

A Medieval Legend of St. Peter's, Northampton.—Translated by the Rev. R. M. SERJEANTSON, M.A., F.S.A., Rector of St. Peter's, Northampton. Read at the Annual Meeting held on the 9th December, 1907.

IN the Library of Trinity College, Dublin, is a large folio volume of 414 pages entitled, "Vitae Sanctorum" (Lives of the Saints). It belonged originally to Westminster Abbey; but on the suppression of that religious house by Henry VIII. the book passed into private hands, and eventually found its way to its present home, Trinity College, Dublin. It is written on vellum, each page measuring $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and the writing $9\frac{1}{4}$ by $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches. From the character of the penmanship experts pronounce it to be a manuscript of the close of the 13th, or beginning of the 14th century (i.e. of the reign of Edward I or Edward II), but, in spite of its age the words are almost as clear now as they were when first written six centuries ago.

The book contains the lives of St. Thomas of Canterbury, St. Edward the Confessor, St. Edmund, St. Ragener, St. Tremund, St. Rumwold, St. Oswald, St. Werburga, St. Etheldreda, St. Mildred, St. Guthlac, St. Egwin, St. Vulgan, and St. Honoratus. Also a history of the Britons in Latin verse by Geoffrey, of Monmouth; the seven ages of the world in Norman French; the prophecies of the 6th King of Ireland: the prophecies of Merlin; the prophecies of the finding of Rome; and the prophecies of the Canon of Bridlington.

The legend I propose to deal with this morning, is the one relating to St. Ragener, and I select it because the story has to do with our own Church of St. Peter, Northampton. My attention was first drawn to the manuscript by Lord Francis Hervey, who was then collecting legends relating to St. Edmund, which he has recently published in a large and beautifully illustrated volume. The legend of St. Ragener was printed for the first time a year or two ago by a German scholar, Carl Horsman; but as his book is little known, and as the stories are all in Latin, or Norman French, I have ventured to translate this particular legend, and to bring it before your notice this morning.

As to how far the story is worthy of credence, each man must, of course, judge for himself; but whether credible or not, the legend is interesting historically, as relating to events

which are said to have happened in our own town of Northampton, and as shewing the sort of stories in which our ancestors implicitly believed during the Middle Ages. The story also tends to prove the theory (supported by other evidence) that an earlier Saxon church stood on the site of the present late Norman building. The legend is as follows:

Here beginneth the finding and translation of St. Ragner, soldier and martyr, kinsman of St. Edmund, king and martyr.

In the time of God's dear Saint, Edward King of the English, son of King Ethelred, there lived at Northampton a certain priest named Bruningus, of venerable life. Among the many churches in the district of which he was Rector, he specially presided over the Church of the Blessed Peter the Apostle, situated in the same town. This priest was exceedingly wealthy, renowned for his many possessions, wonderfully bountiful, and so famed for his liberality that he seemed to delight in devoting all his wealth to the benefit of the poor and needy, and also of passing strangers, especially foreigners. And this he did unceasingly and cheerfully, according to the saying of the wise man, "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver."

And since he devoted himself so zealously to works of piety, that he was in favour with God, and distinguished and renowned among men, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, by marvels of heavenly origin, to make his life-time and the Church of St. Peter, over which he presided with special care, illustrious; and to reveal to many mortals the relics of the Blessed Martyr Ragner, who lay buried beneath the floor of the said church. How this was effected, the following story will declare.

The priest aforesaid, among his many servants, had one, a Norwegian by race, a man of remarkable simplicity and patience. One day the idea occurred to him that he ought to go to Rome, to pray, and to seek St. Peter, for whom he had a special devotion, and whom he called in his own tongue, "Drotinum," which means Lord. Accordingly he asked permission from his master to go; but because he was a favourite, and useful to him, he failed to obtain what he sought. Moreover, many who knew him, ridiculed him as a fool, and said that his petition arose from clownish stubbornness ("*stolida rusticitate*") rather than from real devotion. Notwithstanding these discouragements, he persisted in his entreaties, and steadfastly protested that he could by no means remain where

he was. At length his master, after talking over the plan with his friends, granted him the permission which he sought. Having thus obtained leave, he eagerly took his journey, and hastened with all speed.

After he had spent some days on the way, there appeared to him one night in a vision a man of venerable appearance, who exhorted and strongly advised him to return home without delay, telling him that he would very soon find there the Lord whom he was seeking, and that if he refused to return, he might rest assured his journey would not be a prosperous one.

