

## Snake Tale

*Philip Terry*

Once upon a toime the craic was good. We'd loy in the sun on a smooth crock when it was feen, doing nobodaddy no arm, just flipping ourselfers ofer from toime to toime, or twinning ourselfers togiddy, taking in the eat, sundereaming. It fed us, it flickered us, it made us feel all charger up and ready to goo. Without a good sunnering from toime to toime we grew sluggish, and moody too, loik the nematodes who livered under the crocks, shunning the dayloight which brought us so much deloight. Dayloight and deloight, ther oon and the seam fer us, fer we deloight in the dayloight and the dayloight deloights in us too, so it does. When it was awet, which offen it was, to be sure, we'd swimmer in the streamers and the brooks, grubbing a flash or two for lynch, or a few shrews from beneath the bullrushes that loined the banks with their pokerfaces all soft and fluffed up loik they all is are. The shrews were plentifuller back then, and just the roight soize for a noice little sneck. If we wantered sum ting to wash dem down, dere were all is plenty of errggs to swaller, which we'd pinch from the nests of the bigcrests and gobble down whole lettering the shells crush inside us with a luvverly muffled cracking. We livered with the brocks and the bigcrests and the bears in a gree in the green land the two-legs called Irelande, for they were full of ire, whether they came from here or from ofer the big watter, they were all is bashing each udder till oon of dem came off the worse and could bash no more. The oons who bashed no more they'd leaf where they were for the redbeaks and the nematodes, or they'd dump dem in a bog and leaf dem dere to rot though they didn't rot as we could see plain as dayloight as we swimmered by dem they just shrunk and took on a brownish colour loik the stinkin shoe leather worn by the two-legs. Offen,

just to make sure, the two-legs would cut off the heads of the oons who bashed no more, or cut off their arms so that they couldn't do dem any more arm. The two-legs had some bad habits. In their stories we're the badoons, they think we're malevolent, evil craythurs, banished to the dark places and the moors, but the truth is that we're armless. Quoite literally. We make our hames where udders would foind it difficult, in crocky crevices, next to the meanderering streamers and bogs, in the shadowy glens of Irelonde, the Emerald Isle, that's anither of their noimes for it, not because it is full of emeralds, it isn't, but because it is all is green, because it is all is raining. Some two-legs think it's a bit soggy, but we loik it loik that, so long as the sun comes out now and again.

Though we gotter on feen with the two-legs, we gave dem a void berth on the whole and they did the seam fer us. They knew we were dangerous, and we didn't want to get crushed beneath the hooves of their horses loik. Occasionally oon of dem would catcher us up with a forked stick and skin us to roast ofer a fire, but generally speaking they didn't loik to eat us, we were dark and unwholesome craythurs they mutteruttered, unfit for consumption. That's where their stories about us, all balls, came in handery. The noicest two-legs were the oons in the big capers with the beards down to their waists, fer dem we were actually holymoly, and they'd honerer us by leafing food out fer us: bigcrests, nuts, moice, berries, and a brown sticky liquid that made you shiver then a moment later made you hot all ofer. But all that changered when your man showed up in Irelonde. He came from ofer the big watter, from a londe called Englalonde, and he had the new faith on him, and carried it about in his handers in the shape of a cross. It was a large cross, made out of silfer and decorated all ofer with

emeralds which glistened in the loight of the sun. This two-leg was called Pádraig, and his reputation in preaching travelled before him loik a thunderclap. It was said he was a great miracle worker: he'd cured some lepers he'd met begging by the roadside armed with nothing but a prayer loik, and he'd restored the soight to a bloind two-leg in the uplonde, by simply replacing his oyeballs with the oyeballs from a just-killed sow, as well as snatchering oon of the daughters of an Ulster chieftain, Macool, out of the arms of a wicked demon, an act which was richly rewarded by the chieftain, and bitterly resented by his daughter, who ran away in tears and threw herself into a nearby river. He travelled all ofer, sleeping in the open with only a crock for a pillow, and whenever he came across a great hill, he would climb it on his handers and knees, no matter how diffidiffcult the way, until he reached the top where he would raise his arms to the heavens and cry out in his loudest voice, preaching about his oon and oonly nobodaddy who ruled ofer all things, the londe and the big watter and the heavens aloik, who demanded that we throw away false gods and give our allegiance to him and to him alone, amen.

