

When this succession of writers began, they were unavoidably induced to look back upon the ages that had preceded them, and to collect here and there from tradition any thing that appeared especially worthy of notice. Of course any information they could glean was wild and uncertain, deeply stamped with the credulity and wonder of an ignorant period, and still increasing in marvellousness and absurdity from every hand it passed through, and from every tongue which repeated it.

## MERLIN.

One of the most extraordinary personages whose story is thus delivered to us, is Merlin. He appears to have been contemporary with the period of the Saxon invasion of Britain in the latter part of the fifth century; but probably the earliest mention of his name by any writer that has come down to us is not previous to the eleventh. We may the less wonder therefore at the incredible things that are reported of him. He is first mentioned in connection with the fortune of Vortigern, who is represented by Geoffrey of Monmouth as at that time king of England. The Romans having withdrawn their legions from this island, the unwarlike Britons found themselves incompetent to repel the invasions of the uncivilised Scots and Picts, and Vortigern perceived no remedy but in inviting the Saxons from the northern

continent to his aid. The Saxons successfully repelled the invader; but, having done this, they refused to return home. They determined to settle here, and, having taken various towns, are represented as at length inviting Vortigern and his principal nobility to a feast near Salisbury under pretence of a peace, where they treacherously slew three hundred of the chief men of the island, and threw Vortigern into chains. Here, by way of purchasing the restoration of his liberty, they induced him to order the surrender of London, York, Winchester, and other principal towns. Having lost all his strong holds, he consulted his magicians as to how he was to secure himself from this terrible foe. They advised him to build an impregnable tower, and pointed out the situation where it was to be erected. But so unfortunately did their advice succeed, that all the work that his engineers did in the building one day, the earth swallowed, so that no vestige was to be found on the next. The magicians were consulted again on this fresh calamity; and they told the king that that there was no remedying this disaster, other than by cementing the walls of his edifice with the blood of a human being, who was born of no human father.

Vortigern sent out his emissaries in every direction in search of this victim; and at length by strange good fortune they lighted on Merlin near

the town of Caermarthen, who told them that his mother was the daughter of a king, but that she had been got with child of him by a being of an angelic nature, and not a man. No sooner had they received this information, than they seized him, and hurried him away to Vortigern as the victim required. But in presence of the king he baffled the magicians; he told the king that the ground they had chosen for his tower, had underneath it a lake, which being drained, they would find at the bottom two dragons of inextinguishable hostility, that under that form figured the Britons and Saxons, all of which upon the experiment proved to be true.

Vortigern died shortly after, and was succeeded first by Ambrosius, and then by Uther Pendragon. Merlin was the confidant of all these kings. To Uther he exhibited a very criminal sort of compliance. Uther became desperately enamoured of Igera, wife of the duke of Cornwall, and tried every means to seduce her in vain. Having consulted Merlin, the magician contrived by an extraordinary unguent to metamorphose Uther into the form of the duke. The duke had shut up his wife for safety in a very strong tower; but Uther in his new form gained unsuspected entrance; and the virtuous Igera received him to her embraces, by means of which he begot Arthur, afterwards the most renowned sovereign of this island. Uther

now contrived that the duke, her husband, should be slain in battle, and immediately married the fair Igera, and made her his queen.

The next exploit of Merlin was with the intent to erect a monument that should last for ever, to the memory of the three hundred British nobles that were massacred by the Saxons. This design produced the extraordinary edifice called Stonehenge. These mighty stones, which by no human power could be placed in the position in which we behold them, had originally been set up in Africa, and afterwards by means unknown were transported to Ireland. Merlin commanded that they should be carried over the sea, and placed where they now are, on Salisbury Plain. The workmen, having received his directions, exerted all their power and skill, but could not move one of them. Merlin, having for some time watched their exertions, at length applied his magic; and to the amazement of every one, the stones spontaneously quitted the situation in which they had been placed, rose to a great height in the air, and then pursued the course which Merlin had prescribed, finally settling themselves in Wiltshire, precisely in the position in which we now find them, and which they will for ever retain.

The last adventure recorded of Merlin proceeded from a project he conceived for surrounding his native town of Caermarthen with a brazen wall. He committed the execution of this project

to a multitude of fiends, who laboured upon the plan underground in a neighbouring cavern<sup>a</sup>. In the mean while Merlin had become enamoured of a supernatural being, called the Lady of the Lake. The lady had long resisted his importunities, and in fact had no inclination to yield to his suit. One day however she sent for him in great haste; and Merlin was of course eager to comply with her invitation. Nevertheless, before he set out, he gave it strictly in charge to the fiends, that they should by no means suspend their labours till they saw him return. The design of the lady was to make sport with him, and elude his addresses. Merlin on the contrary, with the hope to melt her severity, undertook to shew her the wonders of his art. Among the rest he exhibited to her observation a tomb, formed to contain two bodies; at the same time teaching her a charm, by means of which the sepulchre would close, and never again be opened. The lady pretended not to believe that the tomb was wide enough for its purpose, and inveigled the credulous Merlin to enter it, and place himself as one dead. No sooner had she so far succeeded, than she closed the lid of the sepulchre, and pronouncing the charm, rendered it impossible that it should ever be opened again till the day of judgment. Thus, according to the story, Merlin was shut in, a corrupted and putrifying body with a living soul, to which still inhered the faculty of

<sup>a</sup> Spenser, *Fairy Queen*, Book III, Canto III, stanza 9, *et seqq.*

returning in audible sounds a prophetic answer to such as resorted to it as an oracle. Meanwhile the fiends, at work in the cavern near Caermarthen, mindful of the injunction of their taskmaster, not to suspend their labours till his return, proceed for ever in their office; and the traveller who passes that way, if he lays his ear close to the mouth of the cavern, may hear a ghastly noise of iron chains and brazen caldrons, the loud strokes of the hammer, and the ringing sound of the anvil, intermixed with the pants and groans of the workmen, enough to unsettle the brain and confound the faculties of him that for any time shall listen to the din.

As six hundred years elapsed between the time of Merlin and the earliest known records of his achievements, it is impossible to pronounce what he really pretended to perform, and how great were the additions which successive reporters have annexed to the wonders of his art, more than the prophet himself perhaps ever dreamed of. In later times, when the historians were the contemporaries of the persons by whom the supposed wonders were achieved, or the persons who have for these causes been celebrated have bequeathed certain literary productions to posterity, we may be able to form some conjecture as to the degree in which the heroes of the tale were deluding or deluded, and may exercise our sagacity in the question by what strange peculiarity of mind ad-

ventures which we now hold to be impossible obtained so general belief. But in a case like this of Merlin, who lived in a time so remote from that in which his history is first known to have been recorded, it is impracticable to determine at what time the fiction which was afterwards generally received began to be reported, or whether the person to whom the miracles were imputed ever heard or dreamed of the extraordinary things he is represented as having achieved.

## ST. DUNSTAN.

An individual scarcely less famous in the dark ages, and who, like Merlin, lived in confidence with successive kings, was St. Dunstan. He was born and died in the tenth century. It is not a little instructive to employ our attention upon the recorded adventures, and incidents occurring in the lives, of such men, since, though plentifully interspersed with impossible tales, they serve to discover to us the tastes and prepossessions of the times in which these men lived, and the sort of accomplishments which were necessary to their success.

St. Dunstan is said to have been a man of distinguished birth, and to have spent the early years of his life in much licentiousness. He was however doubtless a person of the most extraordinary endowments of nature. Ambition early