

Andrew Lang and Lenora Lang

The Book of
Saints and Heroes

SOPHIA INSTITUTE PRESS®
Manchester, New Hampshire

The Book of Saints and Heroes was originally published by Longmans, Green, and Company, New York, in 1912. This 2006 edition by Sophia Institute Press® contains minor editorial revisions and an abridged preface. The text in this book was provided by the Baldwin Online Children's Literature Project (www.mainlesson.com).

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Cover illustration and design by Ted Schluenderfritz

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Sophia Institute Press®
Box 5284, Manchester, NH 03108
1-800-888-9344
www.sophiainstitute.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lang, Mrs.

The book of saints and heroes / Andrew Lang and Lenora Lang.

p. cm.

Originally published: *The book of saints and heroes* / by Mrs. Lang ; edited by Andrew Lang. New York : Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912. With abridged pref.

ISBN-10 1-933184-13-2; ISBN-13: 978-1-933184-13-5
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Christian saints — Biography. I. Lang, Andrew, 1844-1912. II. Title.

BR1710.L3 2006

282.092'2 — dc22

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2006000173

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Preface

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 fairytales. 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 who 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

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far more homely than the wild adventures of Irish saints like St. Brendan. The story that somehow came to be told about the patron 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 à 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; 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 sympathize 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 St. Francis Xavier, 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 toward God and man.

Andrew Lang

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St. Paul and St. Anthony

The First of the Hermits

Travelers in Egypt during the third and fourth centuries after Christ must have been surprised at the large number of monasteries scattered about in desert places, and the quantities of little cells or caves cut in the rock, which formed the dwellings of hermits. In those times, each lonely anchorite lived as pleased him best, or rather, as he thought best for his soul; but, of course, when many of them dwelt in the same house, this was not possible, and certain rules had to be made. In almost the very earliest of the monasteries, built a long way up the Nile, the monks were allowed to do as they liked about fasting, but were forced to work at some trade that would be of use to the brethren, or else, by the sale of the goods made, would enable them to support themselves.

So in the house at Tabenna we find that among the thirteen hundred monks there were basket-makers, gardeners, carpenters, and even confectioners, although probably these last were obliged to seek a market among the inhabitants of the various towns scattered up and down the Nile. In spite, however, of the numerous dwellers in the group of buildings that formed the monastery, Pachomius, the founder, had no intention of allowing his brethren to waste time in idle gossip. Whether working in the carpenter's shop, or hammering at the anvil, or shaping sandals, each man was bound to repeat the Psalms or some passages from the Gospels. He might eat when he was hungry, and could choose if he would give

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up bread, and live on vegetables and fruit and wild honey, or if he would have them all; but he was strictly forbidden to speak at his meals to other monks who happened to be present, and was enjoined to pull his cowl or hood over his face. And lest the monks should become fat and lazy, they were given no beds, but slept as well as they could in chairs with backs to them.



Paul, who is generally thought to be the first man to spend his life alone in the Egyptian desert, was the son of rich parents, who died when Paul was about sixteen. They were educated people and had the boy taught much of the learning of the Egyptians, as well as all that was best in Greek literature and philosophy, but as soon as they were dead, the husband of Paul's sister, hoping to get all the family money for himself, made plans to betray his young brother-in-law, who was a Christian; for at this time the Roman emperor had commanded a persecution of all who would not sacrifice to the gods of Rome. Vainly did his wife implore him to spare her brother; the love of money had taken deep root in his soul, and he was deaf to her prayers and blind to her tears. Fortunately she was able to warn Paul of his danger, and one night he crept out of the house in northern Egypt and fled away to the desert hills on the south. When the sun rose over the river, he explored the mountains in search of a hiding-place and discovered at length a cave with a large stone across its mouth.

"If I could only roll that stone away!" he thought, and with a great effort he managed to move it and clamber inside.

"No one will ever think of looking for me here," he murmured. "And how clean it is!" he added, for he had been used to a house tended by slaves, and did not consider dirt a sign of holiness, as did the later hermits.

