

## SAINTS AND SERPENTS

ART both religious and profane has remembered the curse of the serpent: "*I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel*" (Gen. iii, 15). In pagan art we see the agony of man in Laocoon, in Christian art we see the triumph of the Blessed Mother of God. Amongst many strange cults we see man appeasing the serpent in idolatrous worship, but Christianity has crushed its power for evil. It is in this light, however summarily we may dismiss the legends of hagiography, that we can read their origin, which is in casting out devils and the powers of darkness. Most critics, we presume, would consider the many stories of saints driving away snakes as allegories of their triumph over sin, but there are still no snakes in Ireland whereas Great Britain retains the unpleasant viper. This driving out of serpents occurs in the biographies of more than a score of saints, of whom fourteen are of France, Britain, or Ireland.

After St. Patrick, the most celebrated of these is the great St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers and Doctor of the Church, of whom we are told that he made a short stay at Genoa on his return from exile in the East, and during this sojourn cleared the neighbouring island of Gallinara of a plague of serpents. In memory of this signal service a church was later dedicated to him, and thither a boy, who in his sleep had swallowed an adder, was brought by his distracted parents. Their prayers were heard and their faith rewarded by seeing their child vomit his unwelcome meal.<sup>1</sup> A similar story is related of St. Helrade, Abbot of Novalesse, who drove all serpents from his abbey grounds. Some years after his death a group of boys were guarding a flock of sheep but, overcome by the hot sun, fell asleep. During their slumbers a snake crawled into the mouth of one of them and his horrified companions, awakened by his screams, or rather gurgles, saw the tip of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bollandists, January 15.

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reptile's tail protruding from the unfortunate boy's mouth. Hurriedly they carried him to his mother, who rushed off with him to St. Helrade's shrine, where he also vomited forth his unbidden guest.<sup>2</sup> It was a firmly established belief up to a few centuries ago that serpents would crawl into the mouths of sleepers, and Shakespeare thus refers to it:

About his neck  
A green and gilded snake had wreathed itself  
Who with her head nimble in threats approach'd  
The opening of his mouth.

(*As You Like It*, Act IV, Sc. 3.)

Of those saints to whose memory the snake-expelling legend is attached, monastic builders form a numerous group; and the stories appear to have more than an allegorical origin, for what is more reasonable than to suppose these founders would rid their sites of such obnoxious neighbours as poisonous snakes. Thus St. Honoratus, who died Bishop of Arles in 426, cleared the island of Lerins in order to found there Western Europe's great seat of learning. This fact is mentioned in the panegyric preached by his successor, St. Hilary of Arles, who for his participation in the name of Poitiers' great bishop shares equal fame for casting out serpents, but without any historical proof.<sup>3</sup> St. Mawes, an Irish monk, rid his newly founded abbey in Brittany, called after him St. Maudez, of all venomous reptiles, and the earth of his early hermitage was long used as a cure for snake-bite.<sup>4</sup> St. Magnus, founder of Fuessen, St. Enimia, daughter of Clothair II, Abbess of Fontaine-le-Burle, and St. Pirmin, founder of Reichenau on Lake Constance, all freed their monasteries from snakes.<sup>5</sup> St. Pirmin, according to Husenbeth, is represented in art with serpents twined round him and is wrongly styled a martyr. He was a native of England or Ireland, the question is not settled, and was exiled after founding Reichenau Abbey on an island in Lake Constance, an abbey that grew into a great centre of Benedictine learn-

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<sup>2</sup> Died 874. Bollandists, March 13.

<sup>3</sup> Bollandists, January 16; Husenbeth, *Symbols of the Saints*, 1853, s.v. Serpents.

<sup>4</sup> Cahier, S.J., *Caractéristiques des Saints*, Paris, 1867, p. 748.

