

The Pilgrims.

Legendary history of Ireland

L. Tachet de Barneval

Translated from The French by John Gilmary Shea.

1857

The Story of Arculpths.

A HOLY man, named Molva, said to Mœdoc that he wished to go on a pilgrimage to Rome. [1] “I will not permit thee,” said the bishop. “If I cannot see Rome, I shall surely die,” replied Molva. Then Mœdoc took him in his chariot, and both disappeared till next morning. Meanwhile, it seemed to Molva that he was at Rome, fulfilling his vow in the church of the holy apostles. The next day they reappeared in Fearna, and Mœdoc asked his companion if he still wished to go to Rome. “How could I think of such a thing?” replied the holy man. “Did I not fulfil my vow and offer my prayers there yesterday and last night? I am only ashamed to go back to my monastery so soon.” Mœdoc sent him off, attesting that he had been in Rome. “I do not understand the mystery,” adds the narrator, “but what I know is, that St. Molva knew Rome like one who had long tarried there.”

Pilgrimages were not usually made so easily or so quick. We have some difficulty even in realizing how they travelled in those days, when men’s feet had to bear them, unaided except by the staff on which they leaned, to the distant bourns, which they sometimes wished to reach, across savage or desert countries, among violent or barbarous tribes. They did not find a monastery each nightfall. In the abodes where they might knock had Christian hospitality replaced that of old? Six Irish clerics, animated with the desire of studying the Scriptures and visiting the holy places, had journeyed beyond the sea. They met St. Patrick, and kneeling down, asked his benediction. The apostle blessed them, and foretold that they should all be bishops. The oldest and most vigorous of the party had taken the books and carried them in a fold of his garment, having no other place to carry them. Patrick gave him a seal skin, which they were wont to spread under his feet when he said mass, to make them a sack. The present was received with a thousand thanks, and the six pilgrims went on their way. They crossed the sea happily, and never, during all their way, whether travelling or in the schools, did subsistence fail them; on the contrary, a decent plenty smiled upon them.

Thus, doubtless, went most with a staff and a book; all did not meet St. Patrick, or a saint who like him had experienced the hardships of travel, or who could lend them miraculous assistance. Then they ate the bread of charity or the fruit of the wayside tree, drank the water of the rivulet, slept on the grass or the rock. When food failed, they lived on faith and courage. Did all arrive? Did all return who set out? How many fell on the road, martyrs of the pilgrimage?

“At that time,” says Aethelwerd, in the year 892, [2] “three excellent men from Ireland, all of fervent faith, were seized with a pious desire; they sewed in haste some skins, made a currach, and taking a week’s provisions, hoisted their sail, proceeding seven days and seven nights, and God’s will bearing them on more than their arms or oars, they landed in Cornwall. King Alfred received them with joy; but they soon set out for Rome; thence seeking the footprints of Our Lord, they journeyed towards Jerusalem. Then one of them died.” And other two seem to have sunk; but we can scarcely guess the author’s text and meaning, so

depraved are they. Moreover, he does not follow them in all the incidents or marvels of their voyage. "How," he observes, "can we in so few pages relate these great miracles?"

Did any commit to writing their curious adventures, the description of the nations and places that they visited? No monument remains of these far and painful peregrinations, so frequent and doubtless so interesting. The oldest description of the Holy Land is from an Irish pen; but St. Adamnan's book is not an Irish account, or rather, though the narrative is Irish, the traveller was of Gaul. Arculphus, a Frank bishop, whose see is now unknown, went to Jerusalem with Peter, a hermit of Burgundy; he visited all the promised land, beheld Alexandria, Damascus, Constantinople, and visited a great many islands in the sea. On his homeward voyage he was overtaken by a storm, and wrecked, on the west coast of Britain. Taking this delay patiently, he continued his course in the country where Providence had thrown him, and thus reached the Island of Iona, or Hy, over whose monasteries St. Adamnan then presided. The abbot welcomed the traveller, listened to his accounts, wrote them at his dictation, and made a book useful to all, says Bede, [3] and especially to those who know only by hearsay the land of the patriarchs and prophets. Adamnan presented it to King Alfred, who rewarded the author, and had copies made, to enable it to be in the humblest hands. At a later date Bede abridged it, introducing details drawn from other accounts.

The voyage of Arculphus, thus diffused, might, then, exercise a certain influence, and we may believe that it contributed to popularize the taste for pilgrimages and a love of foreign accounts. It was not, however, made to satisfy the Irish imagination. The picture of the Oriental countries, with their brilliant sun, their mystic deserts, whose torrents, mount, and vale had a sacred and poetic charm for the Occidentals, and which in Ireland men viewed through the Bible illumined by a divine light, paled and seemed unfaithful when received through the medium of a Frank or Burgundian. Nothing can be simpler than Arculphus's narrative; it has neither the charm of a poem, nor the emotion of a romance, nor even the interest of a journal, where the traveller brings himself on the stage and relates all his opinions, joys, and trials. It is not even a narrative; it is notes. They are detailed, and their exact simplicity makes them a precious document in the history of the holy places; but what science has gained poesy has lost. A tradition on the origin of Constantinople; a picturesque and popular story, of which the hero is the St. George in stone, who towered above his charger in one of the squares of Grecian Rome; finally, the history of Our Lord's winding sheet,—these are all the wonders that the two French pilgrims gathered by sea and land.

We know the history of the founders of Constantinople. Like the founders of Chalcedony of old, they, too, were mistaken. God, who had his views as to the future city, wrapped the laborers in sleep; and while they slept, their instruments disappeared. They found them only on the spot where nature, laboring at works of futurity, had prepared the site of a great empire, the capital of two worlds.