So Paul took possession of his cave, and although he lived to be very old, he nevermore quitted the mountainside, but went every

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day to fetch water from a tumbling stream, and to gather dates from the palms, while he made himself clothes out of their leaves. But we are not told that he saw or spoke with anyone until a few days before he died and was taken up to Heaven.



Paul had spent so many years in his mountain cell that he had almost lost count of them and could scarcely have told you his age if you had asked him. Several miles away dwelt another old man called Anthony, who, when he settled in his cave beyond the great monastery, thought he had gone further into the desert than anyone living, until in his dreams he heard a voice that said, "Beyond you and across the hills dwells a man holier than you. Lose no time, but set out at once to seek him, and you will gain great joy."

Then Anthony awoke, and after eating a handful of dates and drinking a little water, he took up his staff made out of a palm branch, and set forth on his journey.

The sun was hot, and the sharp grit of the burning sand hurt his feet. Indeed, it was so long since he had walked at all, that it was wonderful his legs were not too stiff and too weak to support him. But he kept on steadily, resting now and then under the shade of a tree — when he happened to pass one — and kept his eyes fixed on the distant mountains that seemed to give him strength.

In this manner he was pressing forward when a being came up to him, so strange to look upon that he doubted if the like had ever been seen. The head and the front of it resembled a man, and its body and legs were those of a horse. As he gazed, Anthony remembered the verses of the poets he had read in his youth, describing such a creature, which they called a centaur; but at the time he had held these to be vain imaginings. The fearful beast planted itself in front of him and gave utterance to horrible words. As he listened, Anthony grew persuaded that it was Satan himself come to vex him, and he shut his ears and went on his way.

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He had not traveled far before he beheld, standing on a rock nearby, another beast, smaller than the first, with horns growing out of its forehead. "And who are you?" asked Anthony, trembling as he spoke, and the beast said, "I am that creature whom men know as a satyr, and worship in their foolishness," and at its answer, Anthony left it also behind him and passed on, marveling how it happened that he understood what the two beasts had said; for their language was unknown to him.

Night was now beginning to fall, and Anthony feared lest his steps might stray in the darkness, and that the morning sun might find him far away from his goal. But even as the doubt beset him, his gaze lighted upon the footprints of an animal leading straight to the mountain, and he felt it was a sign that he would not be suffered to wander from the right path, so he walked on with a joyful heart. And when the sun rose he saw before him a huge hyena, and it was galloping with all its speed in the direction of the mountain, but swiftly though it moved, Anthony's feet kept pace with it. Up the sides of the hill after it went the holy man to his own great wonder, and when they had both crossed the top, they ran down a steep slope where a cave with a very little opening was hidden among the rocks. Big though it was, the hyena's sides were very flat and it passed easily through the opening. Then Anthony knew in his heart that in the cave dwelt Paul the Hermit.



Although the walls of rock almost met overhead, the cave was not dark but full of a great light, and he beheld Paul sitting in the midst of it. He did not dare to enter without permission, so he took a small pebble and knocked with it on the wall. Immediately the rock was rolled across the opening, with only so much room left as a man might speak through.

"Oh, let me in, I pray you!" cried Anthony, falling on his knees. "Small need is there to shut me out, for I am alone."

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“But wherefore have you come?” asked Paul, and Anthony answered, “I am not worthy to stand in your presence, full well I know it; but since you receive wild beasts, will you not receive me likewise? For I have sought you from afar, and at last I have found you. And if, for some reason that I know not, this may not be, here shall I die, so give my body burial, I pray you.”

Paul bowed his head as he listened to the words of Anthony, and rolled away the stone, and they sat together and talked, and the hermit asked many questions of his guest about the world he had left.

“Tell me, I beseech you,” he said, “something of the children of men, for much must have happened since I took up my abode here, well-nigh a hundred years ago. Are the walls of the ancient cities still growing bigger because of the houses that are being built within them? Do kings yet reign over the earth, and are they still in bondage to the Devil?” These and many more questions did he ask, and Anthony answered them.

