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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A LEGEND OF GOAT ISLAND ***



"He wore his Sacred Order's gown,
A long loose robe of reddish brown."

A LEGEND OF GOAT ISLAND

Ascribed to FATHER LOUIS HENNEPIN, who visited
Niagara in 1678

BY

PETER A. PORTER

Sketches by C. BRECKINRIDGE PORTER

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A LEGEND OF GOAT ISLAND

It is told in Indian story,
Dim tradition of the race,
How, to God's eternal glory,
And through His all-saving grace,
Many a warrior's heart was stirred
To belief in His ever-living Word,
And the Faith that saves us all,
By a Priest, whose holy mission
Overcame their superstition
About the Island, which divides
Niagara's tumultuous tides,
At the brink of the mighty Fall.

Here is the story, as 'tis told
In one of the chronicles of old.

'Twas many a year ago, when o'er
The land on Ni-a-gáh-ra's shore
The Neuter tribe held sway.
On its western bank, above, but near,
Where rapids begin, in wild career
Toward the Fall, and down as low
As a bark canoe could safely go,
One of their villages lay.
In that village by the river,
Late one eve, when bow and quiver
Had been laid aside,
And the warriors were sitting
In the silence, deemed befitting
To an Indian's pride,
A stranger in their midst appeared,
Whose hoary locks and silvery beard
Were to their vision strange and weird.
He was a man of giant size,
Which found him favor in their eyes,
As, at his priestly garb amazed,
In silent wonderment they gazed.

He wore his Sacred Order's gown,
A long loose robe of reddish brown,
Across his shoulders, lightly flung,
The cape and cowl backward hung,
Around his waist a rope was twined,
A girdle and a scourge combined;
While from it, hanging loose and free,
Suspended hung the rosary.
He was the first of stranger race
They e'er had met with, face to face,
Though they knew that such-frosted men
Had visited their brethren.
When they saw him, brave and squaw
Viewed him with a reverend awe.

A wanderer, all alone he came,
He bore no weapons, gave no name.
He said his errand was to teach
The glories of the Life to be,
When, after death, men's spirits reach

The confines of Eternity,
And, as he spake in Indian speech,
They listened most attentively.
For he had dwelt for many a day
Mid Indian tribes, far, far away,
And thus had learnt the Indian tongue
From those whom he had dwelt among.
So, sullenly, they let him share

Their fire's warmth and frugal fare,
And then they suffered him to tell
His mission in the way he chose,
Though little cared they what befell
Their souls, so they but feasted well,
And were victorious o'er their foes.

Later on, as they were sitting
In the fire's cheerful light,
Shadows round them weirdly flitting,
As the moon rose into sight,
The stranger asked, in tones of wonder,
Whence that sound of endless thunder,
That dull, reverberating sound
That seemed to shake the very ground?

For answer, came the Chief's command,
"Be patient, you shall understand."
And, knowing Indian nature well,
He waited till they chose to tell.

Later yet, when chill and hoary
Lay the frost upon the ground,
And the moon in all her glory
Bathed in light the scene around,
The Chieftain rose, around him drew

The bison skin of tawny hue,
And signed to the priest to follow.
He led him through a dense dark wood
Where many a lofty pine tree stood,
Then through a winding hollow;
Whence, as they suddenly emerged,
The rushing rapids 'neath them surged
O'er many a rocky ledge.
Taking, down stream, their silent way
Toward the rising cloud of spray,
They reached the Cataract's edge;
And, from a jutting shelf of stone,
Saw Ni-a-gáh-ra, then unknown,
Save to the red man's Race alone.
Earth's grandest sight, conceived to be
The emblem of God's majesty.

Ne'er has the scene which 'neath them lay
Been chronicled aright,
For no one, in a fitting way,
By pen, nor pencil, *can* portray
The grandeur of that sight.

