

Legend of Saint Eustace

anon

*from the mid-fifteenth century English prose Gilte Legende,
itself taken from Jacobus de Voragine's mid-thirteenth century
Legenda Aurea*

Retold in Modern English

by

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This saint's life has been retold from: Richard Hamer (ed), with the assistance of Vida Russell, 2007. *Gilte Legende*, Volume II, from manuscripts in the British Library and Gloucester Cathedral Library. Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press.

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The Legend of Saint Eustace

anon

thirteenth century hagiography

Eustace that was called Placidus was maister of the cheualrie of Traian the emperoure, and he was right besi in workes of merci, but for al that he was abondonid for to worship ydoles – In the days of the Roman emperor Trajan there was a man named Placidus, later known as Eustace, who was the commander of the emperor’s cavalry; he was a very charitable man but unfortunately a pagan nonetheless, and committed to worshipping idols. Placidus had a wife who also busied herself with charitable works and errands of mercy, and they had two sons who were looked after in a way that befitted their high status. And because he was a good man, Placidus sought enlightenment and was brought into the way of truth.

One day, while he was out hunting, he came upon a herd of deer. One of the stags seemed much larger and more striking to look at than the rest, and it sped off in a different direction to all the others and leapt into the darkest and densest part of the forest. All his knights ran after the other deer, but Placidus found the courage to go alone after this great stag. When the creature sensed that it was being pursued, it climbed a high rock. Placidus went closer, to see how he might overcome this animal, and as he studied it, he saw the form of the cross between its horns, shining more brightly than the sun,



and within this image the face of Jesus Christ who, through the mouth of this stag – in the same way that he spoke to Balam through the mouth of an ass – said: ‘Oh Placidus, why are you chasing me? I’m appearing before you in this animal because of your good grace. I am Jesus Christ, whom you worship without knowing it. Your goodness and your charity have come to my attention and because of this, through this stag that you’re hunting, I shall hunt you.’

There are others who say that these words were said by the image itself that appeared between the stag’s horns, but whichever is true, when Placidus heard this, he was so terrified that he fell off his horse. When he came to again, an hour or so later, he raised himself from the ground and said: ‘Say to me again what you said before, and I shall believe you.’

‘Placidus, I’m Jesus Christ who formed heaven and Earth, who brought forth light and divided her from darkness, who ordained the days and the years, created man from the

slime of the ground and who appeared to the world in the likeness of a man to heal mankind, and was crucified, buried and arose again on the third day.

When Placidas heard all this, he fell once more to the ground and said: 'I believe that you are He who created everything out of nothing, Lord.'

'If you believe this, then go to the bishop of this city and ask him to baptise you.'

'Do you wish me to hide this from my wife and my two sons?'

'No, take them along with you to be baptised as well. Then come back here tomorrow so that I may appear to you again and reveal what will happen to you.'

When Placidas returned to his house and told his wife what had taken place, she exclaimed: 'My lord, I also saw Jesus, last night! He said to me: "Tomorrow, you, your husband and your two sons will come to me," and then I knew that it was our Lord Jesus Christ.'

At midnight, they went to the Bishop of Rome who baptised them with great joy, and the bishop gave Placidas the Christian name Eustace, and gave his wife and his two sons Christian names as well.

In the morning, Eustace went off to hunt once again and when he came near to the place where he'd seen the stag, he sent his knights off to look for deer and very shortly saw exactly what he'd seen the previous day. He fell to the ground before the stag, saying: 'Lord, I implore you, reveal to me, your servant, those things that you've called me to do.'

'Eustace, you're blessed, for you've received the holy washing of baptism and as a result, you've overcome the fiend who up until now has smeared his excrement all over you and deceived you. But now your faith will be tested, for the fiend whom you've rejected is now your formidable enemy and you'll be required to suffer many sorrows before you can achieve the crown of victory. In order to be parted from the high vanity of this world and made sufficiently meek that you can be raised again to divine spirituality, you'll have to endure many things. You must see that you don't succumb to temptation or hanker after your old, privileged life, for you're destined to become the second Job. When you've achieved true humility, I'll come to you again. But first, you must decide whether you want to suffer these temptations now or at the end of your life.'

'Lord, if it must be like this, then make these temptations appear at once. But give me the virtue of patience.'

'Have courage and resolve, then, for my grace will sustain you, and I will look after your

The story of Saint Eustace is found in Middle English in the Gilte Legende, translated from French in 1438, which derives ultimately from Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda Aurea, the Golden Legend, a huge compilation of hagiographies dating to the mid-thirteenth century. Saint Eustace's story is closely similar to that of Sir Isumbras, whose romance resonates in turn with other chivalric romances such as Octavian and Sir Eglamour of Artois, so who may have borrowed from whom is an interesting question. It was once Catholic policy to incorporate pagan mythology into Christian hagiography, as the legend of Saint Brendan clearly illustrates, and the weight of examples, if not the sheer logic of the plot, seems to be on the side of Romance. The Catholic Church removed Saint Eustace from the Roman Calendar in 1969 because of his legend's fabulous events. This story of Saint Eustace is found in manuscripts lying in the British Library and elsewhere, including MS Egerton 876, to which this present version is identical.

soul.’

