



### Shamrocks and Snakes

**L**EGEND has woven the name of St. Patrick into a curiously jumbled odd-lot of natural history stories, most of which the great bishop of early Erin never heard about, and hardly any of which are absolutely accurate. However, nobody minds much; on the Seventeenth of March even a sassenach scientist is willing to concede a point or two for the sake of a pleasant tale.

The story that is most likely to have a core of truth in it is the one about the shamrock. Backing up the difficult doctrine of the Trinity with a trefoil leaf is just the simple kind of illustration that a nimble-minded practical psychologist might be expected to use. But nobody knows for sure just what plant the shamrock is. The ancient Irish word "seamrog," from which the modern "shamrock" is derived, means merely "three-leaf"; so any one of several clover species could claim the honor, and so could the three-leaved oxalis or wood-sorrel.

The tale that accounts for the absence of snakes from Ireland by crediting the saint with driving them all into the sea is without question wholly imaginary. It even ties up with other stories of serpent-slaying heroes of antiquity, most of them pagan. Snakes are absent from Ireland simply because the prolonged cold of the great Ice Age, that lay over northern Europe for half a million years (or maybe a million) made snakes as scarce there as they are in Baffin Land today, and in the scant hundred thousand years since the ice began its final retreat the snakes have not had time to find their way back across the rather wide barrier of salt water that separates Ireland from England. Even in the latter country, and in northern Europe generally, there are relatively few species of snakes.

The curious error that fastened upon the common white potato the misnomer of "Irish potato" is known to everybody. But that vegetable, introduced into the island to relieve the distress of the people, reduced to want after the English conquest, has just about earned its adopted name, for with the possible exception of Germany the potato has been most intensively cultivated in Ireland, where climate and soil combine to favor it.

The potato is a creature of nomenclatural misadventure anyway. The early English botanist, John Gerard, who published the first description and picture of this Peruvian plant in 1597, got mixed up about its source and called it the "potato of Virginia," while the sweet potato, a widely distributed tropical vegetable, was listed in his book as "skyrrets of Peru." The potato owes its very name to this mistake, for the sweet potato had prior claim to the Indian name "batatas."

However, regardless of mistakes, the sons of St. Patrick got the potato, and that's what really counts.

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#### ENDOCRINOLOGY

### Adrenal Cortex May Help Body Resist Disease

**E**VIDENCE that the vital cortex of the adrenal gland may play an important part in helping the body resist invading disease germs was presented by Ernest W. Blanchard of Bryn Mawr College to the American Society of Zoologists.

Work of previous investigators has shown that there may be a relation between infectious disease resistance and the cortex of the two small glands that lie atop the kidneys and are known to have many important functions.

Mr. Blanchard found that when both adrenal glands were removed from animals, there was a drop in the amount of opsonin in their blood. Opsonin is a constituent of blood serum which acts on micro-organisms to make them more liable to be engulfed by the scavenger cells of the body.

Injections of an active extract from the adrenal cortex brought the opsonin content of these animals back to normal and kept it at the normal level. Large amounts of cortical extract raised the opsonin content above the normal level in animals that had not had the adrenal glands removed.

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#### ASTRONOMY

### Spring Begins Wednesday With Sun at Halfway Mark

**H**ALFWAY on its journey from farthest south in the sky to farthest north, the sun will cross the equator on Wednesday, March 21, at 2:28 a. m., Eastern Standard Time. (1:28 a. m., Central Standard Time; 12:28 a. m., Mountain Standard Time; Tuesday, March 20, at 11:28 p. m., Pacific Standard Time.)

At this moment winter comes to an end, and spring commences. Astronomically this is known as the vernal equinox, and at this time the sun will be above the horizon as long as it will be below. After this date, and until the beginning of autumn next September, the days will be longer than the nights.

In the old Roman calendar, from which ours is derived, the vernal equinox marked the beginning of the year. Thus, at that time, September really was the seventh month of the year, as its name indicates, and December was the tenth. When Julius Caesar reformed the calendar in the year 45 B.C. the beginning of the year was shifted to January.

Another way of expressing what happens on the 21st is to say that at that time the sun enters the zodiacal sign of Aries, the ram. This is one of the twelve regions into which the sun's path is divided, and several thousand years ago, when they were established, they were named after the constellations through which it moves. There is a slow shift, however, which takes 25,800 years to complete, so now when the sun is in the sign of Aries, it is actually in the neighboring constellation of Pisces, the Fishes, though the stars are not visible because of the sun's glare.

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