

## The Legend of Saint Christopher.

**T**HE tendency of romance writers, when wearying of the creatures of their own imagination, to take some hero or personage whose name is better known than their deeds, and weave around them a tissue of fancy elaborate with fabricated details, is so well known that it needs no demonstration. In this way historical facts become strangely distorted in time, and legend and fairy tale so intimately connected that only an analytical mind can appreciate the slight nature of the tie.

It is doubtless to the exercise of this tendency that we owe so many of the strange and paradoxical tales of some of the minor saints of the Roman and Greek calendars; for some of the pagan romancers, Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius, for example, became Christians and bishops, and may have diverted themselves in writing romances to suit their Christian readers, with real martyrs for the heroes, but with the actual events and facts altered to suit their own or the popular taste in such matters.

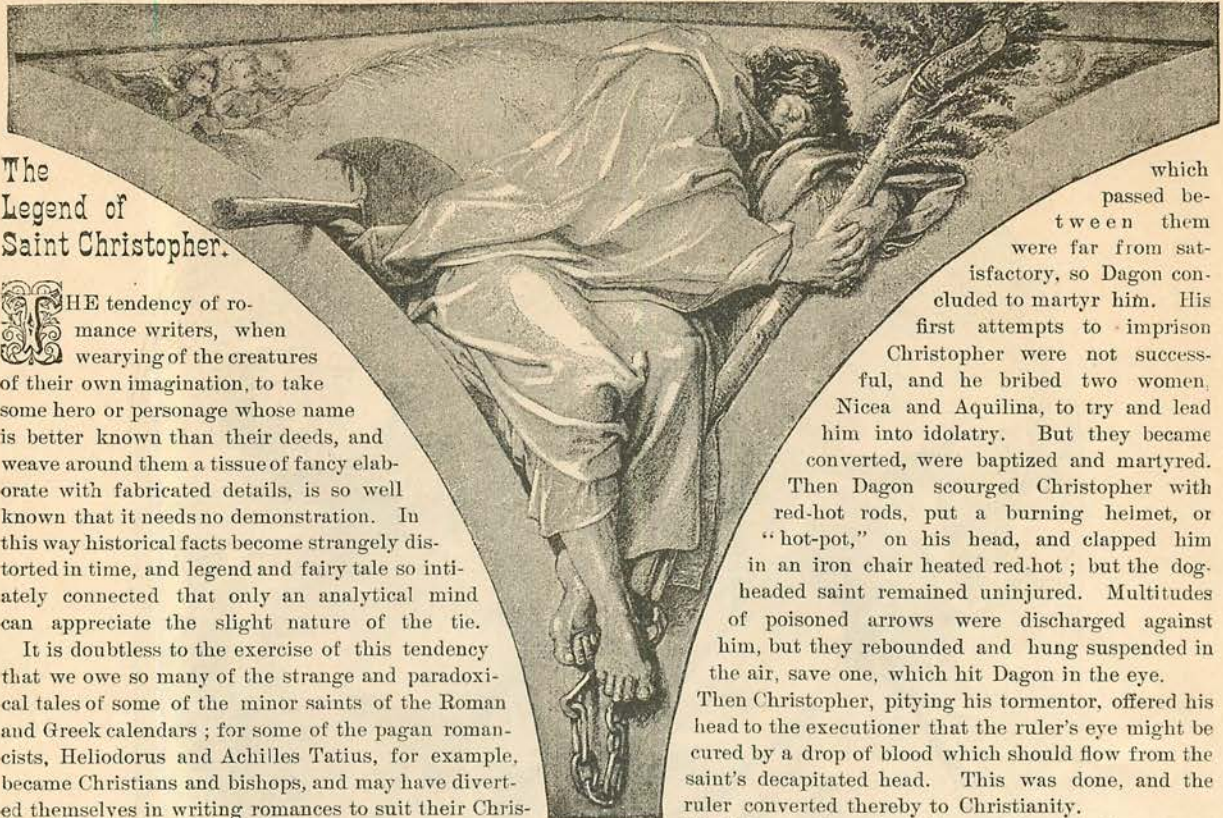
That this must have been the case with the story of St. Christopher, seems extremely probable. The canonized Saint Christopher is supposed to have suffered martyrdom under Decius, about the middle of the third century. Butler thinks that he took the name of Christopher (*Christum fero*) to express his ardent love for the Redeemer, implying by the signification of the name, "Christ-bearer," that he carried that sacred image always in his heart.

There are two versions, the Eastern and the Western legend, the former relating chiefly to his martyrdom.

According to the Eastern account, Christopher was a man of the race of *Cynocephali*, or dog-headed men, who was baptized by clouds and instructed in the Christian faith by a voice from heaven. After this miracle had been accomplished, he took an iron staff in his hand and went into Syria, to Samos, where King Dagon ruled. A woman saw him at the entrance of the city, where she had gone to worship her idols, and having reported the wonder of a dog-faced man, a crowd soon collected, as was natural. Christopher then prayed for a sign to convert the people; and planting his iron staff in the ground, it put forth leaves and bloomed, and many of the assembled people believed and were baptized.