Then Our Lord departed and went up to heaven. Eustace returned to his house and told everything to his wife.

Shortly afterwards, a deadly pestilence broke out in the district and all Eustace’s servants and housekeepers perished. A little while after that, all his horses and animals suddenly died. People he knew broke into his house one night and robbed him of his gold and silver and everything else of value that he owned, and he and his wife and children fled away by night, without any possessions at all. For fear of shame they fled into Egypt, thanking God who made everything, with not a penny to their names, through the unlawfulness of wicked men. The king and all the senators grieved for this noble commander of their cavalry, for they had no idea what had happened to him and could find no news of him at all.

As Eustace travelled with his wife and children, they came to the sea and found a ship, so they boarded it. The captain of the ship saw that Eustace’s wife was very attractive and desired to possess her. When the ship had crossed the sea he demanded payment for the voyage, and because they had nothing to give, the captain commanded that Eustace’s wife be taken in payment for the crossing and that she should be his to keep. When Eustace realised what was happening, he fought for as long as he could, but then the captain ordered his crew to throw him into the water, so in this way the captain got what he wanted.

When Eustace realised that it was hopeless, he departed sorrowfully, leaving his wife behind, and travelled with his two sons, weeping and telling them: ‘Alas, the grief is unbearable for me and for you, for your mother is now with a new husband.’



They came to a great river which was so deep and fast-flowing that Eustace dared not cross with both of his children at once, so he left one of them on the riverbank as he took the other one across. When he’d crossed this river, he set down the one child and went back for the other, but while he was still in the water, a wolf appeared, seized the child he’d just brought across and carried it away into the forest. When he realised that he’d lost this child, he turned again to fetch the other, but a lion came and carried away the other child, so quickly that Eustace had no

hope of catching up with it, for he was still in the middle of the river. He began to weep and tear at his hair, and would have tried to drown himself in the water had not the grace of God prevented him from doing this.

Shepherds saw the lion with the child in its mouth and followed him with their dogs, and by the will of God the lion left the child lying unharmed on the ground. Elsewhere, some farmers saw the wolf and challenged him so that he left the child he was carrying

safe and unhurt. In this way, both the one and the other, that is to say, both the shepherds with the one child and the farmers with the other, reared the children in their own houses.

Eustace had no idea that this had happened but went onwards, weeping and lamenting: 'Alas! I was like a luxuriant tree, and now I'm bare! Alas! I was once surrounded by magnificent knights, and now I'm alone. I don't even have my sons to comfort me. Lord, I remember how you said to me that I would be tempted like Job, but I think that I've had a much harder time of it than he did, for although he was stripped of all his possessions, yet he had a dunghill where he could sit, and friends who pitied him. I've got none of these things, but only wild animals who are my enemies and who take away my children. My wife has been taken from me and given to another man. Please, good Lord, let this be an end of all my troubles; and give me the power to control my mouth, so that I don't break down and start saying things that will insult you.'

As Eustace said this, he wandered onto a street in the very town where his children were being cared for, although they had no idea that they were brothers. He was hired to watch over the fields belonging to some men in the town, and remained in this job for fifteen years. Our Lord protected his wife as well, so that other men never had sexual relations with her and she remained uncorrupted.

At this time, the Emperor of Rome and his people were beset by enemies and their thoughts turned to Placidus, who had many times defeated their foes and rescued them from danger. The emperor lamented his absence greatly and sent many of his knights to diverse countries, promising that whoever found him would receive great wealth and prestige.



Two knights who had been with Placidus on his voyages came into the town and into the very street where he was living. When Eustace saw them he recognised them immediately and, remembering his former dignity, said sorrowfully: 'Ah, good Lord, grant me also that I may see my wife again, for I know beyond all doubt that my sons are dead.'

Then a voice came to him, saying: 'Eustace, have faith, for in a short while your honour and dignity shall be restored to you, along with your wife and your children.'

When Eustace spoke to these knights they had no idea who he was. They asked him if he knew any foreigner in those parts named Placidus who had a wife and two children, and he said: 'No,' but he invited them into his house to rest and to have something to eat. When he recalled his former position and authority, however, he couldn't help but weep. He went out and washed his face, then returned to serve them once more. They observed this and one said to the other: 'This fellow looks a lot like the man we're searching for.'

'I agree,' said the other. 'Let's see if he has a scar on his head like the one that Placidus

received in that battle.’