<sup>5</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*

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ing. St. Florentius cleared the grounds of Norcia Abbey in a drastic fashion, if we can credit his legend which relates how at his prayer a terrible storm arose in which hundreds of snakes were slain, their bodies being most considerably carried off by birds of prey before they had time to become offensive.<sup>6</sup>

Two parish priests, St. Amabilis<sup>7</sup> of Tiom in Auvergne and St. Amantius<sup>8</sup> of Tiferno, drove snakes from their parishes, the latter killing his with the sign of the cross, whilst an early French Bishop, St. Peregrine of Auxerre, cleared them away from his cathedral or what corresponded to a cathedral in the beginning of the fourth century. Of him it is also related that he changed into a serpent the whip with which a pagan was about to flog him. This was probably during his martyrdom in 304.<sup>9</sup> St. Protus, a priest also martyred under Diocletian, cleared the isle of Linaria, off Sardinia, of all serpents.<sup>10</sup> St. Cadoc,<sup>11</sup> son of the King of Glamorgan, during his stay in Brittany drove them from the district round Vannes, and his aunt, St. Keyne, or Cain, who dwelt an anchoress at Keynsham in Somerset, turned her serpent-neighbours into stone.<sup>12</sup> St. Cadoc himself turned to stone a couple of wolves swimming across an arm of the sea after they had killed his sheep.<sup>13</sup> St. Julius, sent by the Emperor Theodosius to root out paganism in Northern Italy, cleared an island in Lake Orta of a great multitude of snakes, which however he did not destroy but, after telling them he wanted their old home for a church, sent them off with his blessing. They thereupon swam to the mainland, finding a home on a mountain and harming no one.<sup>14</sup>

In the preceding stories the saints dealt with serpents in great numbers, but in many legends they deal with only one

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<sup>6</sup> Bollandists, May 23. He died in 547.

<sup>7</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*; Holweck, *Biographical Dictionary of Saints*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*; Bollandists, September 26.

<sup>9</sup> Cahier, 748; Bollandists, May 16.

<sup>10</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> F. J. Cowles, *Dust of Years*, p. 36 (Sands & Co.).

<sup>13</sup> Bollandists, January 24.

<sup>14</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*; Bollandists, January 31.

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monster, perhaps the devil allegorically. St. Modestus, Patriarch of Jerusalem, by praying slew a great snake infesting a public fountain.<sup>15</sup> St. Samson of Caldey, when he became Bishop of Dol, destroyed a monstrous serpent then terrorizing his people.<sup>16</sup> St. Lifard, or Lietphard, performed a like service for the inhabitants of Meun-sur-Loire. Here a dragon-like snake ruled supreme for many years, devouring alike man and beast. It had the temerity one day to give chase to the saint's disciple, Urbicius, who ran terrified to his master. Lifard handed him his staff, directing him to plant it in the serpent's path. The raging monster reared up so violently against the obstacle that it fell backwards, breaking its back.<sup>17</sup> St. Lifard's neighbour St. Menin, Abbot of Micy, also drove a great serpent from the banks of the Loire.<sup>18</sup> St. Peregrine of Caltabellota, sent by St. Peter himself, according to tradition, to preach the Gospel in Sicily, turned a large serpent out of its cave and, having killed it, took up his own quarters there.<sup>19</sup> But not all the saints were so intolerant. St. Didymus, the blind hermit of Nitria, left his snakes untroubled, which conduct they reciprocated, although being blind he must occasionally have trodden on them as he is seen doing in his pictures.<sup>20</sup> St. Celestine V was happier in his hermitage than in the Papal chair; although his cave was not free from snakes, these were less troublesome to him than his professed friends.<sup>21</sup> Blessed Dalmatius Moner, a Spanish Dominican of Gerona, got special leave to dwell in a cave in the priory grounds that was the haunt of serpents. As he is patron of those suffering from toothache perhaps the dampness of his unusual cell was more afflicting than the vipers.<sup>22</sup> But by far the strangest story is that of St. Verdiana and her two snakes which in Giovanni dal Ponte's picture in the National

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<sup>15</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Bollandists, July 24; Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Bollandists, June 3; Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Bollandists, January 30; Holweck, 789.

<sup>20</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*; Husenbeth.

<sup>21</sup> Bollandists, May 19.

<sup>22</sup> Bollandists, September 24.

