad to be released from the cares and distractions of the public ministry, and sought refuge once more in solitude.

Taking with him his brothers and some other companions, he retired to a little island lying off the coast, founded a religious settlement within its bounds, and, protected from the inroads of the greater world by the stormy defence of winds and waves, enjoyed for a happy interval the meditative calm from which he had been too long estranged.

After some time, however, the call of God was again heard summoning him away, and bidding him carry the light of the gospel to populations sitting in the darkness of infidelity, or lapsed from the practice of the faith which their fathers had received. Setting his sails towards Britain with a detachment of disciples, including his ever-faithful and pious brothers, he touched at the isles that lay in his course, sowing the good seed as he went. Having reached the mainland, these missionary exiles proceeded still in the same manner, working, that is to say preaching, their way from post to post, receiving a welcome wherever they turned, and leaving behind them a salutary influence and a grateful remembrance. At length they reached the kingdom of East Anglia, on the farther coast of Britain. [7]

We are not told whether the Irish monks were invited to evangelise East Anglia, or whether their steps were directed thitherward by a secret inspiration. Probably they were pressed to come ; for Sigebert n., surnamed the Learned, who then ruled that territory, was exceedingly zealous for the welfare of his subjects, and had already done much for the promotion of Christianity and civilisation throughout his dominions. Some time before, he had requested that a man of learning and sanctity should be sent to him from the famous monastery flourishing at Canterbury, to aid him in carrying out plans for the education of the people. Felix, the Burgundian, a man of note and capacity, was despatched on this mission. Teachers were procured, a school was opened, and Felix, having been appointed bishop, fixed his see at Dunwich. To carry on the work so dear to king and prelate, and to ensure that the population at large should be instructed in the truths of salvation, and trained in the practices of Christian life, a colony of missionary monks was indispensable. None knew better than Sigebert how qualified for the task were the Irish religious of this vocation ; for, while an

exile from his native land in his earlier years, he was himself converted and baptized in Gaul by St. Columbanus, and witnessed the apostolic zeal and marvellous success of that great missionary and his companions. He saw how welcome to princes anxious for the improvement of their subjects were a company of those saintly pioneers fresh from the Western Isle.

During this period of his life, St. Fursey appears to have been favoured with visions of a similar nature to those which have been already narrated. Bede expressly mentions that this heavenly intercourse was enjoyed by the saint while dwelling in the fortress-monastery of Cnobbersburgh ; and that after these sublime revelations he always took care, as he had done before, to persuade all men to the practice of virtue, as well by his example as by preaching. “ But as for the matter of his visions, he would only relate them to those who, from holy zeal and desire of reformation, wished to learn the same. An ancient brother of our monastery is still living,” continues the venerable historian, with a precious realistic touch, “ who is wont to declare that a very sincere and religious man told that he had seen Fursey himself in the province of the East Angles, and heard those visions from his mouth ; adding, that though it was in most sharp winter weather and a hard frost, and the man was sitting in a thin garment when he related it, yet he sweated as if it had been in the greatest heat of summer, either through excessive fear or spiritual consolation.”

Hardly any of his supernatural experiences would have seemed stranger to the saintly seer than a revelation, had he received such, of the keen interest that should be exhibited in his life and in his dreams by studious antiquaries walking this earth more than one thousand years after his departure from terrestrial scenes. Nor indeed is this fact much less surprising to the reader when for the first time he becomes aware of the association that links St. Fursey’s name so intimately with the poetry and devotion of succeeding ages. “ The stranger on the dank, marshy shores of the oozy Yare,” says a modern historian, “ contemplating the lichen-encrusted walls of the Roman castrementation . . . scarcely supposes that those grey walls once enclosed the cell of an obscure anchorite destined—so strangely is the chain of causation involved—to exercise a mighty influence equally upon the dogma and genius of Roman Christendom.” The Milesian-Scot Fursæus “ there became enwrapped in the trances which disclosed to him the secrets of the world beyond the grave.” He “ kindled the spark which, transmitted to the inharmonious Dante of a barbarous age, occasioned the first of the metrical compositions from which the *Divina Commedia* arose.” [8]