The Priest, as by the view amazed,
Long at the Falls and Rapids gazed,
But not a word he spoke,
Then crossed himself, as if in awe,
And 'twas a holy sight he saw.
At last he turned him to his guide,
Who stood, like statue, by his side
And thus the silence broke:

"For two years past I've often longed
This wondrous sight to see,
And memory has oft been thronged
With stories told to me
By one, upon whose brow I traced
God's holy Cross, a chief
In whose narration I have placed
An absolute belief.

The glories, which I now behold,
In words, somewhat like these, he told:

'Towards the Sun's ascending beam,
Whoe'er his journey takes,
Will reach a broad and rapid stream
Which joins two mighty lakes.
Midway in this river's course
A wondrous fall is found
Where, with an overwhelming force
The waters, rushing in their might,
Plunge downward o'er a fearful height
With a stupefying sound.

Right at the precipice so steep,
Where the river takes this awful leap,
Is placed an Island, small in size,
But like an earthly paradise,
For lovelier spot is nowhere found
Than this, our Indian burial ground;
Where none, unless with honor crowned,
Can ever be interred.
None but brave men e'er can reach
It's wooded shore and rocky beach,
Whereon the sound of human speech
Is scarcely ever heard.
For on this Isle deep-buried lie
The bones of many a Brave,
And Indian chiefs invariably
Ask this spot for their grave.
Thus it has been, in days of yore,
And it is my earnest prayer,
That, when this mortal life is o'er,
And my soul is on the other shore,
My bones may be buried there.
That Ni-a-gáh-ra's mighty roar
So solemn, grand and deep,
May be my dirge forevermore
As 'twixt its Falls I sleep.'

"Since he told me I've often prayed

That hither I might be led,
And to my vision be displayed,
In its scenic majesty arrayed,
The fairest spot God ever made,
This Island of the dead."

The Chief assented, "All you heard
Was true to the minutest word;
But one more fact I must unfold
Ere all the Island's tale is told,
Note its wondrous situation,
'Tis our Spirit's dread abode;
'Tis a spot that, since Creation,
Coward's foot has never trod.
None but warriors can reach it,
Others, should they dare to try,
So our old traditions teach it,
As they touch its soil, they die."

"All that is false," the Priest replied,
"Whoever taught you that has lied;
Strong words, I know, but justified,
For God alone, who gave us breath,
Has power over life and death."

The Chief declared, "His faith is best
Who dares to put it to the test.
I judge men's faith in but one way,
'Tis what they do, not what they say.
If you believe that you'll survive,
I'll take you there tonight,
And, if you tread its shore alive,
Will own that you are right;
Then, I'll believe in what you preach,
And worship Him of whom you teach."

The Priest responded, "Now 'tis clear,
Why I have been directed here.
Your sacred Island is to be
My means of proving conclusively
To Indian Tribes forevermore
The power of Him whom I adore.
An early proof is all I crave,
For never yet did Indian brave,
Who'd traveled far to deal the blow
Of death to his relentless foe
With greater joy await the hour
That placed his victim in his power
Than I impatiently await
The moment yonder Isle I reach,
And thereby clearly demonstrate
The holy precepts that I teach.
So come, tho' here I fain would stay
My beads to tell and prayers to say,
I'll worship God on the Island's shore
After the test you name is o'er."

A look of wonder and surprise
Shone in the Indian Chieftain's eyes,
His sole reply, "So let it be,
Your death shall pay the penalty."

In perfect silence back they went,
Each on the coming voyage intent.
When the village they had reached,
To where his bark canoe lay beached
The Chieftain turned aside.
(The bison skin, he flung therein),
Quickly he launched it, in he leapt,
And, waiting till the Priest had stept
Into his place, he bade him kneel,
So the bark might ride on even keel,
Then pushed it out on the tide.
Swiftly it darted from the land,
Propelled by strong and fearless hand,
Over the dangerous current flies,
As the Chief the paddle rapidly plies,
Until, the wildest portion crossed,
The frail canoe is no longer tossed

By curling waves, but floats, awhile,
On the quiet stream above the Isle,
Towards whose beach it slowly glides
For weal or woe, as its voyage betides.