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Gallery she is seen holding, one in each hand. She had a terrible loathing of snakes, so that it would be difficult to estimate the horror she felt when two large ones crawled through the window and slithered into her cell where she dwelt all alone as an anchoress. In an heroic spirit of mortification she accepted the terrifying visitors, sharing board and lodging with them till her death thirty-four years later, A.D. 1244. It is even said that when alms were few and commons short the two ungrateful beasts united in beating her with their tails till she was prostrate with weakness. Her cult was approved by Pope Innocent XII in 1694 and her feast is kept as a major double on February 1st by the Camaldulose, Vallumbrosian and Franciscan Orders, each of which claim her as a tertiary.<sup>23</sup> A remarkable legend attaches to the memory of St. Chariton of Jerusalem, a hermit of the third century. After being tortured for his faith in the reign of Aurelian he was released, only to fall almost immediately into the hands of robbers who left him shackled hand and foot in their cave whilst they went after richer prisoners. Meanwhile a viper crawled in and drank from a stoup of wine, leaving it full of venom, which proved the end of the robbers, who returned very thirsty. No one else claiming the cave, the saint turned it into a monastery.<sup>24</sup> This turning of the tables is also reproduced in the legendary acts of SS. Anatolia and Audax. The former was arrested during the Decian persecution on information supplied by a rejected suitor, and being brought before the judge was vainly tormented. At length the exasperated judge sent for a snake-charmer, Audax by name, and commanded him to provide a number of snakes to be placed in the holy virgin's cell, but he replied that one would be sufficient because he happened to have in stock a particularly ferocious snake which would make short work of the obstinate girl. From his description it would appear to have been a species of python or boa-constrictor. The following morning Audax came early to the prison to see how things had fared, only to

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<sup>23</sup> Bollandists, February 12; Holweck, *s.v.* Viridiana, 1025; Husenbeth, *s.v.* Serpents; Cahier.

<sup>24</sup> Bollandists, September 28; Husenbeth, *ibid.*

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find to his amazement that the saint was kneeling unharmed in prayer with the snake quietly coiled up at her side. In a moment his surprise was turned into horror by finding himself being slowly strangled in the serpent's coils. The saint however quickly intervened and commanded the beast to release its prey. As the result of this additional miracle, Audax believed and was beheaded, and Anatolia stabbed to death.<sup>25</sup>

In pictures representing the passion and death of St. Victorinus, at the close of the first century, a serpent is biting the arm of the judge condemning him. As no legend of a serpent occurs in his acts it presumably refers to the devil prompting the false judge. Torture by snakes was not uncommon during the pagan persecutions and numerous are the stories told of serpents refusing to injure martyrs, a legend conspicuous in the acts of St. Thecla, proto-martyr of women, of St. Euphemia, and St. Christina. This latter is depicted with two asps hanging to her breasts or sides whose bite had no venomous effect.<sup>26</sup> Mgr. Holweck mentions another Christina, "tried by three judges and bitten by poisonous serpents," who is venerated in the Coptic Church on August 8, but is probably to be identified with the better known Roman saint mentioned previously.<sup>27</sup>

A frequent phenomenon in hagiography is the guarding of the martyrs' remains by wild animals, and even the unpopular snake took his part in this act of charity, guarding the bodies of St. Vincent of Avila and his sisters, SS. Sabina and Christete, martyred under Diocletian. A Jew coming near to the holy remains, probably to scoff, was fearfully set upon by the watchful guardian, which also would seem to have been of the constricting family, and escaped with his life only after promising to be baptized.<sup>28</sup> But surely the most obliging snake of all belonged to St. Felix, a monk at Fondi in the sixth century, for it used to keep watch over his garden when he was absent at office.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bollandists, July 9; Holweck, *s.v.* Anatolia, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Bollandists, September 23, September 16, and July 24.

<sup>27</sup> Holweck, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Holweck, 375.

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In cases of snake-bite recourse was had in days of faith to many saints. At the head of the list is St. Paul, and those who feel inclined to scoff at the many wonders narrated of saints and serpents would do well to recall the Apostle's immunity from the bite of the Maltese viper, a heavenly favour in exact fulfilment of Our Lord's promise: "*they shall take up serpents; and if they shall drink any deadly thing it shall not harm them*" (Mark xvi, 18). St. Luke's description is most graphic: "*And when Paul had gathered together a bundle of sticks, and had laid them on the fire, a viper coming out of the heart, fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the beast hanging on his hand, they said one to another: Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, who though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance doth not suffer him to live. And he indeed shaking off the beast into the fire suffered no harm. But they supposed that he would begin to swell up, and that he would suddenly fall down and die. But expecting long, and seeing that there came no harm to him, changing their minds, they said, that he was a God*" (Acts xxviii, 3-6).