However, when well awake, he turned over the vision in his mind, and in spite of it, pushed on with the journey he had undertaken. On the following night the vision was repeated, and he was warned even more sternly to return. But even then he was unwilling to acquiesce, so great was his desire to go on. A few days afterwards, when he had betaken himself to sleep, there stood by him the same venerable person, who had appeared to him before, threatening and chiding him severely for his want of faith, and for his disobedience to the former visions, and adding that unless he returned at once to his master, a serious mishap would quickly befall him. He soon rose from sleep, and terrified by the threatening words, as well as by the heavenly vision, without any further hesitation, hastened to return to his master. On his return, his master, and all his former acquaintances, who had ascribed his journey to folly, were now more firmly convinced than before, and openly stated their conviction, that he was a fool, and ridiculed him for returning so stupidly from the journey which he had undertaken.

On being asked why he had made up his mind to come back, he related his three visions, and said that he was convinced that he would there, without doubt, find his Lord ("Drotinum").

On hearing this, all wondered and said one to another, "What does all this mean?" Moreover his master, moved by his fidelity and his tale, released him from bondage, and set him entirely free. Having thus obtained his liberty, he devoted himself immediately to the service of the Blessed Apostle, St. Peter, and departed not from his church aforesaid, serving day and night in fastings and prayers. He begged and prayed earnestly that Almighty God, as had been promised him in the vision, would vouchsafe to show him his Lord.

In this way a year and a half passed, when one night, as he was resting in the church, having finished his accustomed prayers, there stood by him, in a vision, the Celestial Being, glistening with clear light, whom he had seen in his former visions, saying to him, "Rise, and follow Me, and I will show you where your desire shall be fulfilled." And, as it seemed in his dream, he arose and followed him, until he came to the place where the body of the blessed martyr lay beneath the pavement. Then his guide thus addressed him: "Lo! here lies the chosen friend of God. Tell thy master, the Priest Bruningus, for in this spot he will find him." Therefore, when morning came he told his master what he had seen and heard. He, on hearing this, hesitated for a time in perplexity, but at length his faith and hope regained their wonted vigour, and he decided to test the truth of the tale by action. Taking a spade, he enters the church, and after offering up a prayer begins to dig, in the place pointed out by his servant. He has dug scarce half a foot in depth, when lo! he discovers a tomb on the exact spot. In joyful surprise he scrapes off the earth, which had covered its surface, and clears it on all sides, so that the whole might be visible to all who wished to see.

So the townspeople hear, and one and all come running thither. The fame of the divine message spreads far and wide, and is established as true, by the finding of the tomb: and although none knew as yet who the man was, of what degree of holiness, or of what name he should be deemed to be, who there lay interred, of this at least they felt sure, that he must have been indeed a friend of God, true, just and holy, concerning whom visions so great and notable had shown the way, and had moreover been confirmed afterwards by signs so clearly following.

What need of more? The tomb remained uncovered for several days, and aroused the wonder of the multitudes, who flocked day by day to see it. The venerable priest, turning over and over in his mind what to do for the better showing forth of the glory of God, and the virtue of the Saint, by divine guidance, as was afterwards proved, bethought himself of the following plan.

There was in the same town a certain damsel, Alfgiva by name, a native of Abington, whose hamstrings had been contracted at her birth; and who, under the pressure of poverty, dragged herself about on her hands and knees rather than walked, and used to beg from door to door her daily bread.

When Easter even next came round, the aforementioned priest, after service in the church was over, ("*divinis obsequiis peractis*") found the girl crawling in the market-place. He escorted her to his house, put food before her, and refreshed her. Then he calls her apart, tells her the facts, and advises and urges her, if she wishes to be cured, after confession to God and His Saints of all her sins, to spend the night of our Lord's Resurrection just approaching in the church, in watching and prayer before the Saint's tomb, begging and beseeching God, with faith nothing wavering, to have mercy upon her, and for love of His Saint, who was buried in this tomb, to grant her a complete cure; so that, by her recovery it might become known to all, how upright, how holy, and how truly beloved of God, that man must have been, whose tomb had been revealed to them in that spot.

On hearing this, she thanked him, and set herself in deep devotion to carry out to the letter all that the priest had bidden her do.

And so when evening came on, and the time of rest approached, the priest, and his clerks, closed, as they were wont, the doors of the church, and went to their own homes, leaving the girl within, near the Saint's tomb. She betook herself to earnest prayer, and as she had been instructed, besought God for the blessing of health; when suddenly in the silence of the dead of night, God, who deals strangely with His Saints, had pity on her; and she saw the whole church lit up with celestial splendour, and a snow-white dove flying hither and thither, which at length plunged into the font ("*Baptisterium*") and thence sped quickly towards her, and by the beating of his wings, sprinkled her, and the martyr's tomb, with holy water.

