

“Dove of the Cell”

THE history of Ireland between the fourth and eighth centuries may be without doubt considered as the brightest period that the Church of Ireland ever knew. It may be called the “Bright Ages” of the ecclesiastical history of Ireland. For it was in these years that the religious conditions of Ireland reached their highest summit in the way of perfection. Numberless schools, churches and monasteries were everywhere founded throughout the land. Not only Ireland, but also all Europe received the benefits of these institutions. For from such great and numerous sources poured forth men into all parts of Europe, there to impart to their unlearned brethren that knowledge which they themselves had so abundantly acquired.

It would be naturally expected that in such an illustrious time as this, when the great mass of the people were eagerly employed in the pursuit of knowledge, men would be found endowed with all the gifts of both civil and religious society. And a man with such qualities as these was clearly and unmistakably found in the person of Columbo. Columbo, or as some biographers termed him, “Dove of the Cell,” was born of noble family at Garton in Donegal, the seventh of December, five hundred and twenty one. His life from beginning to end was one astounding and holy mission. He seemed even from the time of his birth to be predestined by God, for a great and noble work. It is related in Irish legends that before his birth an angel appeared to his mother and said, “Thou art about to become the mother of a son, who shall blossom for Heaven, who shall be reckoned among the prophets of God, and who shall lead numberless souls to the heavenly country.” But let us retrace the ecclesiastical history of Ireland, back two centuries further, and there again we will find the life of St. Columbo prognosticated by the Patron Saint of Erin, when he said “Wonder no more, behold the land from this stream (Deel or Burndale river) northward needs no blessing from me; for a son shall be born there who shall be called Dove

of the Chuches and he shall bless this land in honor of God."

The holy monk who first instructed Columbo in the principles of his religion, also assisted him to lay the foundations of that education which was in after years to hold him up as an example before the eyes of the world and earn for him the still undisputable title "Abbot of Iona's Isle." After withdrawing himself from the guidance of this holy father, Columbo entered several other places of learning and as he increased in knowledge he also increased in power and influence, for though the flower of his youth was just budding forth into the bloom of manhood, we find him occupying a most elevated position in the ecclesiastical world.

Columbo was a great lover of books, found it impossible to sufficiently alleviate his intense thirst for literature within the limits of his own scanty library. So accordingly he was forced to go about among his friends seeking manuscripts which he might temporally purchase or copy. In this manner occurred what one of his biographers called "The decisive event which changed the destiny of Colombo and transformed him from a wandering poet and book-worm into a missionary and apostle." While visiting Finian, who was formerly one of his instructors, Colombo made, unknown to him, a copy of the Abbot's Psalter. On making the discovery Finian, with great indignation, commanded Colombo to give over to him the copy. This Colombo refused to do and the matter was left for settlement to king Diarmid or Dermott, who was at this time ruler of Ireland. He, after due deliberation, decided in favor of Finian.

Columbo on hearing the decision of the King, grew exceeding angry, and raising up his voice declared that he would one day revenge him for passing this unjust sentence upon him. Having returned to his native province of Tryconnell, Colombo at once began preparations to fulfil his vow of revenge. His efforts were everywhere crowned with success and the result was, at the battle of Cool-Drewny the forces of king Dermott were utterly defeated. Later the manuscript which was the real cause of the blood-shed, under the

name of Catach or Fightu, became the national relic of the O'Donnell clan.