St. Silvian, a hermit at Sessefontaine in Bassigny in France, who was slain by robbers, is patron against poisonous serpents probably because he lived amongst them unharmed. His feast is kept on October 18.<sup>30</sup> St. Briac, or Brioc, one of the many Irish missionaries to the Continent in the sixth century, cured a Breton bitten by a snake by making over him the sign of the cross. He allowed the offending reptile to go away unharmed. When sailing for France he encountered the devil under the form of a great sea-serpent, but he also vanquished this enemy with the sign of salvation.<sup>31</sup> St. Saumon, called in Latin Psalmodius, a fellow countryman and contemporary of the preceding, went to Eymoutiers in Aquitaine, where he healed the Duke's little daughter, bitten by an adder, by sprinkling her with holy water.<sup>32</sup> St. Paternus, Bishop of Avranches, in the same century healed a boy thus bitten by anointing the

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<sup>30</sup> Holweck, 915.

<sup>31</sup> Cahier; Butler's *Lives of the Saints*; December 17.

<sup>32</sup> Holweck, 837; Bollandists, June 13.

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wound with some oil over which he had made the sign of the cross. Husenbeth says he is depicted in art with serpents twined round him.<sup>33</sup> The Syrians have confidence in St. Phocas, the great martyr of Antioch in 320, and maintain that those who touch the door of his basilica will be healed of the bite of a poisonous snake. Their legend also relates that on one occasion "a snake spoke to him with a human voice."<sup>34</sup>

It would be hard to exclude from any collection of miracles the wondrous acts of that most lovable saint of the early Church, St. Spiridion, Archbishop of Tremithus in Cyprus. One day he met a cripple who begged an alms, but, being in the position of St. Peter and John on a similar occasion, he picked up a small snake squirming at his feet and handed it to the poor man, who, faith overcoming his repugnance, accepted the horrible gift which turned to gold. This was the same saint whose companion bishops beheaded his two mules whilst he slept, to prevent his arriving at the General Council of Nicea, where they feared his simplicity would damage the cause of the true faith. The saint rose early and stuck the heads on again, unfortunately in the dark not noticing he had given the white mule the head of the black one, and conversely.<sup>35</sup> St. Spiridion's gift turned to gold, but when robbers stole some fishes sent as a gift for the dinner of St. Dominic of Cocullo the fishes turned into serpents.<sup>36</sup> In the Coptic Church, on June 25, is kept the feast of St. Beyoka, priest of Tuna in Lower Egypt, and his brother Benjamin, who ate a poisoned serpent which had consumed the Sacred Host. In memory of this heroic act a church was built in their honour.<sup>37</sup>

In ecclesiastical art many saints are represented with a serpent rising out of a cup or chalice, signifying an attempt on their lives with poison. St. John the Evangelist was thus treated by early heretics, and St. Benedict by some bad

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<sup>33</sup> Bollandists, April 16; Husenbeth, *s.v.* Serpents.

<sup>34</sup> Holweck, 815; Bollandists, March 5.

<sup>35</sup> Cahier, *s.v.* Serpents; Husenbeth calls it an eel, *s.v.*

<sup>36</sup> Cahier, *ibid.*; Bollandists, January 22.

<sup>37</sup> Holweck, 160.



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monks. St. Bonajuncta de Manetti, one of the Servite founders, had a jar of poisoned wine sent him by a wicked man. The saint, although he knew it was poisoned, made over it the sign of the cross and drank it, bidding the servant return to her master, whom she found lying dead in front of his house. The saint is represented blessing bottles from which serpents escape.<sup>38</sup> St. Lewis Bertrand, the great Dominican missionary of South America, was poisoned by native chiefs, but although he was at death's door for a time he recovered, though he suffered from the effects of the poison the rest of his life. We are told he vomited the poison in the form of a serpent.<sup>39</sup> Blessed Benedict XI, the Dominican Pope who excommunicated those who had ill-treated his predecessor, Boniface VIII, is sometimes represented with a serpent rising from a basket of figs, a poisoned present sent him by the emissaries of Philip-le-Bel.<sup>40</sup> These and many other miracles of a like nature are the fulfilment of the second half of Our Lord's promise: "*and if they shall drink any deadly thing it shall not harm them.*"

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<sup>38</sup> Bollandists, August 31; Cahier.

<sup>39</sup> Life by Fr. B. Wilberforce.

<sup>40</sup> Dominican Breviary.