The Priest stood up, above his head
The holy Cross he raised,
And the words of the "Misereri" said
As heavenwards he gazed.

The bark meanwhile,
Has reached the Isle,
A moment more,
And the test is o'er.

The Priest stepped boldly on the sod,
To prove the power of his God,
And, kneeling on the shore,
Poured forth a psalm of praise to Him
Whom Cherubim and Seraphim
Continually adore.

Then, rising, he addressed the Chief
Who, sitting in the bark canoe,
Felt more of wonder than of grief
At seeing that his old belief
Was wholly false, for now he knew
That all the Priest had said was true.

"I tread this Isle alive, and show
Your Spirit's boasted power

To be but falsehood; will you now
Fulfill your solemn Chieftain's vow,
And own that God, by whom I'm sent
To teach you, is omnipotent,
In this auspicious hour?"

As by the issue stupefied,
The Chieftain doubtingly replied,
"I little thought you now would be
Alive to claim my fealty;
But further proof you yet must give
Before I can fully agree,
Although you tread the Isle, and live,
You have proved conclusively
That the Spirit I've adored so long
Is powerless, and my worship wrong.
Perhaps that Spirit, seeing you cared
So little for death, your life has spared
Thus far, but if you long remain
On the Isle, you surely shall be slain.
So, if you heed my advice, return."
Haughtily spake the Priest, "I spurn
Your advice, so artfully given.
Daring your Spirit, I have shown

The power of death belongs alone
To Him, who on the great white Throne,
Dwelleth forever in Heaven.
Now, ponder well before you speak,
Then tell what further proof you seek."

Answered the Chief, "I leave you here,
With none to aid you, naught to cheer,
And when tomorrow's sun
Is high in the heavens, I'll come again.
If, then, I find you have not been slain
By my Spirit's might,
For your act tonight,
Your victory will be won."

The Priest replied, "I'll give anew
This proof, that all my words are true;
But, do not come till another day
In its rapid flight has passed away.
When, next, the rays of the setting sun
Illumine the Falls, as the day is done,
Go to the spot where tonight we stood,
Close to the edge of the headlong flood,
At that hour, and at this edge
Of that same Fall, on the rocky ledge
Of the Island's shore, I'll take my stand
That you, and all your warrior band,

May see that I live; and then to show
That faith in your Spirit you disavow,
Kneel down, and there, beside the Fall,
In the name of God, I will bless you all.
Then, at this hour, tomorrow night,
In yonder moon's effulgent light,
Bring your bark to this spot once more,
And take me back to the other shore.
Now go, and leave me, despite your fear,
Alone with my Maker, who led me here."

The Chief, where the quiet waters lay,
Up stream, pursued his homeward way,
To wait the close of another day.
The Priest, beneath those lofty trees,
In adoration fell on his knees.

All night long, on that wonderful sod,
Where never before had white man trod,
He wandered, ceaselessly praising God
For the mercies to him granted.
Oft, in worship he bowed his head,
His beads he told, his prayers he said.

And, 'mid those graves of unknown dead,
O'er whom no burial rites were read,
The "Nunc Dimittis" he chanted.

All next day, in the forest's shade,
In solitude, he watched and prayed.

And that evening, at the hour
When, in lands where Christians dwell,
From each old cathedral tower
Rings aloud the Vesper bell,
The aged Priest his way did wend
Toward the setting sun,
To where, at the Island's western end
The greater waves of rapids descend,
And the swifter currents run.
Adown the slope he made his way
'Mid bushes wet with driven spray,
Until he reached the rocky ledge,
Close to the Cataract's eastern edge.
While he stood there, in the blaze
Of the setting sun's departing rays,
The spray-cloud hovered low,
And, as it settled above his head,
Across it, in gorgeous colors spread,
Appeared the sign of the promise made
By God to man, as the Flood He stayed,
The evanescent Bow.

