

## A Book of Saints and Wonders

I have given this book its name because it is at my own door, in the Barony of Kiltartan, I have heard a great number of the stories from beggars, pipers, travelling men, and such pleasant company. But others I have heard in the Workhouse, or to the north of Galway Bay, in Connemara, or on its southern coast, in Burren. I might, perhaps, better have called the little book *Myths in the Making*.

A sociable people given to conversation and belief; no books in the house, no history taught in the schools; it is likely that must have been the way of it in old Greece, when the king of highly civilised Crete was turned by tradition into a murderous tyrant owning a monster and a labyrinth. It was the way of it in old France too, one thinks, when Charlemagne's height grew to eight feet, and his years were counted by centuries: *"He is three hundred years old, and when will he weary of war?"* Anyhow, it has been the way of modern Ireland—the Ireland I know—and when I hear myth turned into history, or history into myth, I see in our stonebreakers and cattle drivers Greek husbandmen or ancient vinedressers of the Loire.

I noticed some time ago, when listening to many legends of the Fianna, that is about Finn, their leader, the most exaggerated of the tales have gathered; and I believe the reason is that he, being the greatest of the *"Big Men,"* the heroic race, has been most often in the mouths of the people. They have talked of him by their fire-sides for two thousand years or so; at first earlier myths gathered around him, and then from time to time any unusual feats of skill or cunning shown off on one or another countryside, till many of the stories make him at the last grotesque, little more than a clown. So in Bible History, while lesser kings keep their dignity, great Solomon's wit is outwitted by the riddles of some countryman; and Lucifer himself, known in Kiltartan as *"the proudest of the angels, thinking himself equal with God,"* has been seen in Sligo rolling down a road in the form of the Irish Times. The gods of ancient Ireland have not escaped. Mananaan, Son of the Sea, Rider of the Horses of the Sea, was turned long ago into a juggler doing tricks, and was hunted in the shape of a hare. Brigit, the *"Fiery Arrow,"* the nurse of poets, later a saint and the Foster-mother of Christ, does her healing of the poor in the blessed wells of to-day as *"a very civil little fish, very pleasant, wagging its tail."*

Giobniu, the divine smith of the old times, made a new sword and a new spear for every one that was broken in the great battle between the gods and the mis-shapen Fomor. *"No spearpoint that is made by my hand,"* he said, *"will ever miss its mark; no man it touches will ever taste life again."* It was his father who, with a cast of a hatchet, could stop the inflowing of the tide; and it was he himself whose ale gave lasting youth: *"No sickness or wasting ever comes on those who drink at Giobniu's Feast."* Later he became a saint, a master builder, builder of a house *"more shining than a garden; with its stars, with its sun, with its moon."* To-day he is known as the builder of the round towers of the early Christian centuries, and of the square castles of the Anglo-Normans. And the stories I have given of him, called as he now is, *"the Goban Saor,"* show that he has fallen still farther in legend from his high origin. As to O'Connell, perhaps because his name, like that of Finn and the Goban, is much in the mouths of the people, there is something of the absurd already coming into his legend. The stories of him show more than any others how swiftly myths and traditions already in the air may gather around a memory much loved and much spoken of. He died only sixty years ago, and many who have seen and heard him are still living; and yet he has already been given a miraculous birth, and the power

of a saint is on its way to him. I have charged my son, and should I live till he comes to sensible years, I will charge my grandson, to keep their ears open to the growth of legend about him who was once my husband's friendly enemy, and afterwards his honoured friend.

I do not take the credit or the discredit of the opinions given by the various speakers, nor do I go bail for the facts; I do but record what is already in "*the Book of the People*." The history of England and Ireland was shut out of the schools and it became a passion. As to why it was shut out, well, I heard someone whisper "*Eugene Aram hid the body away, being no way anxious his scholars should get a sight of it.*" But this also was said in the barony of Kiltartan.

The illustrations are drawn from some delft figures, ornaments in a Kiltartan house.

**A. GREGORY.**

**COOLE PARK, November, 1909.**

## **A Book of Saints and Wonders by Lady Gregory (Brigit, The Mary of the Gael)**

### **Brigit in her Young Youth**

Now as to Brigit she was born at sunrise on the first day of the spring, of a bondwoman of Connacht. And it was angels that baptized her and that gave her the name of Brigit, that is a Fiery Arrow. She grew up to be a serving girl the same as her mother. And all the food she used was the milk of a white red-eared cow that was set apart for her by a druid. And everything she put her hand to used to increase, and it was she wove the first piece of cloth in Ireland, and she put the white threads in the loom that have a power of healing in them to this day. She bettered the sheep and she satisfied the birds and she fed the poor.

