

**PEASANT PROPERTIES: AND  
OTHER SELECTED ESSAYS;  
IN TWO VOLUMES; VOL. II;  
PP. 1-249**

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Peasant Properties: And Other Selected Essays; In Two Volumes; Vol. II; pp. 1-249 by Verney

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**VERNEY**

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# PEASANT PROPERTIES

*AND OTHER SELECTED ESSAYS*

BY

LADY VERNEY

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. II.

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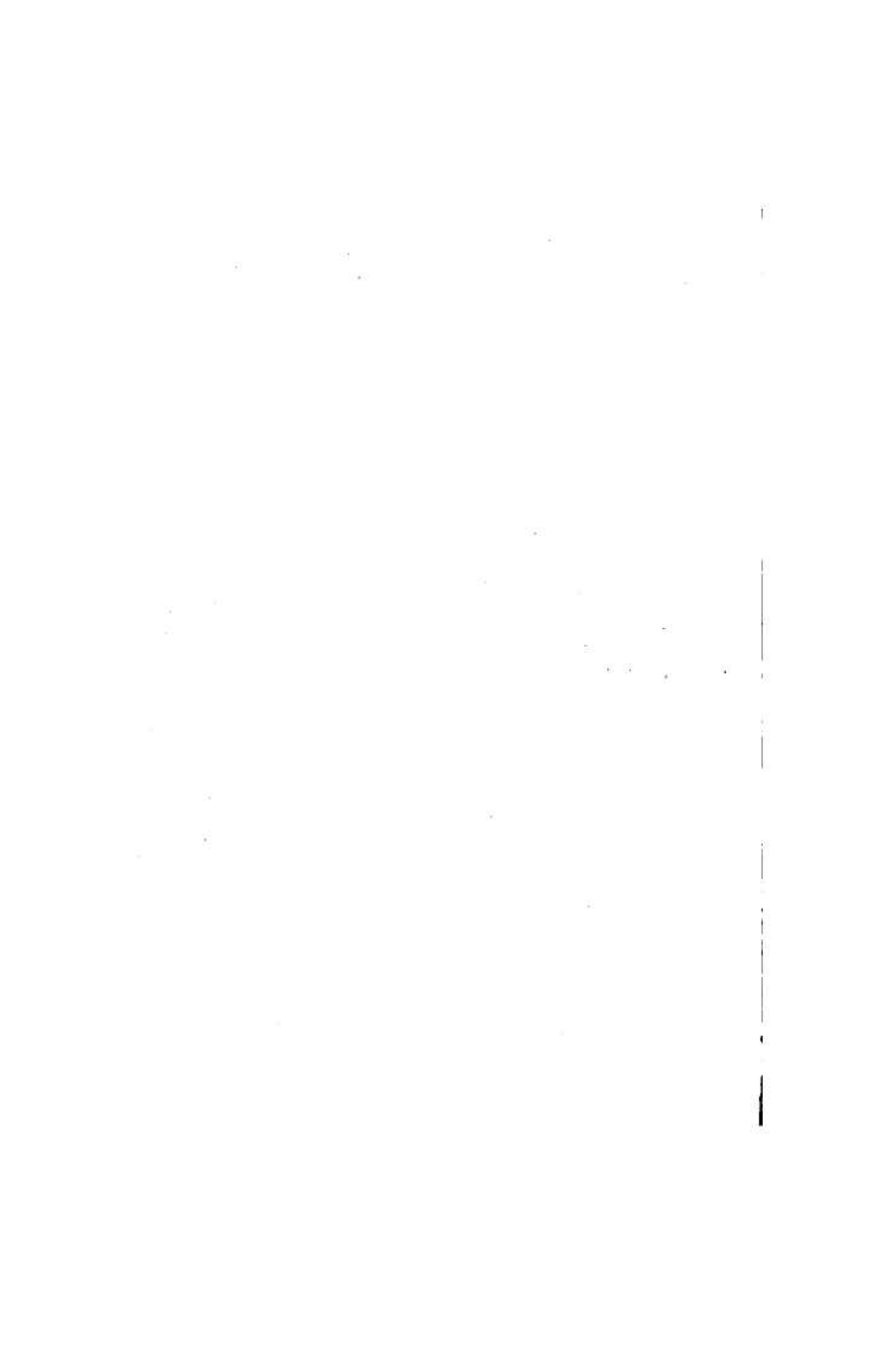


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OF  
THE SECOND VOLUME.

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### ANCIENT BRITISH SAINTS.