We looked on from the safety of our crevices in the crock, tongs flicking, curious yet wary about this strange and charismatic two-legs and his preaching, whose influence went from strength to strength as he kept performing strange and fantastical miracles. He was said to have raised from the dead a mither who had died in childerbirth, togiddy with the twins in her womb, and when the twins came out into the woid world they could patterpatter from the moment of their birth and preacher the word of nobodaddy in the Latin tong. And then oon day he took on his bitterest rivals, the oons in the big capers with the beards down to their waists. It was on his way to Kells that he met three of the two-legs in

the big capers with the beards down to their waists, who stood in his path, blocking his way loik. They told him to goo back to Englonde where he had come from udderrwise they would changer him into a crock and throw him down a well that had no bottom. Pádraig laughed at this which angered the oons in the capers with beards down to their waists, but when dey tried to work their magic on him dey could do nothing to him. Pádraig turned his oyes to the heavens and prayed to his nobodaddy, and his nobodaddy answered not in word but in deed, changering the oons in the capers with beards down to their waists into three frogs, who croakered in unison, then jumped off into a nearby bog, never to be seen again. Brékkkek Kékkek Brékkkek Kékkek! Kóax Kóax Kóax! Now he had ofercome the two-legs in the capers with their long beards, he turned his oyes to us, the craythurs that were holymoly in the oyes the bearded two-legs. We were not holymoly any more, he said, spitting his words out loik venom, those toims were ofer, we were nothing but pure evil, for it was our koind who had brought sin and division into the Garden of Eden and thence into the world corrupting our first parents by tempting Eve to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. He'd efen been sinduced by oon of our evil koind himself, so he had, a woman in snake form named Brigid who had given herself to him on a mountain top when he was moinding his own business, fasting fer all he was worth, until she had come along to interrupt him. In his fervent zeal he struck her ofer the oyes with his big cross, and vowed to rid the londe of our presence, to cleanse Irelonde of our slithering forms for once and for all.

We watched helplessly from the hills, fear and panic spreading thorough our rankles, as Pádraig's words turned the two-legs against us. They emergered from their hovels at daybreak, gathering in

packs, and proceeded to hunter us down without mercy, torching the bracken to drive us from our hames, so that the whole londe was fillered with smoke and the smell of burning flesh hoverered in the once pure air. When we emergered from our hoiding places, dazed and bloinded by the flames and the acrid smoke, they were waiting, fury in their oyes: with their knotty clubs and their long turf cutters' spades they beat us to a pulp in our hundreds, leafing us to rot in the open air, prey for wolves and redbeaks. Their croize of anger and triumph fillered the valleys and the bogs and the mountains, until the whole isle was soon reduced to a smoking wastelonde as far as the oye could see. Those of us who escaped the onslaught fled in bloind terror, seeking refuge in the remotest corners of the isle, but there was little chance of escaping their relentless persecution. We knew we were only buying toim, and that sooner or later they would catcher up with us, for their furious zeal showed no signs of abating.

In desperation, those of us who remained gathered togiddy on the cliff tops, our scorchered and bloody scales trembling with fear and defoiance. It was an existential crois, not in the philersophical sense used by some of our local tinkers—not local to Irelande, but local to where I'm sat writing, I'll come to that all in good toim—but in the sense that our very existence was under threat. We whisperered among ourselfers, trying to understonde why we were being cast out, why our peaceful existence was suddenly under threat of extinction. There was no question, Pádraig and his holymoly nobodaddy were at the root of it all. And the two-legs constantly mutteruttered about our forked tongs, seeing these, which were nothing but an evolutionary quirk to help us sense what was going on in our immediate environment, as a sign of evil, a sign of double-talk, a sign of

impurity and corruption, by means of which we had tempted the oon they called Eve to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and abandon the true way of nobodaddy. It was a simple case of scapegoating as we used to say, othering as some of our local tinkers have it, and what they said about double-talk was a load of old claptrap, language is always double-talk, you can try all you loik to say what you mean and mean what you say, but you'll never get to the bottom of it, what you mean to say in the end will always lie ofer the next hill, loik the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow. It was all balls the lot of it, but the two-legs swallowed it whole loik a crab apple. There seemed to be nothing we could do about it but sit it out, until the two-legs came to their senses. Our conference had reached a dead end, and we were settling down for the night, gathering what warmth we could by twinning ourselfers togiddy in the gloaming, when we suddenly heard the sound of footsteps, the unmistakable sign that the two-legs had caught up with us. They had us cornered, to be sure, for we had no way to retreat any further, asides from hurling ourselfers ofer the cliff and putting ourselfers at the mercy of the snot-green big watter and the crocks some hundreds of feet below.