### **Brigit in her Father's House**

And when she grew to be strong and to have good courage she went to her father Dubthach's house in Munster and stopped with him there. And one time there came some high person to the house, and food was made ready for him and for his people; and five pieces of bacon were given to Brigit, to boil them. But there came into the house a very hungry miserable hound, and she gave him out of pity a piece of the bacon. And when the hound was not satisfied with that she gave him another piece. Then Dubthach came and he asked Brigit were the pieces of bacon ready; and she bade him count them and he counted them, and the whole of the five pieces were there, not one of them missing. But the high guest that was there and that Brigit had thought to be asleep had seen all, and he told her father all that happened. And he and the people that were with him did not eat that meat, for they were not worthy of it, but it was given to the poor and to the wretched.

### **She Minds the Dairy**

After that Brigit went to visit her mother that was in bondage to a druid of Connacht. And it is the way she was at that time, at a grass-farm of the mountains having on it twelve cows, and she gathering butter. And there was sickness on her, and Brigit

cared her and took charge of the whole place. And the churning she made, she used to divide it first into twelve parts in honour of the twelve apostles of our Lord; and the thirteenth part she would make bigger than the rest, to the honour of Christ, and that part she would give to strangers and to the poor. And the serving boy wondered to see her doing that, but it is what she used to say: *"It is in the name of Christ I feed the poor; for Christ is in the body of every poor man."*

### **She Fills the Vessels**

One time the serving boy went to the druid's house, and they asked was the girl minding the dairy well. And he said *"I am thankful, and the calves are fat;"* for he dared not say anything against the girl, and she not there. But the druid got word of what she was doing, and he came to visit the farm, and his wife along with him; and the cows were doing well, and the calves were fat. Then they went into the dairy, having with them a vessel eighteen hands in height. And Brigit bade them welcome and washed their feet, and made ready food for them, and after that they bade her fill up the vessel with butter. And she had but a churning and a half for them, and she went into the kitchen where it was stored and it is what she said:

*"O my High Prince who can do all these things, this is not a forbidden asking; bless my kitchen with thy right hand!*

*"My kitchen, the kitchen of the white Lord; a kitchen that was blessed by my King; a kitchen where there is butter.*

*"My Friend is coming, the Son of Mary; it is he blessed my kitchen; the Prince of the world comes to this place; that there may be plenty with him!"* After she had made that hymn she brought the half of the churning from the place where it was stored; and the druid's wife mocked at her and said *"It is good filling for a large vessel this much is!"* *"Fill your vessel"* said Brigit, *"and God will add something to it."* And she was going back to her kitchen and bringing half a churning every time and saying every time a verse of those verses. And if all the vessels of the men of Munster had been brought to her she would have filled the whole of them.

### **The Man that had Lost his Wife's Love**

Brigit would give herself to no man in marriage but she took the veil and after that she did great wonders. There came to her one time a man making his complaint that his wife would not sleep with him but was leaving him, and he came asking a spell from Brigit that would bring back her love. And Brigit blessed water for him, and it is what she said: *"Bring that water into your house, and put it in the food and in the drink and on the bed."* And after he had done that, his wife gave him great love, so that she could not be as far as the other side of the house from him, but was always at his lund. And one day he set out on a journey, leaving the wife in her sleep, and as soon as she awoke from her sleep she rose up and followed after her man till she saw him, and there was a strip of the sea between them. And she called out to him and it is what she said, that if he would not come back to her, she would go into the sea that was between them.

### **The Drying of Brigit's Cloak**

One time Brennain, saint of the Gael, came from the west to Brigit, to the plain of the Life, for he wondered at the great name she had for doing miracles and wonders. And Brigit came in from her sheep to welcome him, and as she came into the house she laid her cloak that was wet on the rays of the sun, and they held it up the same as hooks. Then Brennain bade his serving lad to put his cloak on the sun rays in the same way, and he put it on them, but twice it fell from them. Then Brennain himself

put it on them the third time, and there was anger on him, and that time it stopped on the rays.

### **The King of Leinster's Fox**

One time there was a man of her household cutting firing, and it chanced to him to kill a pet fox belonging to the King of Leinster, and the King had him made prisoner. But Brigit called the fox out of the wood, and he came and was at his tricks and his games for the King and his people at Brigit's bidding. And when he had done his tricks he went away safe through the wood, and the army of Leinster, footmen and horsemen and hounds, after him.

### **Brigit Spreads her Cloak**

When she was a poor girl she was minding her cow one time at the Curragh of Life, and she had no place to feed it but the side of the road. And a rich man that owned the land came by and saw her and he said *"How much land would it take to give grass to the cow?"* *"As much as my cloak would cover"* said she. *"I will give that"* said the rich man. She laid down her cloak then, and it was spreading out miles and miles on every side. But there was a silly old woman passing by and she said *"If that cloak goes on spreading, all Ireland will be free;"* and with that the cloak stopped and spread no more. And Brigit held that land through her lifetime, and it never had rent on it since, but the English Government have taken it now and have put barracks upon it. It is a pity the old woman spoke that time. She did not know Brigit to be better than other one.