Colombo was soon to reap the fruit of that harvest which he had sown in a moment of passion. He, a chosen servant of the Most High, a minister of the Prince of Peace, had made himself the cause of a civil war, which drained the life-blood from so many Christians. At a synod called together of the royal domain at Tailte, he was tried, and the sentence of excommunication pronounced against him. Though at every thought of this harsh and almost unbearable sentence, his face became pale as death, which too readily spoke the anguish of the heart, though every ray of hope seemed to fade from his view, as the morning dew before the luminous rays of the sun, yet Columbo was not a man to give himself to despair or swoon under the weight of his burden. He resolutely arose and determined to have one last interview with that body of men before whom he had been summoned to answer for his conduct. Presenting himself before the synod he found a protector in the famous Abbot Brendon, founder of the monastery of Birr. This holy and devout man, struck with a sudden liking for Columbo, used every means in his power to persuade the synod to withdraw the sentence of excommunication. "For" said he "I dare not disdain a man predestined by God to be the guide of an entire people to Eternal Life." As a consequence of his intervention the dreadful decree was withdrawn on condition that Columbo, by his preaching, would raise up from the errors of paganism to the light of faith as many souls as had died on the blood-stained battlefield of Cool-Drewny.

But soon another drop was added to that cup of sorrow. To his great work of conversion one of his confessors, St. Molaise, also added another condition. One which sank down deeply into the "Innermost soul" of the penitent, and one which he deemed harder to fulfil and comfort the piercing dagger of the enemy. But still it was an obligation impossible to elude, for thus ran the sentence of St. Molaise: "Perpetual exile from Ireland".

"There is a gray eye which ever turns to Erin,
But never in this life will it see Erin, nor her sons,
nor her daughters."

After accepting the penance of his strict confessor, Columbo with a heart almost breaking, took one last farewell of his beloved country. Never again was he to set eyes upon those beautiful green meadows and rolling uplands which were once the scenes of his childhood. With a few monks who had determined to accompany him wheresoever he might go, he left the shores of Ireland and after sailing for some time almost in utter ignorance as to his whereabouts, Columbo eventually landed upon Iona, thenceforth and for all times to come to be famed as "Sacred Isle of Columbo."

"You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will,
But the scent of the roses hang round it still."

In this distant land, so far from the spot which he so tenderly loved, Columbo labored zealously and devoutly in his work of conversion. Numberless schools, churches and monasteries were founded until the whole island became one grand seat of learning. "In time the Gospel light was ablaze on all the hills of Albyn, and the name of St. Columbo and Iona were on every tongue from Rome to the uttermost bounds of Europe." Columbo himself also underwent a vast change. The man whom we have seen to possess such an irritable and revengeful disposition, became gradually the tenderest, the humblest and the mildest of men. In him people found a solace for all their trials and difficulties, an aid in all their spiritual and temporal necessities.

At last after many years of his exiled life had passed quietly away in this manner, arrived an incident so full of excruciating trial, that its fulfillment was almost beyond the power of Columbo. His presence was found to be importunately required at the general convention of the priests and bishops of the Irish nation, called five hundred and seventy three A.D. which was to settle the controversy concerning the inauguration of the independence of the Argyle or Caledonian colony;

and secondly to discuss the proposed decree for the abolition of the bards who had now become somewhat corrupt. How willingly and pleasurably might Columbo have accepted this invitation to the unforgotten land, if it was not for one thing—his vow of perpetual exile from Ireland. Yes, that penance sentence must be kept, that infrangible law can never be dispensed with, never again can he behold his native land. Yet there was still one alternative, namely to blindfold himself and thus attend the convention. This he did, and his labours were not unrewarded. The two causes which he had done to advocate, turned out as he had desired. The independence of the young Caledonian nation was recognized; the bards were purified and preserved instead of being destroyed. After remaining some time in Ireland visiting, blindfolded, the numerous schools and churches, he returned, to Iona. Here again he resumed his former duties, not, however, without the same courageous and persevering spirit which he had so clearly manifested in his works of previous years. He ever continued to labour earnestly and unceasingly until, when far advanced in years, he heard the loving voice of his Father summoning him from this world of sorrow to enjoy forever his well-earned reward.



Mark what unvaried laws preserve each state,
Laws wise as Nature and as fixed as Fate.

—Pope.

Some praise at morning what they blame at night,
But always think the last opinion right.

—Pope.

The hearts of men are their books ; events are
their tutors ; great actions are their eloquence.

—Macaulay.