



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. VI.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1856.

NO. 27.

LEGENDS AND TALES FROM IRISH HISTORY.

(From a forthcoming Work, by Mrs. Sadler.)

CONVERSION OF THE FIRST IRISH PRINCE.

It was in the year of Our Lord 432, the first of the pontificate of Sextus the Third, and the fourth of the reign of Laogaire, supreme monarch of Ireland, that a venerable man of grave and placid demeanor landed with a few faithful followers on the tranquil coast of Down. The waters of Dundrum Bay lay calm and bright behind him, with his little bark riding safely at anchor, and the stranger sighed as he looked upon its fluttering sail, for it had borne him safely over the billows from a scene of persecution, and had afforded to him and his a temporary asylum. And what awaited him where he was going? He knew not; God alone knew; sterner persecution might be his lot, and what was far more grievous to imagine, the object of his mission might be frustrated by the obdurate pride of the rulers of the land. His heart was heavy and sad as he looked upon the fair, smiling landscape, and contemplated the rich verdure of the pasture-fields covered with herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. "The land is a fair land," said he within himself. "God has given it richness and beauty, but its people are sunk in darkness and rest in the shadow of death. I would impart unto them tidings of great joy, but they close their ears against me.—Eblana (Dublin) has rejected with scorn the words of life I brought her, and hither have I come to make another trial amongst the warlike children of the north. I would see again, if God so wills it, the scenes where so many of my young days were spent amid the hardships of slavery and the sweet consolations of secret communion with my God. Courage, my soul, remember it is God who sends us on this errand of mercy. The voice of the Irish, which we long ago heard in dreams, still cries out to us for pity and compassion. Let us hasten to do the will of God. Sufferings and persecution we do not fear;—they are our most precious inheritance."

The stranger was still wrapped in pious meditation, when one of his companions addressed him in a tremulous voice:

"Patrick, seest thou yonder armed men advancing towards us?"

"I see them," was the calm reply. "It is the chieftain of this country with his followers coming to meet us."

"How came he to know of our arrival so soon?"

"His herdsman fled at our approach, and told his master there was a company of sea-robbers come to carry off his cattle."

"Glory to God in the highest," said his companions one to the other; for they knew that this must have been revealed to their saintly master in prayer. Their hearts failed them as they attempted to number the advancing enemy, and marked the ferocious bearing of their chief; but Patrick re-assured them.

"Arm yourselves," said he, "with the sign of the cross, and let us go forth boldly to meet those poor pagans. They shall be given into our hands, and changed from ravening wolves to docile lambs; yea, even before this day's sun hath set."

The pagans, on the other hand, halted when still at a safe distance from the strangers, and Dicho, their leader, advancing a step or two before the others, demanded who they were that thus dared to land in his territories without his permission.

The stranger advanced alone towards his angry opponent, resisting the entreaties of his friends that he would not venture within reach of the fierce-looking chieftain, who smiled a grim smile, and grasped his ponderous battle-axe.

"We are servants of God," said the holy man, "and come hither with no evil designs, but in all peace and charity. We are not pirates, most noble Dicho, but humble missionaries of the Most High, doing the bidding of our Master."

"Who is your Master, and how know you my name? You are a stranger—are you not?"

"I am a stranger, it is true; but I love you as a brother, and the Great God, who is my Master, has made known to me your name. He sends us hither from afar that we may make known to this nation who and what He is."

"If you be a stranger in this land, how come you to speak our language?" demanded the chief, evidently somewhat softened by the benignant gentleness of the other's manner.

"When a boy I was taken captive by some Irish pirates from my native coast of Brittany, and sold as a slave in this your country. Here, amongst the mountains of Dalraida, I tended the flocks of Milcho, whom you doubtless know."

"I know him," said the chieftain curtly, and he turned towards his followers. "What think ye of this man? He comes to tell us of a new God."