So they peered at Eustace and saw that he bore such a scar, and they knew at once that he was the man they were looking for. They leapt up and kissed him and asked him how his wife and children were. He told them that his children were dead and that his wife had been taken from him. All his neighbours ran in to see what was going on and the knights told them who this man truly was, how noble and respected he had been, how honourable and virtuous. Then they turned to Eustace and repeated the orders they had from the emperor and clothed him and took him back to Rome with them.

When the emperor learned of his arrival, he went to meet Eustace with great joy, and when he saw him he embraced him and kissed him. Eustace, in front of all the people, explained what had happened, and he was restored to his former authority and made commander of the cavalry once more.

Eustace readied himself to embrace his former responsibilities and made an audit of his knights. He found that they were too few in number to be of any use against Rome’s enemies, and so he commanded that all the young men of the towns and cities should put themselves forward to be selected. And it came about that the town in which his



sons had been brought up was required to supply two young men for service, and the two who were deemed to be the most suitable by the folk of that town were his two sons.

When Eustace saw how genuinely noble and virtuous these two young men were, he wept and held them in such high regard that he put them at the head of his cavalry. And when he had vanquished all his enemies, he brought his army to rest for three days in the very town where his wife was living in a hostelry.

By the will of God, her two sons were given quarters in her house, without any inkling of who she was, and sat one day talking to one another about their childhood. Their mother listened attentively as the elder said to the younger: ‘When I was a child I can remember that my father was in charge of cavalry, and I had a brother, but we all left the house one night and took a ship bound for I know not where, and when we left the ship, our mother was left behind and our father wept as he took us with him. When we came to a river he left me on the bank while he carried my brother across. But when he was coming back over for me, a wolf came and took my brother away, and before my father could reach me a lion came out of the forest and carried me off into the woods. Shepherds rescued me from the mouth of the lion and I was brought up in the town we both come from. I’ll probably never know what became of my father and my brother.’

The younger brother began to weep. ‘From what you’ve told me,’ he said, ‘I can say this for certain – that I’m your brother! The people who brought me up said that I’d been

rescued from a wolf.’

They hugged and kissed one another, and began to weep. When their mother heard all this, she carefully reflected upon whether these two young men could be her sons. The following day she went to the commander of the knights and asked him: ‘Sir, I beg you to give out the instruction that I should rightfully be returned to my native country. I’m from the district of Rome and a foreigner here.’

As she spoke, she became more and more convinced that he was her husband. At last, she could hold back no longer but fell at his feet and cried: ‘Sir, I implore you, tell me who you once were, for I’m sure that you’re Placidus, who was once the commander of the emperor’s cavalry, and whose other name is Eustace, for this Placidus was converted to Christianity by the Saviour of this world. He’s had many a dreadful dilemma thrown at him to test his faith, and I, who am your wife, was taken from you in the sea and the Lord has kept me clean and undefiled.’

When Eustace heard this, he knew that she was his wife and he wept for joy; he kissed her and gave glory to God, who never fails to send comfort to those who have been tormented by tribulations.

‘My Lord, what became of our two sons,’ she asked.

‘They were killed by wild animals,’ he replied, and explained to her what had happened.

‘Then let us truly give thanks to God, for I believe that just as he has given us the grace to find each other, so he’ll grant that we shall be reunited with our children as well.’

‘I’ve already told you – they were eaten by wild animals.’

‘But yesterday I sat in a garden and heard two young men speaking of their childhood. I really believe that they’re my sons. Ask them to repeat it all to you, exactly as I heard it.’

Eustace sent for them and had each of them rehearse all over again the circumstances of his childhood, and he soon knew beyond all doubt that they were his sons. Then he and their mother hugged them and kissed them and were very happy. The entire army was delighted that their commander had been reunited with his wife and children, as well as having gained a victory over the barbarian!

When Eustace returned to Rome, the Roman emperor Trajan was dead and Hadrian had succeeded him. Hadrian received Eustace flatteringly and put on a great dinner in his honour, for the great victory, and for rediscovering his wife and children. But Hadrian was more wicked than his predecessor. The next day he went to the temple to sacrifice for the great victory over the barbarians, and when the emperor saw that Eustace would not perform a sacrifice, neither for the victory nor for finding his wife and children, he commanded him to perform the sacrifice.

'I worship Our Lord Jesus Christ and serve only him,' Eustace replied.

The emperor in his rage had Eustace and his wife and children put into an amphitheatre where a cruel lion was set upon them. But the lion ran at them with his head bowed in respect and worship, and wouldn't attack them. So the emperor commanded that a great animal be made out of copper and heated to a high temperature in a fire, and ordered that they all be put into it alive. The saints said their prayers and made their peace with God, then entered this brass ox, and there they yielded up their spirits to Jesus Christ.

On the third day, the emperor came to watch the ashes being removed, but the bodies that were recovered were untouched and not a hair on their head was burnt. Christian men took them and buried them in a suitable location and built an oratory above the tombs.

This was in the days of the Roman emperor Hadrian, who began his rule in the year of our Lord one hundred and twenty.