

CHAPTER II

IN EXILE AND SLAVERY

THE first sixteen years of Patrick's life went by peacefully in the shelter of his home. But the civilised world was oppressed with a feeling of insecurity. No coast was safe from the depredations of sea-rovers coming from countries beyond the Roman pale. When the catastrophe occurred which was to determine our Saint's destiny, he happened to be at his father's country house, in the company of some of the younger children, and, perhaps, superintending the men and maid-servants who did the farm work.

A sudden alarm was given: strange ships were gliding towards the shore, their crews consisting of armed warriors, whose fierce aspect filled the beholders with terror. Too well did the unfortunate inhabitants realise the meaning of the spectacle. Panic-stricken, they ran hither and thither, but there was little hope of defence or escape. Patrick, like the captain of a sinking

ship, remained at his post, directing and commanding as best he could.

With hideous shouts and cries the pirates beached their ships and landed. Some rushed towards the homestead, seeking for objects of value; others laid hands upon the terrified servants and children, and carried them off. An unarmed youth, though ever so brave, would have found himself powerless in the grasp of one of these stalwart barbarians.

In the twinkling of an eye the whole desperate struggle was over. The house was set on fire; the plunder and the captives were hastily thrown into the ships; and Patrick, with his companions, set sail for the land of exile. In vain they strained their eyes to catch a last glimpse of home and fatherland, with, perchance, some lingering hope of rescue. But nothing met their gaze save black smoke rising from devastated buildings; ruin and desolation reigned where an hour ago were peace and plenty.

“They went round Ireland northwards and they landed in the north and sold Patrick to Milcho.” This is all we are told, but we can easily picture the horrors of such a voyage: the light boats tossed upon the waves of the mighty

Atlantic; the rude, rough men with fierce gestures, shouting their orders in an unknown tongue; the physical torture of bonds and blows, combined with the feeling of blank despair at their hearts, which must have made them long for death.

The ships soon parted company and each sought the port nearest home or where they were most likely to find purchasers of their booty. Patrick disembarked somewhere on the coast of Antrim, and must have been grievously disappointed to find himself separated from his sister Lupita and perhaps from another of his sisters, said to have been carried off at the same time, though in different boats. But there was not much time for reflection. The captives were dragged at once to the slave market where they were drawn up in line to be examined by intending purchasers.

Patrick's external good qualities soon caught the eye of a petty king of Dalaradia, Milcho by name, who had come to buy slaves and who, after some bargaining, paid the price required. The youth was then led away to his master's fort or dun, in the neighbourhood of the mountain now called Slemish. There he was placed in charge