The other two legends are not properly legends, but stories. A man, leading a horse, comes to the statue of St. George; he had promised the saint, if he protected him in battle, to offer him his war horse. Instead of fulfilling his vow, he wished to ransom him, and he soon began to bargain. "Twenty pieces of gold," said the soldier; "thirty, forty!" St. George said nothing, remaining motionless; but the soldier's horse also became motionless, as though of stone. [4] Thrice did his master, believing himself free, seek to lead him away; the animal remained fixed to the earth. "Holy confessor," at last cries the huckster, "thou wast generous as to protection in battle but methinks thee not generous in a matter of business." The saint kept the horse and the money. Such stories might suit the familiar, and at times irreverential, devotion of Greece or Italy, or the doubtful simplicity, the captious mind of Gaul, better than the poetic but sincere and serious faith of Ireland.

The other bears a far different character, but equally indicative of the authenticity of its origin. A Christian Jew stole away the holy winding sheet, and till his death, thanks to this precious talisman, wealth abounded in his dwelling. When he was about to die, he called his two sons, and divided his property ; the eldest took the bulk of his property, the youngest only the divine relic. After some time the opulence of the one was changed to misery, the misery of the other to opulence. They went on for five generations. At the end of that time the relic fell into unbelieving hands, without its beneficent virtue losing its efficacy, and this lasted a long while. Discussions and rival pretensions at last arose between the pagans and the faithful, and it was thus decided : Mainnias, a Saracen prince, chosen arbitrator, kindled a large fire, and leaving the decision to Christ himself, threw the relic on the pile. The marvellous veil escaped the flames, floated for a time as though undecided, then went to the hands of a poor and humble Christian who stood there in the crowd. Who can fail to see here, for all its Christian subject, the turn of Oriental anecdote, the ever-recurring type in the thousand, thousand narratives of their ingenious story tellers ?

These foreign elements seldom appear in the Irish legend ; it has remained pure and national. It is its singular privilege, among all the legends ; at least, no other seems to possess in the same degree this inappreciable privilege. It had no need of borrowing from its neighbors either saints or vestures, and they could scarcely have lent it poesy.

Beneath Bede's pen, the story of Arculphus, abridged and augmented, modifies somewhat ; but too little time had elapsed to make the modification notable. Some details are added, some descriptions ; some expressions seem to take a vaguer air of wonder and mystery ; but the cloud is so light that it escapes you, and may be denied. Surely neither Bede nor Adamnan could cry out on writing their book, as Aethelwerd on thinking of the stories of the three Irish pilgrims, " How chronicle such great miracles in so few pages ?" The Frankish relation did not therefore suit Ireland, and the stories which she took down from the lips of her own pilgrims bear little resemblance to the topographical information, cold description, sterile notes of the two reasonable travellers, and speak to the imagination better than the figures speak to the eyes, with which Venerable Bede illustrates his text.

Poetry seized the accounts of travels. We know now the Irish mind enough to presume that it seized the travellers too. It is a matter of regret, doubtless, that in this great number of monks and bishops, who, at that distant and curious day, visited all the provinces of the east and west, some grave and learned men did not retrace, in simple, faithful books, the picture of the nations, cities, monuments, human personages, and natural events that they met. History would have had its travels, as the legend has its own, and we should be at once instructed and edified. But during all these early ages, Ireland had its legendary writers and poets, but no historian. When she could poetize so quickly or so easily what it had seen or saw with its own eyes, how could it but transform what was afar ?

The Pilgrims : An Irish Account.

THE eyes of man embrace but a narrow space, and beyond his horizon the unknown begins ; the rest of the world is the domain of the imagination, which can open or close it, give it emptiness and nothing, or people it with its works and dreams. Hence that lively curiosity, that instinctive credulity, that welcome the wanderer's tale, that creative fancy which anticipates, develops, transforms, nay, at times replaces them. But if all travels awaken the human imagination, travels beyond the sea solicit and move it perhaps more. If all horizons seem to question our mind, the horizon of the sea troubles and agitates it. A moving surface ; the advancing and successively surmounting furrows ; plains that rock the traveller, seem to journey with him, and devour him ; the agitated and transparent depths, so seemingly

endowed with life, and in turn caressing and furious ; lines that disappear, and colors that fade ; vague distance, where heaven sinks to the sea, or the sea lifts up to heaven ; and in the waving abyss beings of strange form, colossal giants, whose form can be but half seen ; terrible phenomena, where heaven and ocean seem laboring to blend, and where irresistible and destructive forces explode,—these are spectacles which enchain naturally poetic races. When they picture space beyond space, isles or continents to be reached only after passing these barriers or abysses, they easily dream of fantastic lands, a different nature, new orders of creatures, a whole world of prodigy and strangeness. When popular faith assigns to the dead a new life of compensation or expiation, it does not traverse the clouds, it does not seek it in the stars ; it passes the sea, and ocean's deserts seem large and impenetrable enough to envelop and conceal the abodes which it assigns to future bliss or woe.

The sea is, then, a marvellous stage for the scenes and creations produced by popular imagination. For the travellers of popular tradition, its space will be ever infinite and full of the unknown ; its archipelagoes ever inexhaustible, and Odysseys will ever be the tales of mariners. “ The Lord,” says the Cambrian Gerald, speaking of Irish accounts, “ has done whatever he willed in heaven, on earth, in the sea, and in every abyss. He is admirable in his saints, and great in all his works ; but it is in the remote extremities of the earth that unfettered nature delights in the most astonishing prodigies.” [5]

The two personages, who, in the Irish legends, open the cycle of maritime poems and marvellous adventures, are St. Abban and St. Patrick.