"Avoid him, Dicho," cried the one immediately addressed; "hearken not to his idle words lest the

wrath of Bel and Samhain should fall on thee and on thy house. Let us take him to Dubtach, the Druid, that he may give him over to the Brehons to be judged according to the law. Beware, Dicho, incur not the anger of the Druids by listening to this vile slave."

"Mighty are the gods of Ierne; we will have none other," cried the followers of Dicho, as with one voice. "Let the man die—he is a blasphemer."

"Be silent," said their lord sternly, "he is a stranger on this shore, and as such entitled to my protection. Tell me, stranger," he added, turning once more towards the group of foreigners, "what manner of weapon or instrument may that be?" pointing at the same time to the cross which the missionary held in his right hand.

"It is the cross—the sign of hope to man, and as such I offer it to thy acceptance."

Dicho started back in horror, and the fierceness of his nature again broke out. "Back, old man, touch me not with that strangely-fashioned stick. It is the magic wand, I have no doubt, which the followers of a certain Palladius—a stranger like thyself—made use of some years ago in making their incantations.—Are you Palladius, who was expelled some short time since from the eastern parts of the country?"

"No—my name is Patrick, an unworthy professor of the same faith which Palladius would have made known to the Irish people. It is a grand and a beautiful faith, and you should, at least, hear it explained. You can then reject it if you will. This cross which you so much fear has no power in itself; it is only a representation of certain great truths of our religion, which I wish you to understand."

"Come with me, then, to my dwelling! This night you shall abide there; and when the evening fire is lighted and my people are gathered into the hall after the labors of the day, thou shalt tell us of this God whom thou servest. The story will while away the hours. My sons and daughters are many, and they will gladly hear the tale. Tonight thou shalt be my guest, though the arch-Druid himself were within hearing."

Patrick thanked and blessed the prince, as he and his followers joined his numerous train, and walked back with them to the bawn, or inclosure, in the centre of which stood the patriarchal dwelling of the chief. It was a wooden building, of one story, covering, however, a vast extent of ground, but without any pretensions to architectural beauty. The surrounding inclosure was empty at that hour of the day; for the cattle which occupied it during the night were long since driven forth to pasture. The wife and daughters of the prince were all engaged in various household duties, in which they were assisted by numerous hand-maidens. The sons were already gone to the chase. The chieftain introduced the missionary, commending him and his followers to the care of his wife and daughters as a stranger and a man who had many things to tell them.

Evening came on; the enormous wood-fire blazed and crackled on the wide hearth; the young sons of Dicho returned from the chase; their mother and sisters laid aside their spindles, in order to give their undivided attention to "the wondrous tale," which they were led to expect. The hand-maidens and the male retainers of the household were ranged in their accustomed places at the lower end of the spacious hall. These preliminaries being arranged, and a grand metrical history of Dicho's ancestry having been sung in a kind of wild recitative by the family-harper, for the soft accompaniment of his *clair-seach*, for the special entertainment of the strangers, the chieftain arose like an uplifted "lance," and called upon his principal guest for the promised account of the gods worshipped in his country.

"There is but one God," said the venerable man, looking round with a benignant smile on his numerous and attentive listeners. "There is but one God who reigns over all the earth—there is, and can be no other. He it was who made the heavens and the earth and the great sea. All things are His, and He is the master of death and of life."

A murmur of disapprobation ran through the room, and Patrick's companions began to tremble in anticipation of what might happen. But he himself looked around with a calm, untroubled gaze, and the fiery spirit of the chief was so subdued by the quiet dignity, the entire self-possession of the stranger, that he moved neither lip nor eye, but sat as if spell-bound, catching in, and, as it were, endeavoring to comprehend every word that fell from his singular guest. When the grumbling sound of suppressed anger was heard to rise higher and louder in the hall, Dicho raised his right hand impatiently, and by an imperative gesture, commanded silence.

"And what sayest thou of our ancient gods—the all-powerful Bel and the great Samhain?" he said, addressing Patrick. "They who light the day and give beauty to the night with the greatness of their glory."