Modern research has not discovered the name or local habitation of the “ inharmonious Dante” who reduced to writing the wondrous narrative first orally communicated by the saint himself. But the date of the transcription must be somewhere in the third quarter of the seventh century, not many years after the death of St. Fursey ; and the writer we may fairly assume to have been one of his Anglo-Saxon disciples. When the learned author above quoted speaks of the mighty influence of the anchorite of Burgh Castle on the dogma of Roman Christendom, he means, no doubt, to refer to the singular impetus given to the devotion to the souls in purgatory by the teaching of the Milesian monk, and by the vivid way in which he brought before his auditory the reality of the judgment which awaits the disembodied spirit in the other world. Sir Francis Palgrave attributes to St. Fursey and his follower-, and to the Irish monks generally, the merit of popularising the devotion to the faithful departed, and gives the credit of its systematic extension to the brethren of the monastery of St. Gall and its offshoot at Richenau. What he says precisely is this :—

“ Fursæus was followed by the Anglo-Saxon Drithelm, similarly gifted, similarly raised up, as it was supposed, to convince the faithful that sin is a fearful reality. Sermon and homily repeated these legends ; and the curious archæologist still recovers from the walls of the East Anglian churches the fading traces of the grotesque designs by which the same lessons were

imparted. The well-known festival for the dead, the Feast of All Souls, was not formally instituted till the eleventh century ; but the dreams of the night, presented to the Celtic and Saxon recluses, had long before instigated the members of various monastic bodies to agree upon periodical commemorations, enabling them to join in common prayer for the repose of the deceased, under chastisement, but not lost,—and the earliest community which practised this work of faith and charity were the monks assembled in the venerable sanctuary founded by the countryman of Furæus the Scot, St. Columbanus, the monastery of St. Gall. The neighbouring house of Richenau followed this influential example. In the same year, during which Charlemagne received the imperial crown, St. Gall and Richenau united themselves for this pious observance into one sodality.”

- [1] Palgrave, *History of Normandy and England*, vol. i. p. 725.
- [2] The Rev. J O’Hanlon, with good reason, excludes from his account of St. Fursey’s parentage a wild legend in relation to the circumstances impanying the saint’s birth. The curious story, however will be found in *The Irish Builder*, May 15, June 1, 1884.
- [3] St. Brendan did not die on the island, but on the mainland, not far off, at Annadown, whither he had gone to visit his sister, St. Briga, for whom he had built a nunnery in that place, under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin. After the oblation of the sacrifice, as an ancient life of the saint records, he said to his sister : “ Commend my departure in your prayers.” And Briga said : “ What do you fear ?” “ I fear,” he replied, “ if I go alone, and if the journey be dark—the unknown region, the presence of the King, and the sentence of the Judge.” The saint was called to his reward on Sunday, the 16th of May 577. His remains were removed for interment to the great monastery near the Shannon, of which he had been the first abbot. Tradition has it, that the funeral procession extended the whole way from Annadown to Clonfert, a distance of more than twenty miles.
- [4] For many succeeding ages St. Meldan’s festival was celebrated in this island on the 7th of February. A moat or rath is the only feature of antiquity now marked on its surface, which, moreover, has been denuded of its natural growth of wood.
- [5] For a description of the ruins of Kill-Fursa, see Sir W. Wilde’s *Lough Corrib*, and an article on the Cyclopean Churches of Loughs Corrib, Mask, and Carra, in the *Journal of the Historical and Archæological Association of Ireland*, July 1868.
- [6] The version of St. Fursey’s vision is nearly altogether translated from M. L.Tachet de Barneval’s *Histoire Légendaire de l’Irlande*. The accomplished author of that work has, in the chapter devoted to our saint, drawn his material from the earliest sources. For this reason, it appears to me that his presentment of the legend is at once more interesting and more genuine than later and “ improved” renderings.
- [7] St. Fursey arrived in England sometime between 633 and 639
- [8] Palgrave, *History of Normandy and England*, vol. i, p. 163.
- [9] *History of Normandy and England*, vol. i, pp. 164, 165.

St. Fursey’s life and visions, and other essays (1907)

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