One day St. Ybar, [6] St. Patrick, and St. Abban were in the same vessel on Lough Carman, when an unknown monster rose from the waters ; it had a hundred heads, all of different forms ; it saw by two hundred eyes, heard by as many ears. Its highest head rose towards heaven, and its throat vomited forth water in torrents, amid the clouds of heaven ; the rising waves were troubled, the vessel was about to sink. Ybar and Patrick knelt in prayer ; but a voice from on high said, “ It is not you who should pray, but Abban. His prayer will put to flight this apparition from hell, and his virtue is hereafter to be invoked on the sea.” Abban was then the patron of mariners, and he watched over them amid the fearful dangers of unexplored worlds and mysterious oceans ; yet we do not find that he gained this glorious prerogative by labors on the sea.

Patrick, on the contrary, made many voyages ; we have said so already, but we have not related what tradition has preserved of the wonderful history of his voyages.

The angel Victor bade the slave of Milcho pass the sea. [7] He placed his foot on a rock, where the holy imprint has remained, and crossed the strait. At a later date, with the leave and blessing of his master, St. Germanus, he left Gaul, [8] and for long years visited the isles of the Mediterranean. It was in one of these isles that he met three other Patricks, leading a cenobitical life in a cave. To join this evangelical society a trial was needed. Patrick came forth triumphantly, overcame the monstrous beast that guarded the fountain, and remained there seven years. A more extraordinary and glorious adventure awaited him elsewhere.

He was again in an island. [9] There dwelt, in an apparently new abode, two spouses, in the bloom of youth and beauty, with a woman so old, so broken, that she was bent to the very ground ; she could no longer walk ; she crawled with difficulty on her hands. The kind-hearted Patrick wondered, and at the same time pitied, this great and sad old age. Much surprised was he when his young host told him that this old woman was his grand-daughter, and that her mother was living ; and her mother, he added, is older and more decrepit. Then he related his history. “ We lived,” said he, “ peacefully, devoted to works of mercy. Our

house and our table were open to every traveller ; and according to our power we gave to all who asked in the name of Christ. One day our Lord himself came in the guise of a pilgrim ; we received him as best we could, doing all that charity inspired ; but before departing, he revealed himself to us and blessed our abode ; and his benediction has preserved us in the bloom of youth. Our daughter was not then born. She is subject to the common law of flesh. As years increase, they weigh heavily over her head, and her daughter grows old like her. Jesus Christ," he added, " on departing, left us his staff, bidding us keep it for a pilgrim who would come many years after him, and who would convert Ireland." An inward voice disclosed to him that Patrick was that predestined pilgrim. The saint rejected the thought, but our Lord appeared to him. The staff of the divine pilgrim never more left Patrick's hand, and we see in all the legend the wonderful prodigies which it accomplished among the Irish.

In the very bosom of the Mediterranean, in the very bosom of the Provencal gulf, so enlightened, and apparently so well known, between Marseilles and Rome, there was then room for discoveries and marvels. There were isles where saints of Erin, like Patrick, and many others before him, still more after him, were led by angels to find a sweet and silent asylum ; and when we behold what occurred there, we are tempted to believe that these mystic lands, unknown and invisible to profane vessels, remained wrapped in some bluish haze, impenetrable and transparent, like the veil with which Homer's gods covered themselves amid men.

But it was rather towards the north, there where the unknown began so speedily, in seas so often vexed with storms, and almost ever veiled, where we almost feel the limits of the world, where we can believe that after the human zones another opens, reserved and mysterious,— there especially was it that they steered their hardy barks, or that the tempest hurried them ; there that they sought inaccessible and undiscovered retreats.

Twice had Corbmach vainly tried to find an island, one of those tall, rugged rocks, where saints love to live alone and exalted, like the birds of ocean, between the sea and sky. [10] In his third attempt he was assailed by mortal perils. For fourteen days and fourteen nights had his bark, at full sail under the impetuous blast of the south, rushed straight to the north. [11] He passed the limits of human navigation, and it seemed as if there was no return for him. On the fourteenth day the nameless terror of a monstrous and formidable world began to arise on every side. The sea swarmed with hideous beasts ; they covered the surface, and dashing in thousands against his hide-covered creel, stopping and checking his paddles, they seemed each moment to invade and overwhelm the voyagers whom they menaced to engulf in these horrible and living billows. This was only one of his dangers. Who can relate the rest ?

Nor, after all, was it necessary to go very far to find monsters. They were felt passing in the very waters of Ireland. Were they not, too, sometimes even seen ? " My son," said Columbkil to Berach, [12] " if thou goest to-day to Ethica, take a circuit, and shun the deep coast, rather the little isles, lest thou be alarmed at the prodigies from which thou shalt hardly escape." Berach set out with the saint's blessing and advice, but he slighted the latter ; and when he was off Ethica, a beast arose from the sea like the leviathan of Scripture ; scarcely could Berach, furling his sail and bending to his oars, escape the yawning maw that opened like the crater of that living mountain, or even the waves that his passage raised, like a hurricane. On the same day Baithen sailed in the same waters ; and him, too, Columbkil had told that he should see the leviathan. " Last night," said he, " he rose from the depths of the sea, and to-morrow he will appear on the surface between Ethica and Iona." " He and I," replied Baithen, " are in the hand of the Almighty." " Go," said the holy abbot, " thy trust has saved thee." When the monster appeared, Baithen rose intrepidly amid his awe-struck

comrades, stretched out his hands, and blessed it. The monster sank to his deepest cave, and the troubled waters grew calm.