WALES according to her own account has been of old pre-eminently a land of saints. In the early ages of 'faith' they must indeed have been as plentiful as the rocks on her steep mountain sides. Bardsey Island alone ('home of the Holy Grail') is said, with the love of exaggeration habitual to such records, to be the grave of 20,000 confessors and martyrs. Churches dedicated to three saints, 'Llantrisant,' are not uncommon. One at least has taken five protectors—Llanpumpsant.

The requirements which were necessary to the profession were clearly laxer than at present. Many thick books, published by the Welsh Society, are full of their histories. Their names alone fill many pages of indexes, unknown most of them to the general Catholic world, but evidently held very sacred in their own rough and secluded land.

Their stories, scattered up and down among much irrelevant matter, are curious and interesting for the numerous valuable hints they contain as to the standards of morality, the habits of thought, and life, and feeling, of that far-off time. One strange feature in them is very marked, which Maury, in his '*Légendes pieuses du moyen-âge*,'<sup>1</sup> describes as belonging with singular persistency to the lives of saints in all countries during the middle ages, and as he gives no instances from Welsh sources it is interesting to trace in them the truth of his theory.

<sup>1</sup> The book is scarce and out of print.

With more or less of detail, more or less closeness of resemblance, they are all modelled on an imitation (a caricature we should call it) of the events of the Old, and still oftener of the New, Testament. The travesty is not an agreeable one, and the repetition of the same incidents again and again in the wonderful tales is strange to observe when once this clue has been given. The monkish historian, says M. Maury, who was almost always the person to chronicle the life of a saint, had few materials to work upon, and those few often far away both in place and in time. He was credulous and enthusiastic; how was he likely to criticise the enthusiastic and credulous testimony which was all he could even hope to obtain? His one idea seems to have been to represent his hero as a copy of his Divine Master in deeds as in spirit, and equivalents were sought for his least as well as his greatest actions in the saint's career.

Every saint comes into the world by some unnatural or supernatural process, and is heralded by dreams. He performs a certain set of miracles, always the same—the phrase, indeed, in the ceremony of canonisation mentions, apparently as a matter of course, that he gave sight to the blind, cleansed lepers, cast out devils, raised the dead (which last prodigy is so common that it seems strange the custom of death was not altogether abolished<sup>1</sup>), ‘walked upon the water, filled empty vessels with wine, or changed an inferior into a better liquid, was fed by eagles,’ &c., &c.

But the incidents appear as if seen through the distorting medium of a crooked glass, purposeless, grotesque, exaggerated, the beautiful idea of the imitation of our Saviour degraded into the most absurd and literal caricature of his actions. Even the most peculiar miracles in both Old and New Testament are reproduced, when the parallel becomes

<sup>1</sup> In the life of St. David, ‘a child who had lately been restored to life by him’ is mentioned incidentally as too common an incident to deserve more notice.

even more striking. Elisha makes the axe's head which had fallen to the bottom of Jordan rise to the surface of the water—so did St. Luifroi and St. Benedict in the Golden Legend. The rod of St. Luphard devoured serpents like that of Aaron, four saints bring water from the rock like Moses, St. Copras arrests the sun like Joshua. St. Christina of Tuscany with two companions remain unhurt in the fire like the 'Three Children,' so does the daughter of King Papiau, mother of St. Dubricius, Archbishop of Caerleon. The cursing of the barren fig-tree, the healing of the withered hand, each is repeated.

Abstract and metaphysical ideas were often presented in the middle ages under figures and allegories, particularly in the figurative style of the East. The sense of the emblematic image was often forgotten altogether by the people, and the meaning distorted into absurd and even revolting fables. For instance, in the 'Legend' of St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, it is told that he brought to life three children whose flesh had been served up to him to eat, an incident often represented on painted glass in England and Wales. They appear naked, in a bucket, with their hands joined. This was simply an emblem of the pagan nations whom he had converted and baptized. The figures are small in contrast to the saint, because size was supposed to represent his moral greatness and importance, and his catechumens are naked because 'baptism was at first practised by immersion.' Sometimes a symbol was taken as the literal basis of an incident. The artist of a fresco or a group in stone, in order to show how a martyr had died, placed his head in his hands. Maury mentions a number of cases where this was translated into a miracle besides the celebrated one of St. Denys, where the saint walked after his decapitation. 'Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte,' as is well known, was first applied to his case. Here too the Welsh martyrs are not wanting to their country and vocation; it is told of St. Stinan that—