When Dagon heard of this he sent two hundred soldiers to take this dog-headed man, but the soldiers were afraid of him, and ran away. A second company was sent, who were braver than the first, but when they saw Christopher they began to pray as he was doing. Finally they mustered up courage and told him that the king would like to see him. Christopher said that he would go to see the king, or not, as he chose; but he chose to go, and went.

Poor Dagon! When he saw the dog-headed giant he trembled so with fear that he rolled out of his chair; but the position was anything but dignified, especially for royalty, so he calmed his tremors, and seating himself with royal grace, questioned Christopher. The compliments



which passed between them were far from satisfactory, so Dagon concluded to martyr him. His first attempts to imprison Christopher were not successful, and he bribed two women, Nicea and Aquilina, to try and lead him into idolatry. But they became converted, were baptized and martyred. Then Dagon scourged Christopher with red-hot rods, put a burning helmet, or "hot-pot," on his head, and clapped him in an iron chair heated red-hot; but the dog-headed saint remained uninjured. Multitudes of poisoned arrows were discharged against him, but they rebounded and hung suspended in the air, save one, which hit Dagon in the eye.

Then Christopher, pitying his tormentor, offered his head to the executioner that the ruler's eye might be cured by a drop of blood which should flow from the saint's decapitated head. This was done, and the ruler converted thereby to Christianity.

The Western legend, while retaining a similar account of Christopher's martyrdom, does not give him a dog's head, but describes him as a native of Palestine, Syria, or Lycia, and a person of gigantic bulk and strength. His height was said to be twelve feet, and so proud was he of his gigantic frame that he would serve only the mightiest of princes. His wonderful might made him an indomitable champion, and the monarch in whose service he engaged had little to fear from any adversary when Christopher swung his mighty steel.

The king he served was the greatest of his day; but after a while Christopher found out that his master was terribly afraid of the devil, therefore, with fearless consistency, the champion attached himself to the latter. He served Satan for a short time, but one day, as they were walking through a wood together, they came across an image of Christ. At the sight of this, his new master became so perturbed, and exhibited alarm to such a degree, that Christopher entirely lost confidence in him, and immediately forsook the devil and resolved to seek the Saviour, and follow him.

His search was vain for some time; but at last a hermit met him, who showed him Christ, and baptized him. The customary penances were too trifling for one of Christopher's powers; and in consequence it was imposed on him to act the part of a ferryman, and convey all Christian pilgrims on his shoulders across a stream which had no bridge.

One day a little child came to the stream, and Christopher lifted him easily and started across; but before the middle of the stream was reached, the child's weight, light at first, grew so oppressive that the ferryman was about to sink under his burden, and exclaimed: "I feel as if I had the weight of the world on my back!"

The child then said: "Wonder not, my friend, I am Jesus, and you have the weight of the sins of the whole world on your back."

To prove his identity, the child, when they reached the shore, commanded Christopher to stick his staff into the ground. He did this, and the next morning it had blos-



SAINT CHRISTOPHER BEARING THE CHILD JESUS.



CHRISTOPHER IN BATTLE.

somed into a palm-tree bearing fruit. This miracle is said to have converted thousands to Christianity.

St. Christopher, in time, came to be regarded as a symbol of the Christian Church, and the gigantic figure of the saint wading the stream with the infant Jesus on his shoulder, became a favorite subject for painting and wood-carving. The sight of his image was thought to be a protection from sickness, earthquakes, fire, or flood, for the rest of the day on which it was seen, especially in Italy, Spain, and Germany. St. Christopher was greatly invoked in times of pestilence, and the formula used was called a Christopher's prayer. He was also the patron of an Order of Moderation, probably the first temperance society organized, founded in Austria in 1517, for the purpose of checking excessive drinking and swearing, and which was called the Order of St. Christopher.

The saint also has an interesting place in the history of typography; for one of the earliest known examples of wood-engraving, supposed to date about 1423, is a picture of Christopher with a hermit holding a lantern for him to see to cross the river. Underneath is an inscription in Latin, assuring the reader that on the day he sees this picture, he will die no evil death:

"Cristofari facitem die quacónque tueris,  
Illa nempe die morte malá non morieris."

None of the many carved figures of St. Christopher ap-

proached in magnitude one which was placed in the church of Notre Dame in Paris. It was erected by a knight of the name of Antoine des Essars, who was arrested with his brother for some malversation. The latter was beheaded, but the former dreamed that the saint broke his prison-bars and carried him off in his arms. The dream was verified, for in a few days he was declared innocent. In consequence he erected this wooden giant, which, after having been an object of popular wonder for many generations, was removed in 1785.

The Greek church celebrates the festival of St. Christopher on the 9th day of May, and the Roman Catholic calendar places the saint's day on the 25th of July. Critical historians, however, reject him as an imaginary character, and consider the whole story only as a beautiful allegory of great strength ever seeking its master, force to guide it to the fulfillment of glorious deeds, as the church looks to her Lord, or the body to the intellect to control action.

Longfellow has somewhat varied the symbolic idea of Christopher in his poem "The Lighthouse," and the comparison loses no force by its slight relation to the legend.

"Like the great giant, Christopher, it stands  
Upon the brink of the tempestuous wave,  
Wading far out among the rocks and sands,  
The night-o'ertaken mariner to save."

L. S. F.