Thus sailed, in search of lost and savage islands, the cenobites and anchorets, whom a long and fervent practice of asceticism had prepared to wrestle with mortal anguish, to enjoy the sublime and dangerous delights of absolute solitude. Before starting, they had for the last time measured their strength, consulted their conscience and God, in redoubled fast and prayer. If they were truly called, Ocean reserved for them one of his mysterious cells. Some day their bark discovered it ; then, with a narrow rock beneath their feet, the measureless ocean around, the infinite heaven above, their soul might forget earth, and float in spiritual regions. They had only to give their thought to the wind that eternally lashed their asylum, and passed over their burning brow, to the tireless, countless, endless waves that rolled at their feet. Whence came these winds and these waves ? Whither did they go ? Where were men ? Where was the earth ? The anchoret was lost in immensity. This was a real solitude, melancholy for earthly souls, heart-breaking, fearful even, and ill omened. But these ecstatic souls bore it unmoved ; there they abode, without weakness, without regret, without troubles, without fear ; these strong hearts, far from shrinking and breaking, dilated. The infinite was not too great for them. The spirit alone lived in them, and in the spirit lived alone thoughts divine.

In the legend Ireland appears surrounded by a circle of islands, forming a holier halo to the Isle of Saints, a sort of radiant glory, where all mystic splendors blend. Some distant rays of a world where shines a purer and more dazzling light seem to glimmer in this splendor.

In fact, beyond this indefinite archipelago, peopled with living and mortal saints, another archipelago began. As you receded from the coasts of Ireland, and the countries abandoned to human society, the cenobites are more perfect, the anchorets more disengaged from humanity ; nature changes her aspect and modifies her laws ; more monstrous beings appear ; we feel that the region of spirits is nigh, that we touch the frontier of another world ; we even meet the van of these mysterious people. As ever, the evil spirits are in the front ; but if the demons and the damned appear, the angels and the elect are not far off ; if hell is on the one side, on the other is paradise. There was, and the saints knew it, the land of promise. More than one sought it ; God, doubtless, had forbidden the path ; one of them half saw it. Surely he was the greatest amid his brethren ; but his divine will is impenetrable ; others after him, who seem to us greater, tried to follow his traces ; like him they could but catch a glimpse. Otherwise can we suppose that, despairing of describing in human speech those happy kingdoms of the future, they have not attempted to do so ? or that God, revealing his works, set a seal on their lips ?

The first of these happy voyagers was Barnit ; the second was Brendan, son of Findloga, later abbot of Cluain-Fearth. From birth he had been marked for a high destiny. His mother, when she bore him in her womb, had seen her bosom filled with pure and brilliant gold, and her breasts shine with a dazzling light—expressive presage of the rich favors that Heaven was afterwards to shower on his servant, and the striking wonders that it should be given him to contemplate.

We will read the exact account of his voyage. We know already what Ithaca these Ulysses pursued, and on what seas their ship was to pass ; and we may form in advance some idea of that monastic and spiritual Odyssey, so famous in Irish legend.

If we test it by the criticism with which we ordinarily analyze poems, it will not be difficult to distinguish in the legend the origin and historic reality from the mystic and wonderful part.

Brendan was one of the most illustrious chiefs of the Irish church. Thousands of monks were grouped, serried around him, or scattered at intervals, isolated or in colonies, forming a people of ascetics. Afar, perhaps, he governed other monasteries and other cells. Doubtless he sometimes visited his province. It was, moreover, a general custom in the church, and especially in Ireland, to undertake pious voyages, to go and seek around, and even afar, examples and subjects of edification. Abbots who wished to practise and teach its best rules and the most perfect life went from monastery to monastery, and the disciples who did not follow the master profited, on his return, by what he had seen and learned. The purity and unity of discipline were thus preserved, as well as the efficacious and fruitful communion of saints.

St. Brendan's voyage is one of these visits, or one of these pilgrimages. We know how wonderful is that land of Erin ; how fertile in prodigies that sea that washes and indents its shores ; how lively the imagination of that naturally poetic race, now exalted by Christian spiritualism. The scenes of the voyage were soon idealized. The isles multiplied, receded, became less familiar. Men disappeared, a mysterious hospitality welcomed the voyager. If visible, their sanctity is purified and refined ; their mouth utters, their ear hears, only the praise of the Almighty. God nourishes them by the secret ministry of his angels, and their spirits, maugre the earthly tenement that still encases them, communicate like pure spirits. Eternal flowers, unknown and delicious fruits, ripen for the servants of God ; day obscured by no shades of night, sweetened and tempered only by transparent veils, that come to repose the weary eye of the saints. And in the fresh and brilliant meadows, under the fragrant and nutritous trees, is endless chant, is tireless procession, holiday, and ceremony, that nought comes to interrupt. It is, in a word, the ideal of the virtues and pleasures of the church, the earthly paradise of the cloister.

Yet the Irish monks dreamed better still. Beyond these isles, abode of perfection and present felicity, they dreamed for their brethren to come a still holier and happier land. We have already seen that they durst not describe it ; but it was necessary at least that a glimpse should be given, its existence vaguely indicated to future generations, its sweetness and its riches ; they led Brendan thither ; none worthier than he of such an honor ; and he it was who offered the church of his day the first fruits of the good things that the future church was to possess. This mysterious country, that served as an intermediary between earth and heaven, between time and eternity, between the world of body and the world of spirit, was bounded, too, by the darksome and painful zones of hell ; and Brendan, under the hand of Providence, which misled, and yet directed him, perceived and described some advanced isles of the infernal regions ; their fearful noise, their corroding emanations, reached him.

With these exclusively monastic and Christian conceptions blend the popular imaginings. Strange and monstrous creatures pass around the voyagers, attack or defend them. On distant rocks they found dangers that seemed to show that a malignant power dwelt there, spreading its snares ; other marvels, too,—palaces or churches of crystal and marble, founded on the sea, and plunging in its depths the columns of their gigantic peristyles ; in the very ocean interior splendors issued from its measureless depths, changing its waves to billows of light ; this too the legend tells.

