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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

St. Brendan's Island

There was once an Irish monk called St. Brendan. One day he received a visit from a hermit who told him of a most marvelous island.

"Come and visit this earthly Paradise," said the hermit.

"There the sun always shines. The birds wear golden crowns upon their heads and speak like humans."

The perfume of the island clung to the garments of the hermit for forty days.

Good St. Brendan asked many questions about the mysterious island and at last resolved to visit it and see for himself if all the wonders of which he had heard were really true. Accordingly, he built a coracle of wattle covered with hides tanned in oak bark and softened with butter. He loaded it with provisions to last for forty days. Then he persuaded some of his disciples to accompany him. This was somewhat difficult for they were timid about embarking upon this dangerous expedition in the frail boat. St. Brendan, however, succeeded in overcoming their fears and set out with a little group of his most devoted followers.

It was seven years before they returned to their native land. They were even more enthusiastic about their wonderful island than the hermit had been. They urged others to go and find out its marvels but nobody else was ever able to locate it.

They say that the island of St. Brendan was a floating island in the Atlantic. Good St. Brendan did not die but kept on living in the earthly Paradise of his isle. When the Christians were hard pressed in their battles with the Moors and were about to be pushed back into the sea the island of St. Brendan appeared upon the horizon, and the good saint himself came to fight against the Moors and bring victory to the Christians. In the middle of the fifteenth century there was a little maid called Maria who lived in the island of Terceira. She heard the story of St. Brendan's isle from a Franciscan brother. Day and night she dreamed of it. She often sat upon the hillside of Monte Brasil, looking eagerly out over the broad expanse of sea, hoping with all her heart that the island would appear to her. One day there landed in Terceira a cavalier of Rhodes named Vital. From his grandfather he had inherited some of the sacred relics of St. Brendan. He had come to the Azores in his search for the mysterious island. On his doublet he wore an eight-pointed star and a band upon which was embroidered in scarlet silk the motto, "By Faith." It was indeed "by faith" that he had embarked upon his quest. The little maid, Maria, fell in love with him the moment she heard of him and his errand. She worshiped him as if he had been the good St. Brendan himself, but when she was with him she sat with downcast eyes, her long dark eyelashes sweeping her delicate cheek, and did not give him a glance, much less a word.

The young cavalier loved the little maid. He divided his holy relics of St. Brendan with her, and in return he begged of her that she might speak a word of love. "To tell my love to you," said Maria, "I'd have to be where nobody but God could hear."

Indeed it was quite true that Maria needed to be where nobody but the good God could hear her when she spoke of her love for the cavalier Vital. The son of the wealthy Captain of the district had long admired her delicate beauty. He had already sought her for his bride. His jealousy against Vital rose up like a burning flame. He went to Maria and demanded that she should marry him at once.

Maria firmly refused.

"If you do not wed me," said the captain's son, "I shall have my father lock you up in the stronghold of St. Louis on the hillside."

"I should prefer to spend all my days confined in the castle of St. Louis rather than be your wife," said she.

"Why can't you leave me in peace with my relics of the good St. Brendan!"

The mention of St. Brendan's relics stirred the young man's wrath even more. He well knew who it was who had given her the holy relics. His threat was fulfilled, and she was taken that very day to the castle of St. Louis and locked up in that stronghold.

Her room had a window, and there she sat high up in the tower of the castle looking down at the city of Angra beneath her.

"I had longed to serve the good God," she cried. "Why is it that my life has been made useless!"

At that very moment the earth trembled. The strong walls of the castle shook as if they had been built of paper.

Near the fort two doves were sitting on the branches of a cedar tree.

"Let us rescue this fair maid," said one dove to the other.

"Yes, let us carry her away on our wings," agreed the other.

That instant the earth shook so that the walls of the stronghold fell to the ground. The two doves spread out their snow-white wings and bore Maria away in safety. Over houses and churches they flew. Over treetops and the broad expanse of the sea they rose. The city, the island, the sea, all disappeared from Maria's sight. She felt so dizzy that she closed her eyes.

When she opened them again she was in an island of such beauty as she had never dreamed. It was indeed a garden of Paradise. The good St. Brendan himself, she saw, was the gardener.

The earthquake caused much damage in the island of Terceira. When the disappearance of Maria was known throughout the little city; of Angra nobody mourned for her as did the young cavalier Vital.

"What is the island to me without Maria?" he asked in sorrow.

Once more he embarked upon the sea in his search for the island of St. Brendan. Long days and long nights he tossed about on the ocean.

One evening just at sunset he saw the clouds of heaven descending to earth like a white ladder. Then he observed, far away upon the horizon, an island. He knew in his heart that he had at last a glimpse of St. Brendan's isle.

A gentle breeze swelled his sails and sent him rapidly toward it. As he drew near he saw his loved Maria standing with her arms outstretched. A bright light shone about her.

"To speak of my love to you," said she, "I have to be where nobody but God can hear—God and the gardener of this island, St. Brendan."