"They are but the works of the great Ruler—the great Maker of all," returned Patrick calmly.—"They are the work of His hands, good prince, and obey His laws. They are creatures, too, and have in them neither life nor power. To worship them is to sin against the Great God of heaven, before whom we must all stand when we leave this world to render an account of our works."

Again did the fierce gesticulation and the hoarse whispering of the pagan men give cause for serious alarm; but Patrick only raised his voice the higher, and grasped the cross more firmly in his hand. He commenced to explain the great truths of faith, gradually unfolding the entire history of man's creation, ruin and redemption, his hearers becoming more and more deeply interested as the simple eloquence of the apostle placed each succeeding branch of the subject within the reach of their understanding, till at length the chieftain suddenly arose, and raising his right arm aloft, exclaimed in a voice hoarse with emotion:

"By all that my fathers believed and honored, I swear!"

"Swear not at all, most noble Dicho," interposed the calm, passionless voice of the missionary; "all manner of swearing is offensive to the God whom I would have you serve!"

"And I will serve him," said the prince firmly. "I believe in your God, and am ready to renounce the delusions I have hitherto followed." He looked anxiously towards his wife, who came forward and bowed down before the missionary, saying: "I, too, Dicho, will serve this mighty Lord."

"And I?"—"and I?"—was echoed in turn from mouth to mouth, while the humble apostle stood with uplifted hands and tearful eyes blessing and thanking the Lord of hosts for this His first victory over the pagan gods of Ireland. Before the morning dawned on the eastern skies, the prince and his entire household were sprinkled with the water of regeneration, and the great Apostle of Ireland had gathered in the first fruits of his plenteous harvest.

THE BON-FIRE AT SLANE.

Having evangelized a great portion of the northern province, St. Patrick bade adieu to Dicho and his other Christian friends; and hearing that the monarch, Laogaire, had convened a meeting of the rulers of the land, both spiritual and temporal, at his royal palace of Tara, he resolved on laying hold of the opportunity to get speech of the king and the chief men of the kingdom. Accompanied by a young nobleman whom he had converted and baptised on his way by the name of Benignus, he arrived with his little party late in the evening, at the place now called Slane, where he resolved on spending the night. The tents were pitched and the frugal evening collation disposed of, and then St. Patrick commanded a fire to be made in front of his tent. Benignus hastily interposed, supposing that his revered master spoke in his ignorance of the national laws and customs of the people whom he came to convert.

"Father, it must not be so," he cried with trembling haste; "there can be no fire made in this land until the sacred flame is enkindled on yonder hill of Tara. It were death to violate this ancient custom."

"It matters not, good youth," replied the holy missionary; "this is the eve of the greatest of Christian festivals: the commemoration of Our Lord's resurrection; and it is an ancient practice in the Church to light a fire on this day, which is kept burning all the year. I also have my sacred fire to enkindle. If thou fearest the consequences, worthy Benignus, thou canst withdraw thyself from our company."

"Nay, nay, father, I fear not for myself," replied the youth with generous fervor; "it is only for thy most precious life that I dread the anger this act may call forth. The Druids never forgive an insult offered to their idols, and they will persecute thee even to death if thou doest this thing."

Patrick smiled, and invoked a blessing on the young man's head, but was no way shaken, it would seem, in his purpose; for the next minute the fire blazed up merrily in front of his tent, shedding a warm glow on the grey tents and the anxious faces of the men who stood looking at each other in portentous silence.—Patrick himself exhibited no emotion of any kind, seeming as though he had retired within himself in his habitual recollection. Benignus stood near him with a face of ashy paleness, his long fair hair tossed by the freshening breeze of spring, and his soft blue eye kindled into unusual animation as he fixed it on the distant hill of Tara, with its group of regal buildings, where no other light was yet visible than the flickering beam of the young moon, as it shone forth at intervals through a drapery of white, fleecy clouds.—Long did Benignus look, but he looked in vain, for no signal-fire appeared; and it seemed to the young

neophyte as though the sacred flame were destined to arise no more on the royal hill.