We might go farther back, and follow higher still the origin of these fancies ; we might at least for some of them. This western land, this Irish Atlantis, was it America, seen dimly

through the prism of poesy ? This oceanic architecture of marble and crystal, was it not the account brought back by Ireland's hardy fishers from their cruises towards the polar ices ? Do not these unceasing days light up the arctic regions ? But of what avail such an exegesis ? Poesy gives no account of what it borrows ; and if great works are condemned by their greatness to undergo this anatomical dissection, we may at least spare the humble creations of the legend.

In these fantastic conceptions, these religious imaginings, there was matter for an epic, where cloistral and popular poesy should unite. Has this epic found its Homer ? Have these ideas and traditions ever been gathered in a composition of just extent. The question is addressed to the men of Ireland, who love the ancient days, study, and their country.

Listen, meanwhile, to Capgrave, or probably to John of Tynemouth, whose work the learned say he merely edited ; he gives an abridged account of Brendan's voyage. It is not merely insufficient and too short ; it is evidently mutilated and garbled, and fragments torn from the work are found here and there in the legends.

St. Brendan's Voyage.

BRENDAN was one of the most perfect among the saints. His childhood had been formed by St. Mida, his youth instructed by Ercus ; and he already directed many disciples, when God inspired him to travel. He desired that God should give him a land isolated in the midst of the sea, and far from men. While in these thoughts, a voice from on high spoke to him in his sleep. " Brendan, servant of God," said he, " know that the Lord has heard thy prayer." Then there came to him a saint of the name of Barnit, to whom the Lord had revealed great things during his voyage, and Brendan said to him, " Relate to us the word of the Lord, and console our soul by the story of the wonders thou hast seen found worthy for thy virtue to see in the waters of ocean." And Barnit began to speak to him in these terms : " My son Mernocat, who was in my monastery procurator of the poor, stole away one day, and fleeing far from my face, and wishing to lead a solitary life, he found an isle in the sea, and dwelt there. Long after I was told that he had around him numerous disciples, and that the Lord had revealed great wonders by him. I went to him. One night that we were watching together and rambling over his island, my son led me to the banks of the sea on the western coast. A bark stood there, and he said to me, ' Enter this bark with me, father, and let us sail to the west ; there is there an island called the Land of Promise, and it is the abode that God has destined to those who will come after us in the last times. We began to sail. Thick clouds soon covered us ; I could hardly discern the prow of our bark ; but at the end of an hour or so, an immense light shone around us, and a land appeared. It was great, full of grass and fruits. For a fortnight we journeyed there. Every plant hung with flowers, every tree with fruit ; the very stones were precious. On the fifteenth day we came to a river flowing from the east to the west. We knew not what to do ; we wished to reach the opposite shore, and yet we awaited the will of Heaven, when, suddenly, a being of human form, but all radiant, appeared before us. Saluting us by name, he said, ' Courage, worthy brethren ! The Lord has revealed to you the land that he is to give to his saints. The river that you see divides it in twain ; but you cannot touch the farther shore : return now whence ye came.' When he ended, we asked his name, and whence he was. ' Why ask who I am, and whence I come, and not question me as to this island ? Such as you see it has it remained since the beginning of the world. Do you feel any want of eating, drinking, or clothing ? You have been a year in this country without feeling the wants of the body ; sleep has not weighed you down, night has not infolded you. Here shines an eternal day ; blind darkness is here unknown, for Christ is our light,' Then we set out to return, and he left us to return to that isle of bliss."

This story awakened Brendan's imagination. Then, with quick resolve, choosing four of his three thousand disciples, he confided to them his project of going in search of that land of saints, and took them as his comrades. For six weeks they fasted, breaking the fast only every third day. On the fortieth day, they ascended a mountain's top, and there built the bark that was to bear them. It was very light, but solid, with a deck supported by posts ; they covered it with well-tanned ox hides, and carefully pitched the seams. Two similar coverings were kept in reserve, and they took provisions for forty days. Finally they erected and solidly planted the mast, and made the sail and rest of the rigging.

Then St. Brendan ordered his brethren, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to embark. As he had remained alone on the bank, and blessed the spot of their departure, three brothers came from the monastery, and fell at his feet, saying, " Father, permit us to follow thee whither thou goest, or else we are resolved to die here of hunger and thirst." Seeing them thus pressing and offering violence, the saint bade them enter, saying, " Brethren, your will be done ;" and he added, " This one has adopted a happy resolution, for God has prepared a place suitable for his soul ; but he reserves a terrible judgment for the other two." When he had embarked, they unfurled the sail, and began their voyage, steering towards the summer solstice. The wind was favorable, and they had merely to hold the sail.

After a fortnight the wind fell, and they took their paddles till their strength was spent. Brendan encouraged them, saying, " Fear not, for God watches over us, and he guides our bark ; trim the sail, and let her float ; God will do what he will with his servants and his bark." They knew not to what part of the world the vessel bore them. Every evening they took some food ; forty days had elapsed ; their provisions were exhausted ; then an island appeared to them full of towering rocks. From the midst of this isle many streams ran down to the sea. The brethren, exhausted with hunger and thirst, wished, even before they found a landing place, to dip up water ; but Brendan said, " Beware, brethren ; what you would do is mad. God has not yet deigned to show you the port, and you wish to steal. In three days our Lord will show a spot where we may land, and where the wearied shall regain their strength." For three days they coasted around the island, and on the third, about the ninth hour, they found a port where there was room only for one vessel.