### **The Leper who would be a King**

A leper came one time to Brigit, asking a cow. And Brigit said *"Would you sooner have a cow or be healed of your disease?"* *"I would sooner be healed"* he said *"than to have the sway over the whole world. For every sound man is a king"* he said. Then Brigit prayed to God; and the leper was healed, and served her afterwards.

### **The Lake of Milk**

The Seven Bishops came to her in a place she had in the north Kildare, and she asked her cook Blathnet had she any food, and she said she had not. And Brigit was ashamed, being as she was without food before those holy men, and she prayed hard to the Lord. Then angels came and bade her to milk the cows for the third time that day. So she milked them herself, and they filled the pails with the milk, and they would have filled all the vessels of the whole of Leinster. And the milk overflowed the vessels till it made a lake that is called the Lake of Milk to this day.

### **The Things Brigit wished for**

These were the wishes of Brigit:

*"I would wish a great lake of ale for the King of Kings; I would wish the family of Heaven to be drinking it through life and time. I would wish the men of Heaven in my own house; I would wish vessels of peace to be giving to them.*

*"I would wish vessels full of alms to be giving away; I would wish ridges of mercy for peace-making.*

*"I would wish joy to be in their drinking; I would wish Jesus to be here among them.*

*"I would wish the three Mary's of great name; I would wish the people of Heaven from every side.*

*"I would wish to be a rent-payer to the Prince; the way if I was in trouble he would give me a good blessing."*

Whatever, now, Brigit would ask of the Lord, he would give it to her on the moment. And it is what her desire was, to satisfy the poor, to banish every hardship, and to save every sorrowful man.

### **The Son of Reading**

One time she was minding her sheep on the Curragh, and she saw a son of reading running past her. *"What is it makes you so uneasy?"* she said *"and what is it you are looking for?"* *"It is to Heaven I am running, woman of the veil"* said the scholar. *"The virgin's Son knows he is happy that makes that journey"* said Brigit. *"And pray to God to make it easy for myself to go there"* she said. *"I have no time"* said he; *"for the gates of Heaven are open now, and I am in dread they might be shut against me. And as you are hindering me"* he said *"pray to the Master to make it easy for me to go there, and I will pray him to make it easy for you."* Then they said *"Our Father"* together, and he was religious from that out, and it was he gave her absolution at the last. And it is by reason of him that the whole of the sons of learning of the world are with Brigit.

### **The Fishes Honour her**

Brennain came to Brigit one time to ask why was it the beasts of the sea gave honour to her more than to the rest of the saints. Then they made their confession to each other, and Brennain said after that *"In my opinion, girl, it is right the beasts are when they honour you above ourselves."*

### **A Hymn made for Brigit by Brennain or another**

*"Brigit, excellent woman; sudden flame; may the bright fiery sun bring us to the lasting kingdom.*

*"May Brigit save us beyond troops of demons; may she break before us the battles of every death.*

*"May she do away with the rent sin has put on us; the blossomed branch; the Mother of Jesus; the dear young woman greatly looked up to. That I may be safe in every place with my saint of Leinster!"*

### **Brigit Helps the Mother of God**

There was a poor man, and a poor woman, living in an ancient place in Ireland, a sort of a wilderness. The man used to be wishing for a son that would be a help to him with the work, but the woman used to say nothing, because she was good. They had a baby at last, but it was a girl, and the man was sorry and he said *"We will always be poor now."* But the woman said, for it was showed to her at that time, *"This child will be the Mother of God."* The girl grew up in that ancient place, and one day she was sitting at the door, and our Saviour sent One to her that said *"Would you wish to be the Mother of God?"* *"I would wish it"* said she. And on the minute, as she said that, the Saviour went into her as a child. The Messenger took her with him then, and he put beautiful clothing on her, and she turned to be so beautiful that all the people followed them, crowding to see the two beautiful people that were passing by. They met then with Brigit, and the Mother of God said to her, *"What can we do to make these crowds leave following us?"* *"I will do that for you"* said Brigit *"for I will show them a greater wonder."* She went into a house then and brought out a harrow and held it up over her head, and everyone of the pins gave out a flame like a candle; and all the people turned back to look at the shining harrow that was such a great wonder. And it is because of that the harrow is blessed since that time. The Mother of God asked her then what would she do for her as a reward. *"Put my day before your own day"* said Brigit. So she did that, and Saint Brigit's day is kept before her own day ever since. And there are some say Brigit fostered the Holy

Child, and kept an account of every drop of blood he lost through his lifetime, and anyway she was always going about with the Mother of God.

