

Legends

THOSE ecclesiastical histories entitled Legends are said to have originated in the following circumstance.

Before colleges were established in the monasteries where the schools were held, the professors in rhetoric frequently gave their pupils the life of some saint for a trial of their talent at *amplification*. The students, being constantly at a loss to furnish out their pages, invented most of these wonderful adventures. Jortin observes, that the Christians used to collect out of Ovid, Livy, and other pagan poets and historians, the miracles and portents to be found there, and accommodated them to their own monks and saints. The good fathers of that age, whose simplicity was not inferior to their devotion, were so delighted with these flowers of rhetoric, that they were induced to make a collection of these miraculous compositions; not imagining that, at some distant period, they would become matters of faith. Yet, when James de Voragine, Peter Nadal, and Peter Ribadeneira, wrote the Lives of the Saints, they sought for their materials in the libraries of the monasteries; and, awakening from the dust these manuscripts of amplification, imagined they made an invaluable present to the world, by laying before them these voluminous absurdities. The

people received these pious fictions with all imaginable simplicity, and as the book is adorned with a number of cuts, these miracles were perfectly intelligible to their eyes. Tillemont, Fleury, Baillet, Launoi, and Bollandus, cleared away much of the rubbish; the enviable title of *Golden Legend*, by which James de Voragine called his work, has been disputed; iron or lead might more aptly express the character of this folio.

When the world began to be more critical in their reading, the monks gave a graver turn to their narratives; and became penurious of their absurdities. The faithful Catholic contends, that the line of tradition has been preserved unbroken; notwithstanding that the originals were lost in the general wreck of literature from the barbarians, or came down in a most imperfect state.

Baronius has given the lives of many apocryphal saints; for instance, of a Saint *Xinoris*, whom he calls a martyr of Antioch; but it appears that Baronius having read in Chrysostom this *word*, which signifies a *couple* or *pair*, he mistook it for the name of a saint, and contrived to give the most authentic biography of a saint who never existed! The Catholics confess this sort of

blunder is not uncommon, but then it is only fools who laugh! As a specimen of the happier inventions, one is given, embellished by the diction of Gibbon—

“Among the insipid legends of ecclesiastical history, I am tempted to distinguish the memorable fable of the *Seven Sleepers*; whose imaginary date corresponds with the reign of the younger Theodosius, and the conquest of Africa by the Vandals. When the Emperor Decius persecuted the Christians, seven noble youths of Ephesus concealed themselves in a spacious cavern on the side of an adjacent mountain; where they were doomed to perish by the tyrant, who gave orders that the entrance should be firmly secured with a pile of stones. They immediately fell into a deep slumber, which was miraculously prolonged without injuring the powers of life, during a period of one hundred and eighty-seven years. At the end of that time the slaves of Adolius, to whom the inheritance of the mountain had descended, removed the stones to supply materials for some rustic edifice. The light of the sun darted into the cavern, and the Seven Sleepers were permitted to awake. After a slumber as they thought of a few hours, they were pressed by the calls of hunger; and resolved that Jamblichus, one of their number, should secretly return to the city to purchase bread for the use of his compan-

ions. The youth, if we may still employ that appellation, could no longer recognize the once familiar aspect of his native country; and his surprise was increased by the appearance of a large cross, triumphantly erected over the principal gate of Ephesus. His singular dress and obsolete language confounded the baker, to whom he offered an ancient medal of Decius as the current coin of the empire; and Jamblichus, on the suspicion of a secret treasure, was dragged before the judge. Their mutual inquiries produced the amazing discovery, that two centuries were almost elapsed since Jamblichus and his friends had escaped from the rage of a Pagan tyrant. The bishop of Ephesus, the clergy, the magistrates, the people, and, it is said, the Emperor Theodosius himself, hastened to visit the cavern of the Seven Sleepers; who bestowed their benediction, related their story, and at the same instant peaceably expired.

“This popular tale Mahomet learned when he drove his camels to the fairs of Syria; and he has introduced it, as a *divine revelation*, into the Koran.”—The same story has been adopted and adorned, by the nations from Bengal to Africa, who profess the Mahometan religion.

The too curious reader may perhaps require other specimens of the more unlucky inventions of this

“Golden Legend;” as characteristic of a certain class of minds, the philosopher will not condemn these grotesque fictions.