When they had landed, and were walking along the shore, a dog, trotting down a path, came to Brendan's feet. Following it as a guide, they entered a town, where they found a great hall, with beds and seats, and water to wash their feet, And while they rested the man of God warned them, saying, " Take care, lest Satan lead you into temptation ; for I see that at this moment he instigates one of you three, who followed us from the monastery, to a shameful theft. Pray for his soul, for his flesh has already been delivered to the power of Satan." Now, the house where they were was full of jars, hanging by the wall, of all different metals ; there were, too, bits and horns, mounted with silver ; and Brendan added, " Let us eat the meats which our Lord has prepared for us." Then they sat, and nought was wanting at their board. Rising, they went to their beds, which were all ready, to rest after their great hardships. But while they slept, Brendan saw a child, black as an Ethiop, holding a bit, and playing before the unfortunate brother, in whose eyes he made it glitter. The saint arose, and passed the night in prayer till day.

Two days, by the divine will, they rested on that isle. Then they returned to the ship, when Brendan said, " See, brethren, does not one of you carry off something from here?" " God forbid," they replied, " that a robbery should dishonor our voyage." Then said St. Brendan, " Behold, our brother, whom I warned yestereve, has now in his robe a silver bit that the devil gave him this night." The brother instantly flung the bit on the ground, and fell at the feet of the man of God, crying, " Father, I have sinned : pardon ! pray for the salvation of my soul."

And all at the same moment fell down to pray for the salvation of his soul. Rising up, they saw the wretched Ethiop escape from the guilty man's bosom, howling and crying, "Why drive me, man of God, from my abode?" Brendan immediately turned to the brother, and said, "Receive promptly the body and blood of Christ, for thy soul is about to leave thy body, and this is the place of thy burial." He received and died.

They were reëmbarking, when a young man came with a basket of bread and a jar of water. "Receive," he said, "this offering of thy servant. You have a long way to go; the bread and water will not fail you till Easter." Thus they set out and sailed, eating every second day; then coming to an island, they landed.

On getting ashore, they saw waters, which, coming from different fountains, formed a large current, full of fish; and traversing the island, they found flocks of sheep, all white, and so numerous that they could be seen far off from the land. Brendan told them to take one to celebrate the feast, for it was now Easter; and the one taken followed like a domestic animal. It was brought to the saint, and by his order a spotless lamb was also taken. At the same time, a man appeared, holding a basket full of loaves, cooked under the ashes, with whatever was necessary to celebrate Easter, and laid it all at the feet of the man of God, saying, "Father, here you are going to celebrate the Sabbath; but to-morrow you will go into the island that you see; there the Lord wishes you to feast the day of his resurrection. I give you wherewith to supply your want till Pentecost. After the day of the resurrection of the Lord, you will sail to another island to the west; it is called the Paradise of Birds; there you will rest till the octave of Whitsunday."

After Whitsunday they sailed for three months, seeing nothing but sea and sky, eating once every two or three days; then they descried an island; but for forty days they sailed around it without being able to find a port. At last they found one, but it was very narrow. There were two fountains there, one turbid, the other limpid and clear. And as the brethren hastened to draw water, the saint stopped them, saying, "You cannot, without the permission of the fathers who inhabit this country. Will they not give you this water which you now wish to steal?" Then an old man of venerable mien advanced towards them. His hair was white as snow, and his countenance radiant. Thrice did he prostrate himself on the ground before Brendan; Brendan raised him up; they embraced. The old man took Brendan by the hand, and walked with him a stadium to the monastery. When they reached the door, Brendan asked his guide, "What is this monastery? Who governs it? Whence come the saints who dwell here?" The old man spoke not; but his thought answered, and miraculously penetrated Brendan's mind. Seeing this, he said to his brethren, "Hold your tongues in silence, lest our brethren be sullied by our dissipation."

Eleven brethren soon appeared, attired in copes, bearing the cross, and chanting, "saints, arise from your abodes; go to meet the truth; sanctify the place; bless the people, and vouchsafed keep thy servants in peace." At the moment that the verse finished, the father of the monastery embraced Brendan and his companions after him; his companions and the brethren also embraced each other. When they had thus given the kiss of peace, the travellers were led into the monastery; after prayer their feet were washed, while the antiphon, "Behold, I give you a new commandment," was chanted. Then their hands were washed; all sat down, and the table was prepared. Loaves of exquisite whiteness and roots of exquisite savor were served up. Each of the voyagers was placed between two of his hosts, and a whole loaf was set before each two.

After the meal the abbot of the monastery said to the strangers, "Brethren, you wished this morning to steal water from the fountain whose limpid waters you saw; but you may now

draw thence at will, rejoicing in the fear of the Lord. The other fount, with its turbid waters, serves for our daily ablutions, for it is tepid all the year round. As to these loaves, we know not where they are prepared, nor how they are brought to us. It is an alms that God sends us by one of his obedient creatures. We are twenty-four brethren, and we have twelve loaves every day. To-day, in consequence of your arrival, the number has been doubled. Such are the presents that Christ has continued to bestow on us since the days of St. Patrick and St. Albeus. Eighty years have passed, and yet our body has not grown old in all that time. We have no need here of things prepared by fire. We suffer neither cold nor heat. When the hour of mass or the offices comes, the candles that we brought from our own land light of themselves in the church, and by a divine disposition, they burn without ever diminishing."

Then rising, Brendan, and the abbot of the monastery, and the brethren with them, entered the church. It was square ; the altars and all the vases were of crystal. Not a voice or a murmur was heard in all the monastery. If a brother had a question to ask, he went before the abbot, bending the knee, and speaking to him in his heart ; the abbot understood him by a revelation from on high, and wrote his answer. When complins were ended, the abbot said to St. Brendan, " I attest, in the presence of Christ, that for the eighty years we have been on this island, we have heard the human voice only in the chant of praise which we address to the Lord. None of us has felt the miseries of the flesh, or the approach of the evil spirit who prowls around the human race." He said also, " Of the two brothers whom you know, one shall remain in the island of the anchorets ; the other, by a shameful and lamentable death, shall be plunged into hell." While they thus conversed in the church, a fiery dart came from heaven, and all the candles that stood before the altar lit up. " You see," said the abbot, " these torches which burn ; they consume not nor decrease, and the fire leaves no trace or mark, for it is wholly immaterial."