"Oh Patrick!" said he, almost reproachfully, "why didst thou not wait for one short hour till after the sacred fire was lighted; then we might have lit our paschal-fire without fear; but now—now—oh! master, thou hast undone thyself, and it may be defeated thine own work. It were better for us move away from here before the king's messengers arrive."

The saint smiled again. "Nay, it is too late," said he, "for here they are, and yonder," he added, "is the Bealtine fire, soon, I trust, to be extinguished for ever by the advancing beams of the great Sun of Justice."

Some half-dozen servants of the king here made their unwelcome appearance, curiosity and amazement depicted on their faces. Leaving them to deliver their message, let us see what effect the sight of the paschal-fire produced at Tara. The monarch, Laogaire, was walking with some of his courtiers within the Rath which encircled the palace. Chancing to cast his eyes in the direction of Slane, he was astounded to see a bright light illumining the horizon, and a few moments' observation speedily convinced him that it must proceed from a fire made in the open air. The nobles by whom he was surrounded did not fail, in true courtier style, to fan the flame of their king's ire, so that by the time the chief-druids had reached his presence in obedience to his summons, he was prepared to execute any measure of revenge which they might propose in the paroxysm of their religious hate. By this time many of the princes and nobles from within the palace had hurried to the spot, attracted by the conflicting rumors flying from mouth to mouth. The king demanded of the arch-druid what fire that was that sent its sacrilegious glare up to the angry heavens.

"That fire, prince," replied the druid, "is one which, unless you quench it this very night, nay, as soon as may be, will burn for ever and ever in this land. It will scorch and shrivel up your kingly power, and before it the fires of Bel and Samhain will pale and die away."

"Nay, then, it shall not do any of these things; for, by the gods of my fathers, I swear it shall go out in the twinkling of an eye after my messengers reach it." The swiftest amongst the household retainers were then dispatched, as we have seen, with orders to bring the audacious offender before the king. The sacred-fire was then lit and consecrated with all the usual ceremonies. Long before the consecration was ended, word was brought the king that the foreign magicians awaited his pleasure; and no sooner were the mystic rites concluded than he commanded them to be brought forward. History records that the monarch was seated on this occasion, on a grassy mound, with some of the princes around him. The moonbeams shed a pale and sickly light on the faces of the king and his warrior-chiefs, and on the patriarchal figure of Patrick as, leaving his companions a little behind, he stood forward to confront the king. There was dead silence for a few minutes, during which the pagan prince and the Christian bishop were each deliberately studying the lineaments of the other. The scrutiny was rather satisfactory in its results on both sides, for the king addressed Patrick in a much milder tone than could have been expected, while the saint in his turn was emboldened to speak his mind freely.

"Who art thou," said the king, "that thus presumest to defy our power, and offer foul insult to the gods of Ierne?"

"I am called Patricius, or Patrick, most noble prince, and I have no mind to disobey your royal orders. I did but observe a sacred rite of my own religion in making yonder fire on this evening. I ain sent hither at the bidding of a Prince who is mightier than thou, great monarch, yea, even the King of kings. He grieves to see your majesty at enmity with him, and desires me to solicit your alliance."

"It is strange," said Laogaire, "that we never heard of him before. But if he be so powerful as you say, and so well-disposed towards ourself personally, we would hear more concerning him. Tomorrow, at noon, thou shalt appear before the supreme council, wherein all the estates of our kingdom are assembled, and there thou shalt tell us all things that appertain to this great king who has sent thee hither. See, however, that thou art never again guilty of such rashness while in our dominions, or it shall not be well with thee."

"Fear not, king," said Patrick with his paternal smile; "long before the next feast of Bel or Samhain thou wilt thyself extinguish their fires, and command me to kindle mine." So saying he bowed low to the monarch, and slowly retired to where he had left his companions.

"I told you, prince, what would happen," said the arch-druid; "thou seest this foreigner does not even attempt to conceal his wicked purpose."