These monks imagined that holiness was often proportioned to a saint’s filthiness. St. Ignatius, say they, delighted to appear abroad with old dirty shoes; he never used a comb, but let his hair clot; and religiously abstained from paring his nails. One saint attained to such piety as to have near three hundred patches on his breeches; which, after his death, were hung up in public as an incentive to imitation. St. Francis discovered by certain experience that the devils were frightened away by such kind of breeches, but were animated by clean clothing to tempt and seduce the wearers; and one of their heroes declares that the purest souls are in the dirtiest bodies. On this they tell a story which may not be very agreeable to fastidious delicacy. Brother Juniper was a gentleman perfectly pious on this principle; indeed so great was his merit in this species of mortification, that a brother declared he could always nose Brother Juniper when within a mile of the monastery, provided the wind was at the due point. Once, when the blessed Juniper, for he was no saint, was a guest, his host, proud of the honour of entertaining so

pious a personage, the intimate friend of St. Francis, provided an excellent bed, and the finest sheets. Brother Juniper abhorred such luxury. And this too evidently appeared after his sudden departure in the morning, unknown to his kind host. The great Juniper did this, says his biographer, having told us what he did, not so much from his habitual inclinations for which he was so justly celebrated, as from his excessive piety, and as much as he could to mortify worldly pride, and to show how a true saint despised clean sheets.

In the life of St. Francis we find, among other grotesque miracles, that he preached a sermon in a desert, but he soon collected an immense audience. The birds shrilly warbled to every sentence, and stretched out their necks, opened their beaks, and when he finished, dispersed with a holy rapture into four companies, to report his sermon to all the birds in the universe. A grasshopper remained a week with St. Francis during the absence of the Virgin Mary, and pittered on his head. He grew so companionable with a nightingale, that when a nest of swallows began to babble, he hushed them by desiring them not to tittle-tattle of their sister, the nightingale. Attacked by a wolf, with only the sign manual of the cross, he held a long dialogue

with his rabid assailant, till the wolf, meek as a lap-dog, stretched his paws in the hands of the saint, followed him through towns, and became half a Christian.

This same St. Francis had such a detestation of the good things of this world, that he would never suffer his followers to touch money. A friar having placed in a window some money collected at the altar, he desired him to take it in his mouth, and throw it on the dung of an ass! St. Philip Neri was such a *lover of poverty*, that he frequently prayed that God would bring him to that state as to stand in need of a penny, and find nobody that would give him one.

But Saint Macaire was so shocked at having *killed a louse*, that he endured seven years of penitence among the thorns and briars of a forest. A circumstance which seems to have reached Molière, who gives this stroke to the character of his Tartuffe:

Il s'impute a peché la moindre bagatelle;
Jusques-la qu'il se vint, l'autre jour, s'accuser
D'avoir pris une puce en faisant sa prière,
Et de l'avoir tuée, avec trop de colère!

I give a miraculous incident respecting two pious maidens. The night of the Nativity of Christ, after the first mass, they both retired into a solitary spot of their nunnery till the second mass was rung. One asked the

other, "Why do you want two cushions, when I have only one?" The other replied, "I would place it between us, for the child Jesus; as the Evangelist says, where there are two or three persons assembled I am in the midst of them."—This being done, they sat down, feeling a most lively pleasure at their fancy; and there they remained from the Nativity of Christ to that of John the Baptist; but this great interval of time passed with these saintly maidens as two hours would appear to others. The abbess and her nuns were alarmed at their absence, for no one could give any account of them. In the eve of St. John, a cowherd passing by them, beheld a beautiful child seated on a cushion between this pair of runaway nuns. He hastened to the abbess with news of these stray sheep, who saw this lovely child playfully seated between these nymphs, who, with blushing countenances, inquired if the second bell had already rung? Both parties were equally astonished to find our young devotees had been there from the Nativity of Jesus to that of St. John. The abbess asked after the child who sat between them; they solemnly declared they saw no child between them, and persisted in their story.

Such is one of these miracles of "the Golden Legend," which a wicked wit might comment on, and see nothing extraordinary in the whole story. The two nuns

might be missing between the Nativities, and be found at the last with a child seated between them.—They might not choose to account either for their absence or their child—the only touch of miracle is, that they asseverated, they *saw no child*—that I confess is a *little (child) too much*.

The lives of the saints by Alban Butler is a learned work, and the most sensible history of these legends; Ribadeneira's lives of the saints exhibit more of the legendary spirit, for wanting judgment and not faith, he is more voluminous in his details, and more ridiculous in his narratives.