

THE STUFF OF FANTASY - FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE.
CURIOUS MYTHS OF THE MIDDLE AGES by Sabine Baring-Gould.
Reviewed by Belladonna.

This book, unfortunately, you will not be able to get in paper-back nor, I fear, anywhere but by lucky chance in second hand bookshops or libraries. It was published in 1877 and has not, as far as I know, been reprinted. Sabine Baring-Gould was a country clergyman in Cornwall, and wrote hymns, notably 'Onward Christian Soldiers' - also some lively romances in the Lorna Doone tradition - but he was also an early folklorist, and as such is still held in honour by the Folklore Society. Some of his conclusions are, of course, rather naive to modern ears, and much of his archaeology is out of date, but he may, on the other hand, have had source material no longer available to us. In this book we find such old favourite myths as Pope Joan, the Wandering Jew, Prester John, the Pied Piper, and Bishop Hatto, all traced down to their earliest mention - as well as the fable about Cornishmen/Englishmen having tails. Also, as a caution to the "Nothing but..." school of folklorists and ingenious tongue-in-cheek argument to prove that Napoleon never existed, being simply a solar myth, as shown by all the typical signs.

But chiefly the book is a collection of irresistible 'Serendipity.' Is not this the stuff of fantasy, the following description of the Kingdom of Prester John:

"Our land is the home of elephants, dromedaries, camels, crocodiles, meta-collinarum, cametennus, tensevetos, wild asses, white and red lions, white bears, white merles, crickets, griffins, tigers, lamias, hyenas, wild horses, wild oxen and wild men, men with horns, one-eyed men with eyes before and behind, centaurs, fauns, satyrs, pygmies, forty-ell high giants, Cyclopes, and similar women; it is the home too of the phoenix, and of nearly all living animals. We have some people subject to us who feed on the flesh of men and of prematurely born animals, and who never fear death.... At the foot of Mount Olympus bubbles up a spring which changes its flavour hour by hour, night and day, and the spring is scarcely three days' journey from Paradise, out of which Adam was driven. If anyone has tasted thrice from the fountain, from that day he will feel no fatigue but will as long as he lives be a man of thirty years.... In our territory is a certain waterless sea, consisting of tumbling billows of sand never at rest... Three days' journey from this sea are mountains from which rolls down a stony, waterless river, which opens into the sandy sea. As soon as the stream reaches the sea, its stones vanish in it and are never seen again. As long as the river is in motion, it cannot be crossed; only four days a week is it possible to traverse it.... Near the wilderness trickles between barren mountains a subterranean rill, which can only by chance be reached, for only occasionally the earth gapes, and he who would descend must do it with precipitation ere the earth closes again. All that is gathered under the ground there is gem and precious stone...."

And so on - a treasure of fantasy. Enough to show you what a strange old jewel-box I have stumbled upon.