Brendan and the brethren finally reëmbarked, and after some weeks they saw an island, where they found a fountain, whose limpid waters were full of fish and various herbs. Brendan tasted it, and warned his brethren : " Drink cautiously ; this water is dangerous." But they disregarded his word, and were seized with a sleep that lasted three days and three nights. Meanwhile, the saint prayed unceasingly, asking pardon for the ignorance which had led them into this peril. At the end of the third day, God awakened them anew.

They resumed their course, and reached the isle where they had passed the vigil of Easter, and the one whom they had already seen came to meet them, saying, " Admirable in his saints is the God of Israel ; he will give his people fortitude and courage, blessed be He." He gave them new clothes, loaded their bark with provisions, and announced that they should find the promised land the seventh year of their voyage, and that God would take them back to the place of their birth.

One day, as they continued their voyage, they beheld an immense, monstrous beast appear, with foaming nostrils ; it hastened its rapid course, as if to devour them. The terror-struck brethren cried, " Deliver us, Lord ; the beast devours us." Brendan encouraged them : " Fear not, men of little faith ; God is ever our defender ; he will deliver us from the monster's mouth, and from all other danger." The monster approached, waves of prodigious size rolling before him to the very ship. Brendan, seeing terror increase in the hearts of the brethren, raised his hands to heaven, and cried, " Lord, save thy servants, as thou didst thy servant David from the hands of Goliath, and Jonas from the belly of the whale." At the same instant, another beast, coming from the westward, passed them, and rushed on the sea monster, vomiting flames ; and the beast that pursued the servants of God remained dead, torn in three parts. By Brendan's order the brethren took one, and it served them for food.

Then they came in sight of a certain island. "There are here, so to say," said Brendan, "three nations—the children, the young, and the old ; and here must remain one of the brethren who joined us at the moment of our departure." This island was a plain, wonderfully smooth, like the sea ; not a tree was to be seen nought that the wind could agitate. It was vast, and covered with white and purple fruit. There they beheld three troops, each separated from the other two by about a sling's cast ; they were constantly walking, sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another. One stopped and sang, "The saints shall go from virtue to virtue, and the God of gods shall be seen in Sion." When it finished, another stopped and sang, and the third in turn, and so on without stopping. The first, that of children, wore robes of dazzling white ; the second were arrayed in garments of hyacinth ; the third in red dalmatics. At sext they sang the *Miserere*, with other psalms, to the end ; and others again at nones ; and at vespers they sang again. When the chant was over, a cloud enveloped the island ; it was bright, yet the isle was veiled, and only the chant of hymns was heard, continuing till morning, at the hour of the nocturns, when the new psalms began. At dawn they changed again ; then they immolated the spotless lamb, and all came to communion. Then two young men approached with a basket full of fruit, and laid it on the ship, saying, "Behold fruits of the isle of the strong ; take them and give us our brother ; then go in peace." Brendan, calling him, said, "Embrace thy brethren, and go with those who claim thee. Happy was the moment when thy mother conceived thee, since thou hast merited to live in this company. Remember the good things which the Lord has bestowed upon thee ; go, and pray for us."

When he had departed with his new companions, the brethren resumed their way, and at meal time Brendan took a fruit ; it was of marvellous size and full of an abundant juice. He divided it among the brethren, and its taste was that of delicious honey. After that they fasted three days. Then, behold, a bird, of prodigious size, came flying towards them, bearing a branch of an unknown tree. The branch fell on Brendan's knees. It bore a cluster of enormous size, of a bright purple hue ; the grapes were like apples, and it fed all the brethren. After another three days fast, they perceived an island all covered with tufted trees, laden with fruit, like that brought by the bird, and of the same color. The branches, loaded with the fruit, bend to the very earth. There were no other trees in the island, and the whole country was perfumed like a hall filled with oranges. They stopped there forty days.

Then they tried the sea again, and suddenly beheld a griffin directing its flight towards them. It was already stretching out its claws to seize the servants of God ; but, lo, the bird that had brought the branch plunged upon it and killed it. Its body fell into the waves before the eyes of the brethren.

Another time they saw all the sea lighted up ; it was so transparent that they could fathom its abyss, and distinguish what was at the depths of its waters. They also beheld a tower reared from the sea above the clouds ; it was surrounded by an open pavilion, with openings so large that the vessel could pass through. The pavilion had the brilliant whiteness of silver and the hardness of marble ; the tower was of the most brilliant crystal, and when they entered the pavilion the sea itself seemed to be of crystal, so clear and transparent was it to its very depths. They went around this wonderful monument : the tower was fourteen hundred cubits on each side ; and the fourth day they found, on the ledge of one of the openings, a chalice of the same material as the pavilion, and a patera of that of the tower. The man of God took them, saying, "They are presents of Christ, who has shown us these wonders."