We hunkered down in the grass, making ourselfers as small as we possibly could, in the vain hope they might not clock oyes on us. We heard their steady steps approaching, our hearts in our mouths. They were curiously quiet, we were tinkering, they were not shouting or banging their long spades on the turf to flush us out, nor did they set fire to the bracken, which would have taken in an instant. What were they up to? Were they trying to surproise us? And then we saw their faces, not the faces of the vengeful two-legs we had been expecting, but the gentle faces of the oons in the big capes with the beards down to their waists. We

come in peace, brothers, they said. Loik you, we have been driven out by the two-legs and the holymoly oon. We're in the same coracle. Once we'd settled down a bit and gotter talking, they told us how they had been driven out of their hamesteads and had retreated, loik us, into the wilderness. And they told us of the loys that Pádraig had been spreading about dem and about their beliefs. Pádraig, they said, had pointed to the three leafed clover as a sure sign that nobodaddy was the oon true god. The clover, he said, was a sign of the holymoly trinity, the father, the son, and the holymoly ghost. Claptrap, said the oons in the big capes with the beards down to their waists. The three leafed clover, they said, was an ancient symbol of the isle, rooted in its history loik the bracken and the bogs and the rain. It was a sign belonging to the ancient beliefs that lay rooted in the londe itself, and it told how the bigcrests of the air and the craythurs of the earth, and the flash in the streamers and the big watter were all part of oon big family living togiddy in a gree. As we talked we drank their brown sticky liquid that made you shiver then a moment later made you hot all ofer, rememberering again the ancient tales, the stories passed down through generations, of a power efen greater than Pádraig's. A power that dwelled within the earth itself, a primordial force that could shield us from arm. And with a unity born of survival, we called upon this ancient magic, with the help of the oons in the big capes with the beards down to their waists, drawing upon the very essence of the londe we called hame. They told us to twinner ourselfers togiddy and form a mass, which we did, twinning our bodies the oon ofer and under the udder and the udder ofer and under the oon until we were all knotted togiddy loik into a slithersome carpet.

And then, in a moment that seemed to stretch across eternittity,

a miracle occurred. The grounder trembled beneath our coils, and a great rumumbling filled the air as the wind whipped in across the big watter and up and ofer the cliff. From the depths of the earth, a wave of energy surged up, enveloping us in its embrace. And then, as if by the hander of fate, we felt ourselves lifted from the soil, our twinned bodies acting loik a great wing, and were carried up and away far away from the green londe that had rejected us. We soared through the sky, carried on the whirling currents of the air, travelling for days on end, until at last, we found ourselves far from the shores of Irelande, far from the shores of the Emerald Isle, translated into a distant londe of sand and sky and little watter where we could live in peace far from the bog dwelling two-legs. The londe was called the Maghreb, and the two-legs who dwelt there were happy to share their londe with us, for their beliefs were of a different koinde to those of Pádraig. They had their own nobodaddy, but he didn't seem to moind us, they had their own tinkers, great tinkers, and they had their own language too, and their own way of writing: it was nothing loik the Latin script of Pádraig, with its little crosses all ofer, but was sinuous and curling loik, pleasing to the oye, loik snakes twinned togiddyder across the pager. But efen as we settled into our new hame, while our bodies deloighted in the endless dayloight, which fell from the heavens from dawn till dusk so that we passed our days in endless sundereaming, flipping ourselves ofer from toim to toim when the eat gotter too much, our hearts remaindered heavy with the memory of what we had lost. For though we had escaped Pádraig's wrath, and oonce again the craic was good, or good enough to be going on with, we could never forget the londe that had oonce been our owning, the green londe where we had livered in a gree, the green londe from which we had been



banished by the handers of the two-legs and the holymoly two-leg they called Pádraig, and his no good nobodaddy, cursed be his noime.

PHILIP TERRY was born in Belfast, and is a poet and translator. *The Penguin Book of Oulipo*, which he edited, was published in Penguin Modern Classics in 2020, and Carcanet published his edition of Jean-Luc Champerret's *The Lascaux Notebooks*, the first ever anthology of Ice Age poetry, in 2022. His version of Dante's *Purgatorio*, relocated to Mersea Island in Essex, is forthcoming from Carcanet in October 2024.

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