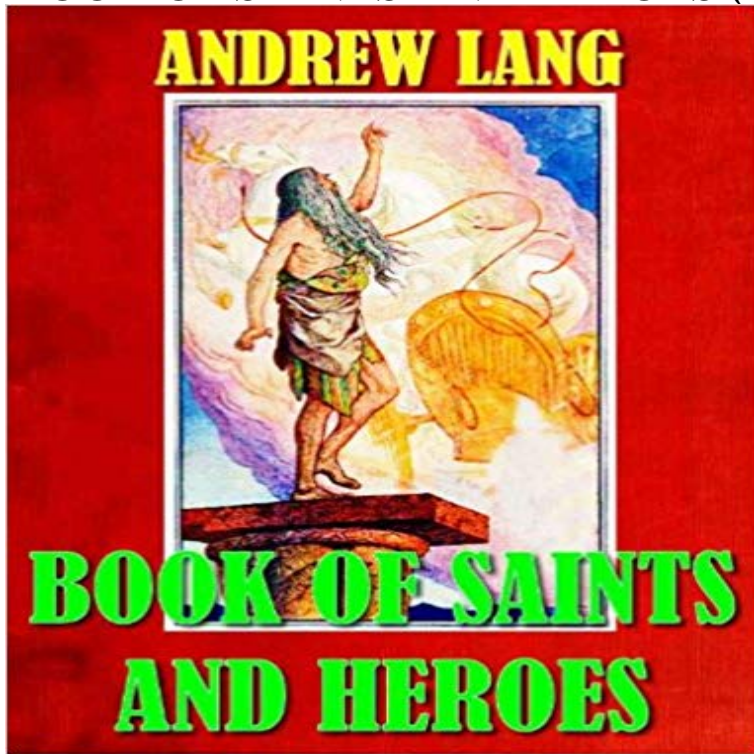


BOOK OF SAINTS AND HEROES (ILLUSTRATED)



Now when Christianity came first to be known to the Greeks and Romans, and Germans and Highlanders, they, believing in fairies and in all manner of birds and beasts that could talk, and in everything wonderful, told about their Christian teachers a number of fairy tales. This pleasing custom lasted very long. You see in this book what wonderful stories of beasts and birds who made friends with saints were told in Egypt about St. Anthony, and St. Jerome with his amiable lion, and St. Dorothea, for it was an angel very like a fairy that brought to her the fruits and flowers of Paradise. These Saints were the best of men and women, but the pretty stories are, perhaps, rather fanciful. Look at the wild fancies of the Irish in the stories of St. Brendan; and of St. Columba, who first brought Christianity from Ireland to the Highlands. I think St. Columba's story is the best of all; and it was written down in Latin by one of the people in his monastery not long after his death. Yet many of the anecdotes are not religious, but are just such tales as the Highlanders where he lived still tell and believe. Some of them are true, I daresay, and others, like the story of the magical stake given by the Saint to the poor man, are not very probable. The tales of St. Cuthbert are much less wonderful, for he did not live in the Highlands, but among people of English race on the Border, near the Tweed. The English have never taken quite so much pleasure in fairyland as other people, and the stories of St. Cuthbert are far more homely than the wild adventures of Irish Saints like St. Brendan. The story which somehow came to be told about the patron Saint of England, St. George, is a mere romance of chivalry, and the part about the dragon was told in the earliest age of Greece concerning Perseus and Hercules, Andromeda and Hesione. About that English Saint, Margaret, Queen of Scotland, there are no marvellous tales at

all; but a volume would be needed for all the miracles wrought by the intercession of Thomas a Becket after his death. In his life, however, he had nothing fairy-like. No Saint has more beautiful and innocent fairy-like tales told about him than St. Francis, the friend of the wolf, whom he converted, and the preacher to the birds; while St. Anthony of Padua was even more miraculous when he managed to make the fishes of the sea attend to his sermon. Fishes, we believe, are deaf to the human voice; you may talk as much as you like when you are fishing, as long as the trout do not see you. It is not easy to sympathise with the Saint who stood so long on the top of a pillar. Perhaps he thought that by this feat he would make people hear about him and come to hear his holy words, and, so far, he seems to have succeeded. Perhaps St. Colette had a similar reason for shutting herself up in such an exclusive way for a while, after which she went out and did good in the world. Like many Saints she was said to float in the air occasionally; but not so often as St. Joseph of Cupertino, who, in the time of King Charles II, once flew a distance of eighty-seven yards, and was habitually on the wing. In other respects the life of this holy man was not interesting or useful like the noble lives of Saint-Francois Xavier, and St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louis of France, and St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and the good lover of books, Richard de Bury. In their histories there is scarcely a wave of the fairy wand, but there are immortal examples of courage, patience, kindness, courtesy, and piety towards God and man.

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