They sailed eight days more, and they beheld a rocky isle ; not a tree, nor a blade of grass, and on all sides rose forges and iron workers. "Brethren," said Brendan, "my soul is in pain for this island, for I would not touch or approach it, and yet the wind drives us straight upon it." Indeed, they soon heard the mighty panting of the bellows, which made a noise like

thunder, and the formidable blows of the sledges on the anvils at the depth of the echoing workshops. One of the workmen then came out by chance ; he was hairy, and as it were mingled with fire and darkness. At the sight of the servants of God, he returned to his companions, and Brendan cried, “ Put off, my brethren ; let us fly this island.” Already he who had seen them returned bearing in his enormous tongs a mass of burning, immense seething iron, and he hurled it with violence. It did no harm to the saints, for it passed over their heads and fell more than a stadium beyond, and where it fell the sea boiled up as though a mountain of fire had entered its bosom ; the smoke poured up as from an oven. All the men of the island then flocked on the shore, armed with like masses, and they hurled them all, one after another, against the servants of Christ. Then they returned to their lairs, and their lairs at once burst into flames, and the whole island seemed on fire. The sea around the ships and afar, heated, vexed, seethed, like the water in a vessel over a raging fire. The howls of the island, and its fetid odor, reached the brethren. Brendan said, “ Soldiers of Christ, let us rely on our faith and spiritual arms ; watch and be men, for we are on the borders of hell.”

The next day they saw, as in a transparent haze, a lofty mountain rising from the ocean, its summit lost in a dense smoke. A rapid wind drew them on. Then the survivor of the three brothers sprang out of the boat, and walked to the shore, saying, “ Woe to me ! I am lost, father ; I cannot return to you.”

A crowd of devils had already seized him, and were dragging him off. He was a prey to the tortures and flames that devoured him. Brendan cried out, “ Woe to thee ! the end of thy life is an eternal death.” At that moment the mountain top was descried ; it foamed and boiled, breathing in and out fire and flames, which were seen to ascend to the height of heaven, and descend again to the bowels of the mountain. The whole mountain, to its very base, to the sea itself, was like a flaming pyre.

On they sailed to another isle. Brendan said, “ You are going to see Paul the hermit, who lives there with out his corporal life being supported by any material food. We cannot enter the island without the permission of the man of God ; await my return.” He landed alone ; the old man came to meet him, saying, “ It is sweet and pleasing for brethren to dwell together.” All the brethren then left the ship ; Paul embraced them, and saluted them by name. His hair, his beard, and the hair of his body covered him down to his feet ; by his extreme old age, it was white as snow ; he had no other garment, and only his eyes and part of his face could be seen. On beholding him, Brendan was saddened, for he said in his heart, “ Woe is me ! I wear the habit of a monk ; many have placed themselves under me to learn the monastic life ; and behold, a man who in the bonds of the flesh is like an angel, and is uninfluenced by the miseries of the body.” Meanwhile, the man of God answered his thoughts : “ Venerable father, what great wonders God has shown thee that he has not revealed to the other fathers ! and thou sayest in thy heart that thou art unworthy to wear the habit of a monk, when thou art greater than a monk. The monk lives and is clothed by the labor of his hands, and for the last seven years God has nourished thee and thine by his benefits. As for me, here I am on this sock, miserable and naked, like the bird that has only its plumage.”

Then Brendan asked him how he had got there, when he came, and how long he had led that life. “ I was nourished for fifty-five years,” said Paul, “ in the monastery of St. Patrick, and I kept the cemetery of the community. One day, a brilliant vision appeared to me, saying, ‘ To-morrow thou shalt go to the sea side ; there thou wilt find a vessel ; embark ; it will bear thee to a spot where thou shalt await the day of thy death.’ I set out on the seventh day ; arrived in this island where thou seest me. About the ninth hour, another came to me with a fish and some twigs. I struck fire from a flint, and prepared my meal. Every third day my servant came thus from the sea, and thus I lived for thirty years. I feel no thirst ; on the Lord’s

day a rock gave me a little water for ablution. At the end of thirty years, I discovered two grottos and a living fountain ; and I have since lived sixty years with no other food than the water of the fountain. My life has already lasted one hundred and fifty years, and according to God's promise, I here await the day when he shall judge me in this mortal flesh."

After that they sailed forty days, and as they drew nigh to an island, a fog enwrapped them, so thick that they could scarcely see each other. An hour passed thus, and they suddenly found themselves in a great light. Before them lay a spacious land, full of trees, loaded as it were with autumn fruit. For forty days they travelled through it, and saw no night ; nor did they see the end of the country. Then they came to a large river, traversing the island, and a young man came to them, embracing them with great joy, saluting them by their names, and saying, " Blessed are they that dwell in thy house, Lord ; they shall praise thee forever and ever." And he said to Brendan, " This is the island that thou hast so long sought. Thou didst not find it immediately, because God wished to reveal to thee the wonders that he has hidden in the vast ocean. Return to the spot of thy birth, and bear with thee for this is allowed as many of these exquisite fruits and precious stones as thy vessel will hold. At a time still distant, when persecution shall come upon Christians, this land shall be shown to thy successors." He added, " that it was always thus rich and fruitful, and that it had no night, because Christ was its light."

Then Brendan loaded his vessel with the delicious fruits and brilliant stones of that happy country, and a favorable wind bore him back to his monastery.

[2] Jocelyn, Vita S. Patricii.

[1] Evin, Vita Mædoc, (Colgan.)

[2] Aethelwerd, Chron. Lib. iv.

[3] Ven. Bede, Hist. Eccl.

[4] Delocis sanctis, Lib. iii.

[5] Topog. Hib.

[6] Vita Abban, (Colgan.)

[7] Fiech, Hymn.

[8] Evinus, Vita Patricii.

[9] Id.

[10] Egress Brendani.

[11] St. Adamnan, Vita Columb.

[12] St. Adamnan, Vita Columb.

Legendary history of Ireland (1857)

Author : Tachet de Barneval, L

Subject : Christian saints — Ireland ; Ireland — Church history

Publisher : Boston, Patrick Donahoe

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Kelly — University of Toronto

Collection : kellylibrary : toronto

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/legendaryireland00tachuoft>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

April 29 2013