## **The First of February**

And from that time to this the housekeepers have a rhyme to say on Saint Brigit's day, bidding them to bring out a firkin of butter and to divide it among the working boys. For she was good always, and it was her desire to feed the poor, to do away with every hardship, to be gentle to every misery. And it is on her day the first of the birds begin to make their nests, and the blessed Crosses are made with straw and are put up in the thatch; for the death of the year is done with and the birthday of the year is come. And it is what the Gad of Scotland say in averse:

*"Brigit put her finger in the river on the feast day of Brigit, and away went the hatching-mother of the cold.*

*"She washed the palms of her hands in the river on the day of the feast of Patrick, and away went the birth-mother of the cold."*

## **A Hymn Brocan made for Brigit**

*"Victorious Brigit did not love the world; the spending of the world was not dear to her; a wonderful ladder for the people to climb to the kingdom of the Son of Mary.*

*"A wild boar came among her swine; he hunted the wild pigs to the north; Brigit blessed him with her staff, that he made his dwelling with her own herd.*

*"She was open in all her doings; she was only Mother of the great King's Son; she blessed the frightened bird till she played with it in her hand.*

*"Before going with angels to the battle let us go running to the church; to remember the Lord is better than any poem. Victorious Brigit did not love the world."*

## **Her Care for Leinster**

On the day of the battle of Almuin, Brigit was seen over the men of Leinster, and Columcille was seen over the Ua Neil; and it was the men of Leinster won that battle. And a long time after that again, when Strongbow that had brought great trouble into Ireland and that was promised the kingdom of Leinster was near his end, he cried out from his bed that he saw Brigit of the Gael, and that it was she herself was bringing him to his death.

## **She Remembers the Poor**

But if Brigit belonged to the east, it is not in the west she is forgotten, and the people of Burren and of Corcomruadh and Kinvara go every year to her blessed well that is near the sea, praying and remembering her. And in that well there is a little fish that is seen every seven years, and whoever sees that fish is cured of every disease. And there is a woman living yet that is poor and old and that saw that blessed fish, and this is the way she tells the story:

*"I had a pearl in my eye one time, and I went to Saint Brigit's well on the cliffs. Scores of people there were in it, looking for cures, and some got them and some did not get them. And I went down the four steps to the well and I was looking into it, and I saw a little fish no longer than your finger coming from a stone under the water. Three spots it had on the one side and three on the other side, red spots and a little green with the red, and it was very civil coming hither to me and very pleasant wagging its tail. And it stopped and looked up at me and gave three wags of its back, and walked off again and went in under the stone.*

*"And I said to a woman that was near me that I saw the little fish, and she began to call out and to say there were many coming with cars and with horses for a month past and none of them saw it at all. And she proved me, asking had it spots, and I said it had, three on the one side and three on the other side. "That is it" she said. And within three days I had the sight of my eye again. It was surely Saint Brigit I saw that time; who else would it be? And you would know by the look of it that it was no common fish. Very civil it was, and nice and loughy, and no one else saw it at all. Did I say more prayers than the rest? Not a prayer. I was young in those days. I suppose she took a liking to me, maybe because of my name being Brigit the same as her own."*

### **The Boy that dreamed he would get his Health**

There was a beggar boy used to be in Burren, that was very simple like and had no health, and if he would walk as much as a few perches it is likely he would fall on the road. And he dreamed twice that he went to Saint Brigit's blessed well upon the cliffs and that he found his health there. So he set out to go to the well, and when he came to it he fell in and he was drowned. Very simple he was and innocent and without sin. It is likely it is in heaven he is at this time.

### **The Water of the Well**

*And there is a woman in Burren now is grateful to Saint Brigit, for "I brought my little girl that was not four years old" she says "to Saint Brigit's well on the cliffs, where she was ailing and pining away. I brought her as far as the doctors in Gort and they could do nothing for her and then I promised to go to Saint Brigit's well, and from the time I made that promise she got better. And I saw the little fish when I brought her there; and she grew to be as strong a girl as ever went to America. I made a promise to go to the well every year after that, and so I do, of a Garlic Sunday, that is the last Sunday in July. And I brought a bottle of water from it last year and it is as cold as amber yet."*

### **The Binding**

And when the people are covering up a red sod under the ashes in the night time to spare the seed of the fire for the morning, they think upon Brigit the Fiery Arrow and it is what they do be saying: *"I save this fire as Christ saved everyone; Brigit beneath it, the Son of Mary within it; let the three angels having most power in the court of grace be keeping this house and the people of this house and sheltering them until the dawn of day."* For it is what Brigit had a mind for; lasting goodness that was not hidden; minding sheep and rising early; hospitality towards good men. It is she keeps everyone that is in straits and in dangers; it is she puts down sicknesses; it is she quiets the voice of the waves and the anger of the great sea. She is the queen of the south; she is the mother of the flocks; she is the Mary of the Gael.

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