When the sun in splendor sank
Behind the fir trees tall,
Gazing toward the farther bank,
With a joy no pen can e'er describe,
He saw the Chief and warrior tribe
At the other end of the Fall.

The Chief, who saw him as he moved
From out the forest's shade,
And realized that again he'd proved
The truth of all he said,
Knelt, so the Priest might comprehend
That faith in his Spirit was at an end.
The warriors knelt beside their Chief,
Thus emphasizing their belief.

The Priest was there by God's own will,
A holy mission to fulfill.
His human voice, in that grand roar,
Could not have reached the other shore,
No matter how he had striven,
Yet he spake the Word,
Though it was not heard,
And he raised his hands,
As our God commands,
And lifted his eyes to Heaven;
Thus, in the way the Church decrees
To suppliants, tho' afar, on their knees,
Was the Benediction given.

The Priest was with emotion thrilled,
His mind with sacred thoughts instilled,
And, in imaginative mood,
Again in a holy Church he stood,
(It was three long years since he
Had stept within a Sacristy).

A wondrous Church it was, indeed,
By Nature's changeless laws decreed,
Tho' man reared not the structure fair,
All churchly attributes were there.

The gorge was the glorified Nave,
Whose floor was the emerald wave.
The mighty Fall
Was the Reredos tall,
The Altar, the pure white foam,

The azure sky,
So clear and high,
Was simply the vaulted Dome.
The column of spray,
On its upward way,
Was the smoke of Incense burned;
The Cataract's roar,
Now less, now more,
As it rose and fell,

Like an organ's swell
Into sacred music turned.
While, like a Baldachin, o'erhead
The spray-cloud, in its glory, spread
Its crest, by the setting sun illumed,
The form of a holy Cross assumed.

The vision gone, the Priest once more
Stood, simply on the Island's shore.
Slowly he climbed the bank again,
And into the forest passed,
His body weak with cold and pain
From his long and sleepless fast.
Little he cared for the food and rest
His mortal being craved,
He only thought, how, at his behest,
The Chief and warriors had confessed
Belief in God, and had been blest,
And their souls might thus be saved.

Again, amongst the trees he knelt,
Expressive of the joy he felt.
In worship, loud, his voice he raised,
His tones through the forest rang,
As the ever-living God he praised,
And the "Jubilate" sang.

The twilight passed, but the aged Priest
From his adorations had not ceased;
The darkness came, but his only thought
Was praise of Him whose word he taught;
The moon arose, and found him there,
Still in the attitude of prayer.
But when in the Heavens, high and clear
She stood, and midnight's hour was near,
He rose and went to the rocky beach,
Where alone the Island one may reach.

Soon the Chief, in his birchen bark,
Came swiftly over the waters dark,
And reaching the Island's shore
Cried, "As God's follower, receive
An erring man. I now believe
In Him, forevermore."