She arose forthwith to her full height, and continued standing, her feet and ankle-bones received strength, and she now walked naturally, which she had never hitherto done from the time of her birth. Wonders succeed wonders. Two bells ("*signa*") hanging at a distance from one another in the same Church (which are said to be there to this day) by divine power, chimed alternately in such true time, as though rung by the hands of some skilled ringer. The priest and his clerks were awakened by the sound at so late an hour, and the townspeople also leaped in terror from their beds. All came running up, eager to see whatever it could be that had happened. And now, looking towards the church, they see

through the windows, as it were flames, playing through the whole interior, which was brightly illuminated with heavenly light. Then, even more terrified and affrighted, they hurry on, and running at full speed, hastily unbar the doors and look in. They see the girl, whom they had left there deformed ("*contractam*"), now standing erect and sound, and her skirt, which before had dragged two feet behind her, as she crawled bowed down to the ground, now not even reaching her knees. One and all are overwhelmed with excessive fear, as with their own eyes, they see God's mighty works, so great and unwonted, that unless they had actually seen them themselves, they would scarcely have been able to credit them. They enquire eagerly of the girl how the cure was effected; and she, in joy and gladness, explained the whole matter in order, as has already been related above in detail.

All therefore rejoice, and unite in praising God, "because He is great in heaven and earth, and alone doeth wondrous things."

By these signs, the venerable priest was assured that he had attained his object; but still his heart burned with an insatiable desire to open the sacred tomb, and to see the incomparable treasure which was hidden therein. But, conscious of sinfulness, and knowing that "in many things we offend all," he scrupled to touch the relics of a Saint, until he had first entreated the face of the Lord. Accordingly he proclaimed to the people a three days' fast, which he himself and his assistant priests took care to observe with greater strictness than others, on bread and water.

At length, when the fast had been kept, the priest and his fellows, with courage renewed, and trusting in the mercy of God, approached the sarcophagus with awe and reverence. There came also a vast crowd of sick and infirm persons, and invalids of all kinds, whom the fame of the miracle above-mentioned, and the hope of being cured, had drawn thither from all sides. At length the tomb of the Saint is opened, and the martyr's bones, deeply to be revered, are before their eyes. A writing also is found, placed near the body, to say that this was Ragener, the holy martyr of Christ, and that he was nephew ("*nepotem*") of the most holy king, and martyr, St. Edmund, and that he had died for the faith of Christ, cruelly slain by the same persecutors, at whose hands the king had suffered. But when the tomb had been opened by the hands of the priests, at once so great an abundance of

virtue from God flowed forth upon the sick, that all those who had come together oppressed with divers diseases, were, in the presence of the crowd, cured of whatever disease they had. On seeing this, clergy and people alike raise a mighty shout to heaven. The bells too are rung, and echo through the skies, the mighty works of God are published abroad, and in the praise of Christ their voices thunder through the clouds. King Edward himself, that most upright of kings, moved by the strangeness of these heaven-sent powers, paid great honour to the place, and enriched it with divers offerings. Thus the earth rejoices, and the heavens resound; and there is an even greater concourse of priests and people. Various gifts are offered to the martyr, both of gold and silver; and great heaps of other kinds of gifts are collected.

The fame of these proceedings reaches to the farthest limits of the realm, and through the length and breadth of England ("*Anglici orbis*"), because of this new discovery of a martyr, the sweet savour of Christ is spread abroad. Finally, not only from places in the neighbourhood, but from the most remote parts of England, every year at the Feast of the Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, numberless weak, ("*languidi*") sick, and dying people were laid in carts, and brought to the martyr's resting-place, and soon returned home in perfect health; for through the blessing of Christ, "virtue proceeded from him and healed them all." Alfgiva, who, as we have already related, was the first to be cured at the tomb of the Saint, after a time grew up to be a strong, and famous woman. She assumed the religious habit in the same town, and remained a virgin. She continued to lead a holy life, and lived to extreme old age; and such was her reputation for sanctity that she was commonly known as the holy nun ("*sancta nonna*").

At length by the command of the glorious king, out of this great wealth of offerings, there was made a shrine ("*feretrum*") of great size, and wondrously adorned with gold and silver and precious stones, in which the relics of the holy martyr were carefully and reverently bestowed. For it is our Lord Jesus Christ, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, reigneth for ever and ever. Amen.

King Edmund, a man most holy, and accepted of God, suffered in the year of our Lord's Incarnation eight hundred and seventy, when also St. Ragner aforesaid, his nephew, Christ's dear martyr, is supposed to have suffered. Seven

years afterwards, his persecutor, Inguar, together with another heathen king, was slain. Lastly, King Edward the Just, in whose time the revelation was made, died in the year of Christ, one thousand and sixty-six. Here endeth the finding of St. Ragner, soldier and martyr.

(MS. Trin. Coll., Dublin, B. 2, 7).

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