

THE

LEGEND OF ST URSULA

AND

The eleven thousand Virgins.

It was in the year of Our Lord 220, that Vionest and Daria reigned in Britain. Only one thing was wanting to complete their happiness; they had no children. Daily however did they offer up their prayers to heaven for a son, in order to perpetuate the royal dynasty. At length the Almighty partly granted their request; he sent them a daughter, and this daughter was a Saint, who from her earliest youth, devoted herself to God, and vowed before his altars to belong only to him. However, as she increased daily in grace and beauty, and as the renown of her virtues spread abroad, even to the most

distant countries, Agrippinus, a German prince, demanded her in marriage for his son, and dispatched ambassadors to the Court of Vionest, loaded with presents consisting of glittering arms, money and provisions of all kinds.

Vionest had witnessed with pain his daughter's consecration to the service of God, and regretted secretly, that a maiden of such great virtue should be lost to the world. Nevertheless he respected his daughter's vows, and replied to the ambassadors, that being no longer master of her hand, he begged them to take back the presents to Agrippinus and assure him of his regret. The ambassadors however did not abandon all hopes, but tarried some time at the Court of Vionest. One night as the king lay tossing about in his bed, tormented with grief at the resolution of his daughter, and at the futility of endeavouring to dissuade her from her purpose, an angel appeared to him, who declared that it was the will of God, that the marriage should take place: so that Ursula ultimately consented and dictated the conditions, according to the angel's advice.

All preliminaires being settled Vionest would not suffer his daughter to depart without a suite corresponding with her exalted rank. Eleven thousand Virgins of the most distinguished families of Britain were consequently selected as her retinue. The day fixed for their departure having arrived, and the vessels being ready, the eleven thousand virgins, with the princess at their head, assembled on the

sea-shore, attired in white and chaunting canticles. Before going on board, Ursula exhorted her companions not to be afraid of the sea, but to fear God alone, and as she had been inspired with the gift of science from heaven, she taught them the art of navigation, and dismissed all the men that were employed in the fleet.

These preparations being completed, they embarked. It must have been a gorgeous sight to behold these eleven thousand virgins, distributed throughout the ships, like swarms of white doves; some trimming the sails, some standing at the prows, and others at the helm, whilst the beautiful bride Ursula stood upon the poop of the principal vessel, commanding them all. It must have awakened profound emotion in the soul to have seen these eleven thousand virgins seated upon deck, singing harmonious canticles, when the wind blew fair and the vessels glided swiftly over the tranquil water.

After a few days, the miraculous fleet, guided by the hand of God, entered the Rhine, and ascended that noble stream to Cologne, where Aquilinus, the Roman governor, received Ursula and her companions with great honors. But they did not tarry long. Their design was to proceed on a pilgrimage to Rome, and they soon re-embarked in order to ascend the Rhine as far as Basle. There Pantulus, another Roman governor, received them with still greater distinction, than Aquilinus. Having quitted their vessels at Basle, they traversed Switzerland and the Alps on foot,

escorted by Pantulus, who resolved to make the pilgrimage to Rome, in their company. Having thus participated in the labours of the eleven thousand Virgins, he also partook of their glorious immortality. An altar in the church of St. Ursula, records the canonization of St. Pantulus.

Having arrived at Rome, they were baptized by Pope Cyriacus, and, having visited the tombs of the holy Apostles, they prepared for their return to the Rhine. Pope Cyriacus, says the chronicle, renounced the Pontificate, that he might accompany them, with a great number of the clergy. At length the eleven thousand Virgins again embarked on the Rhine, and were joined at Mayence by Coman, the son of Agrippinus, who there awaited their arrival. Coman was a Pagan, but upon seeing his young and beautiful bride, with her suite of eleven thousand Virgins, of whom she seemed the queen, accompanied by the venerable and grey haired Pope, and a long train of clergy, he discovered that doubts about the religion of his fathers, were combined with the violent love, with which Ursula had inflamed his heart. It is probable that the angel who appeared to Vionest and decided upon his daughter's marriage, likewise influenced the mind of the young barbarian. But whatever may have been the cause, he was converted and baptized: after which the betrothed pair and their immense suite descended the Rhine to Cologne.

They had scarcely arrived in that city however, ere it was surrounded, besieged and taken by an army of

Goths. The eleven thousand Virgins were tortured in a thousand different ways. Some were crucified, as a barbarous mockery of the death of that Saviour, whom they adored. Others were cruelly beaten to death with clubs or decapitated, whilst the Pope and all his clergy perished in excruciating torments. The barbarians reserved Coman and his bride to crown this horrible scene of martyrdom. One of the pictures now in the church of St. Ursula at Cologne depicts the manner of their death. Coman pierced with wounds is represented turning towards Ursula, with perhaps more of love than resignation in his looks, whilst Ursula more saintly seems to defy death. Her tomb is in a little chapel near the picture, where her effigy is sculptured in white marble, with a dove at her feet. Thousands of bones are shown in this church as the relics of these Virgin martyrs.