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St. PATRICK - THE MAN

by

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St. Patrick was born in 373 A.D. but the exact location of his birthplace is in some dispute. In his Confession he appears to tell us that the place was "Bannaven of Taberniae" which many authorities claim was near Dumbarton in the most Northern Roman province of Celtic Britain. Some experts claim that it may have been in the Severn Valley near Abergavenny and others claim that he may have been born on the continent in the Celtic province of Brittany. In his Confession there is some evidence that this may have been so, plus the fact that St. Martin of Tours was his maternal uncle. His father named Calfrom was a magistrate and his mother Conchessa was a niece of St. Martin. He himself was christened Suceat meaning "Clever in War,'.

At this time the power of Rome, the greatest empire that the world had ever known was beginning to wane and the power of the Empire which stretched from Hadrian's Wall in North Britain to Egypt and the Holy Land was being challenged on all sides by the Barbarians. The 20th Legion which had been stationed at Chester for 350 years was now withdrawn and returned to defend the home provinces and Rome itself, leaving the island province to defend itself.

Wherever St. Patrick was born it seems to have been from Brittany from the home of his mother's parents where he was visiting that he was taken captive by a raiding party of Irish led by Niall of the Nine Hostages and taken to Ireland with his two sisters where he was sold into slavery and ended up tending sheep for a Lord of Antrim in Northern Ireland on the slopes of the Slemish Mountain.

His occupation as a herdsman on the mountainside was a probation for a holy career which he tells us that in his wayward youth he had forgotten about God but that during his lonely hours upon the mountainside with his flocks his spirituality was reawakened. "I was always careful," he says to lead my flocks to pasture and pray fervently" so that "the love and fear of God became more inflamed in my heart..... so that I said a hundred prayers by day and almost as many by night." "I arose before day in the snow, in the frost and rain yet I received no harm, nor was I affected with slothfulness. For then the spirit of God was with me."

He spent seven years in human slavery and eventually in a dream which came to him on the slopes of the mountain he was told to travel to the seashore to a certain place two hundred miles distant where he should find a ship on which he would make his escape. He ran away from his master and made his way to Wexford town (which is coincidentally exacty two hundred miles from Slemisk Mountain) where he was able to join a ship carrying a cargo of Irish wolfhounds to the continent and in the seventh year of his captivity he sailed away from Ireland.

It should be noted that the Irish land which he had entered as a foreigner he now left as an Irishman, for their language and customs were now his and it was not the land of his birth and childhood that determined his nationality but the absorbent years of his youth. So the Irishman, Patrick like so many

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others who followed him and made Ireland their home became "more Irish than the Irish". After an arduous journey of twenty eight days he was again welcomed to

his old home with great rejoicing and although for a time he was happy to be with his own kin again he could not help thinking about the country and people of his captivity.

They had grown into his soul and become part of him and now they became the centre of his thoughts during the day and of his dreams at night. At length he had a vivid night vision in which he saw a man coming towards him, a man named Victor from Ireland, bearing letters which were marked "Vox Hibernionacum", "The Voice of the Irish". In these letters the people of his captivity pleaded with him saying "Come to us, O Holy Youth, and walk among us." "With this," he said "I was feeling touched and could read no longer. I then awoke." He knew then that he must prepare himself for the task of carrying the Gospel of Christ to the people of his heart.

Despite the pleading of his relatives he again left his home and set off to study for the ministry. He traveled across Europe studying in many monasteries and schools. There are accounts that he studied at St. John, the Lateran in Rome, spent many years on the Island of Lerius off the coast of Cannes under St. Honoratus and St. Maximus. He also spent time at the monastery of Auxerre under St. Germanus, the Bishop. He now sought to be commissioned to Ireland but Palladius had already been sent out, however, after the death of Palladius, Patrick journeyed to Rome with a letter from Germanus. Pope Celestine now granted his request and consecrated him Archbishop for the Irish mission. Twenty priests and deacons were also ordained to be his companions and on him the Pope conferred his new name Patricius, a title of the highest honour among the Romans.

Traveling between Germanus and Rome, tradition informs us he acquired his famous "Backaill Gosa" or Staff of Jesus, his pastoral staff. Sailing to Rome he landed on an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea where he was welcomed into the house of a young couple who had great grandchildren who were old and decrepit. The young couple who were married in the time of Jesus and had received our Saviour into their house, and thanking them for their hospitality he blessed them and their house saying that they should remain new and young until Judgment Day. In their care he left his staff with the injunction that it should be kept for Patrick against the day that he too passing that way should be entertained. "And God hath enjoined thee" said the young man, "to go and preach in the land of Gael, and Jesus left with us his staff to be given to thee."