Now, while they were speaking, they both looked up at the moment, and on a tree that hung over the cave they beheld a raven sitting, holding in its beak a whole loaf of bread and waiting until they had ceased speaking. When the two old men paused in their conversation, the raven fluttered to the ground and, laying the loaf down between them, spread its wings and flew away.

“Behold,” said Paul, “what mercies have been given me! For sixty years and more, this bird has brought me half a loaf daily, from whence I know not, but now has a double portion been bestowed on us. Take, then, the loaf and break it.”

“No,” answered Anthony. “That is not for me to do.”

But Paul would not hearken to him, and darkness came on while they were yet disputing over the matter, until at the last each took hold of one end of the loaf, and pulled it until it broke in two. And after they had eaten, they stood up and prayed until the dawn.

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They beheld a raven holding in its beak a whole loaf of bread.



“The time of my rest has come, brother Anthony,” said Paul in the morning, “and you have been sent hither by the Lord to bury my body.” At his words Anthony broke forth into weeping and entreated that Paul would not leave him behind, but would take him into the heavenly country.

But Paul answered, “It is not fitting that you should seek your own good, but that of your neighbors; therefore, if it is not too much for your strength, return to the monastery, I entreat you, and bring me the cloak that was given you by the holy Athanasius, that I may lie in it when I am dead.”

This he said, not because he took any heed what might befall his body more in death than in life, but because Anthony might not have the pain of watching him depart.



Anthony wondered greatly that Paul should set so much store by the cloak or, indeed, that one who had been for so long set apart

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from the world should ever have heard of the gift; but he arose at Paul's bidding and said farewell, kissing him on his eyes and on his hands.

Heavy of heart was Anthony, and weary of foot, when his long journey was done, and he entered the monastery.

"Where have you been, O Father?" asked his disciples, who gathered eagerly around him. "High and low have we sought you, and we feared greatly that illness had come upon you, or that some evil beast had devoured you."

But he would tell them nothing of his pilgrimage. He only went into his cell and took the cloak of Athanasius from the place where it hung, and having done this, he set forth again on his road to the mountains, making all the speed he could, lest he might be too late to see Paul alive.

That day and all through the night Anthony went on without resting or eating food; but on the second day, at the ninth hour, he had a heavenly vision. In the air before him was a multitude of angels and prophets and martyrs, with Paul in their midst, his face shining like the sun. The vision lasted but a moment, yet clearly he beheld the faces of them all; and when it had vanished, he cast himself on the ground and wept, crying, "O fearer of God, why have you left me thus without a word, when I was hastening to you with the swiftness of a bird?"

Then he rose up and climbed the mountain, and soon the cell of Paul was before him. The stone that kept it fast had been rolled away, and in the entrance knelt Paul himself, his face raised to Heaven.

"He is alive, and I am in time," thought Anthony, and he stood and prayed, and the body of Paul stood by him and prayed also. But no sound came from his mouth, and a certainty crept over Anthony that the vision had been true, and that the soul of Paul had ascended to Heaven. So he spread the cloak of Athanasius on the earth, and laid the body of Paul upon it and wrapped the cloak

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about him as the holy hermit had desired. Yet another task lay before him, and in what manner to accomplish it he knew not.

“How shall I bury him?” he said to himself. “For I have neither axe nor spade with which to dig a grave, and it will take me four days to go and come from the monastery. What can I do?”

Now, as he pondered, he lifted his head and beheld two great lions running toward him, and his knees knocked together for fear. But as he looked again, his fear passed from him, and they seemed to him as doves for gentleness, monstrous of size though they were. While he gazed, the lions drew near, and by the body of Paul they stopped; then they lifted their heads and fixed their eyes on Anthony and wagged their tails at him, laying themselves down at his feet and purring. By this Anthony understood that they desired his blessing, and he blessed them. When they had received his blessing, they began to dig a grave with their claws, and the hole that they made was deep enough and wide enough and long enough for the body of Paul. And as soon as it was finished, they knelt down a second time before Anthony, their ears and tails drooping, and licked his hands and his feet. So he thanked them for their good service, and blessed them once more, and they departed into the desert. Then Anthony took the body of Paul and laid it in the grave the lions had dug, sorely grieving.