Now with his soul uplifted and a glad heart at the age of sixty he began his journey towards the land of his adoption stopping en route with St. Germanus who presented him with all the vestments, chalices and books necessary for his mission and in the year 437 in the reign of Laoghaire (Leary) son of Niall the High King, he landed again in Ireland at a place near Vortry in Co. Wicklow and began his conversion of the Irish.

He was driven out from Co. Wicklow like Palladius before him so he sailed north and landed in what is now Co. Down where he was attacked by the local tribe led by their chief Dichu. The chieftain was so struck with respect when St. Patrick faced him that he listened to his words and finally with his family became baptized in the new religion. To commemorate his first conversion he built a church called Saul. However not everyone was so easily converted and his old master Miliuc on hearing that the man converting the people was his former slave, Suceat, the old pagan set fire to his own house and immolated himself in the flames rather than submit to being converted by his former herdsman. After some time convening and baptizing Dichu's people, he again sailed south to the mouth of the Boyne and traveling up the River Camfrid on the left bank opposite

to and in sight of Tara the royal hill on which were crowned all the High Kings of Ireland. A great festival was beginning at Tara and it was a violation of ancient law that any fire should be lighted before the Druids (the Holy men of the old pagan religion) lighted their sacred fire on the hill at Tara. St Patrick however had lit a fire in front of his tent violating this old order. The Druids knew of St Patrick and his recent conversions and fearful of being displeased said to the king, "Unless the fire on yonder hill be extinguished this very night, it shall never more be extinguished in

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Erinn." He will overthrow you and his kingdom will overthrow your kingdom. King Leary ordered that the transgressor should be dragged before him; subsequently St Patrick's camp was raided and he and his followers were ordered to march to Tara. Old tradition has it that on Easter morning the missionaries proceeded in processional order towards the court chanting the sacred Loric, the "Faid Fiada" or "Deer's Cry" said to have been composed by St Patrick and the first hymn written in Gaelic. It has been used by Irish people as a loric for protection and even repeated by Irish regiments on the eve of battle.

"I bind me today"	God's hand for my cover
God's might to direct me	God's path to pass over
God's power to protect me	God's buckles to guard me
God's wisdom for learning,	God's army to ward me,
God's eye for discerning	Against snares of the devil,
God's ear for my hearing	Against vice's temptation,
God's word for my cleaving..	Against wrong inclination
	Against men who plot evil,
	A near of afar with many or few.

It is said that followers of the Druids lay in ambush to intercept and kill the missionaries but never did see them only a herd of harmless deer pass by hence the title of the hymn "The Deer's Cry". In the presence of the king and his court, St. Patrick was first confronted by the Druids who by their art brought down a thick darkness which enveloped St. Patrick and his companions but St Patrick in the name of Christ blessed the spot so that light was restored to all there except the Druids who would not believe. This miracle would have a certain significance to all Masons having been brought out of darkness and into Masonic light. St. Patrick won a great number of converts at Tara but the old king remained a pagan. He did however give St. Patrick freedom to preach the new religion throughout his realm.

St. Patrick left Tara and journeyed the length and breadth of Ireland winning converts wherever he went. His progress is marked by various churches, wells, statues where he is said to have knelt or prayed or refreshed himself. At last he came to Croagh Patrick, a large mountain in the west of Ireland where in the spirit of Moses he fasted for forty days and forty nights. At Armagh he established the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland which remains so today. The hill above the town is dominated by two cathedrals, one Roman Catholic and one church of Ireland. During his lifetime nearly all Ireland deserted the old pagan religion and became Christian. His name became almost sacred. His memory is entwined in myth and legend. Tales true and not so true are told to this day about St. Patrick. Places where he drank or refreshed himself, these waters are said to have special cures for warts, arthritis and various other diseases. Stories that he drove the snakes out of Ireland are still believed even though the Roman writer Solinus recorded some centuries before St. Patrick that there were no snakes in Ireland at all. He eventually returned to Gaul the place where he had originally landed and there wrote his famous Confession before as he said, "I send forth my spirit to heaven" and on March 12th, 461 he died.

Although he has been reduced to the status of a lesser saint in the church hierarchy his memory is revered around the world and no saint is held with more affection than Saint Patrick not only by his people of Irish descent but by people of every race and colour. Parades are held in his honour from Dublin to Honolulu. In Ireland there are 166 churches named after him including St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Dublin. In the United States 461 churches bear his name and in Canada 65.

It will be of special interest for us at Freemasons to note that it is recorded that when St. Patrick returned to Ireland, included in the group which accompanied him were three Masons who were to assist him in building his churches. It is also recorded that of all the virtues Saint Patrick held that great Mason's virtue, "Charity", to be the greatest of all virtues.

He is buried at Downpatrick where a simple stone bearing the word Patrick covers his grave. No great monuments were built to his memory but he remains forever enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen and once a year he is remembered by Irish and non-Irish alike who, as is the custom, drown

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their shamrock by drinking a toast to his memory.