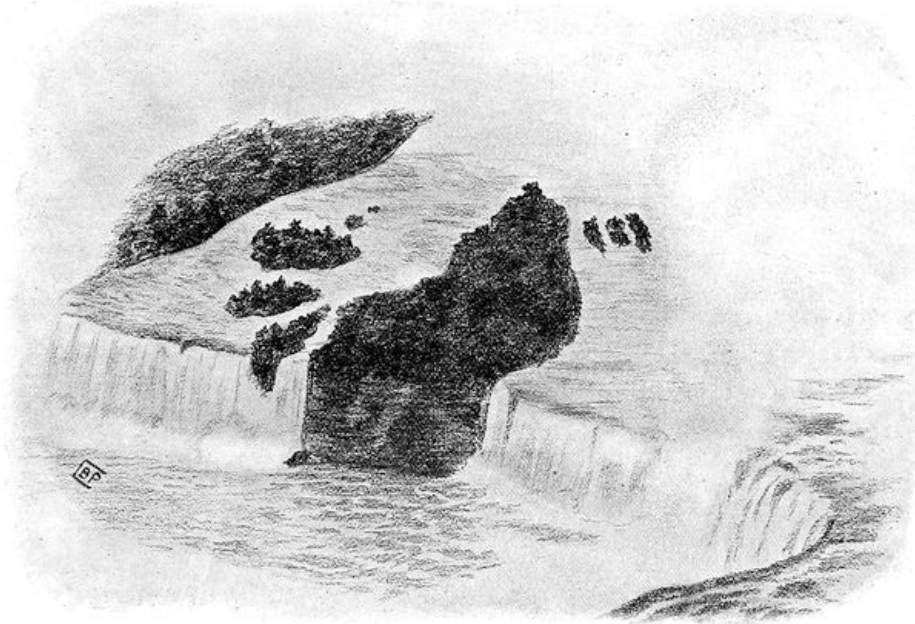
As the Priest to meet him came
He said, "Baptize me, in His name."
The Priest bent down to the river's bed
And dipped his hand in the wave,
Then bade him kneel, and on his head
Poured the water, and joyously said,
"Your soul I hereby save.
First convert of the Neuter race,
Upon your forehead, thus, I trace

The Cross's holy sign;
And thereby, as you now believe
In God's omnipotence, receive
You into His Church divine.
And, in the Faith you have confessed,
I bless you, and you shall be blest."

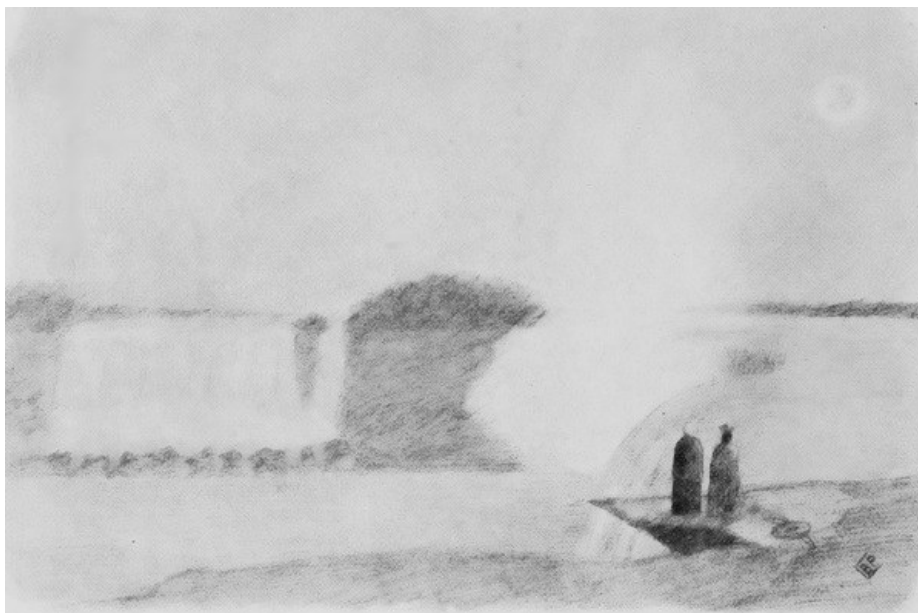
But meanwhile many a bark canoe,
Bearing those Neuter warriors true
Was rapidly coming down the tide,
Along the path, where the waves divide.

As the Isle these warriors reached,
Their frail canoes they safely beached,
Then stepped to the Chieftain's side;
Beneath that grand primeval wood
In awe-felt silence, there they stood.
It was a noble sight, and good,
For the Priest, in his holy pride.

For of the bravest of the land
Was that converted warrior band,
All firm in their new Belief;
And, on this wondrous Island's sod,
Before that holy man of God,
Knelt their baptized Chief.



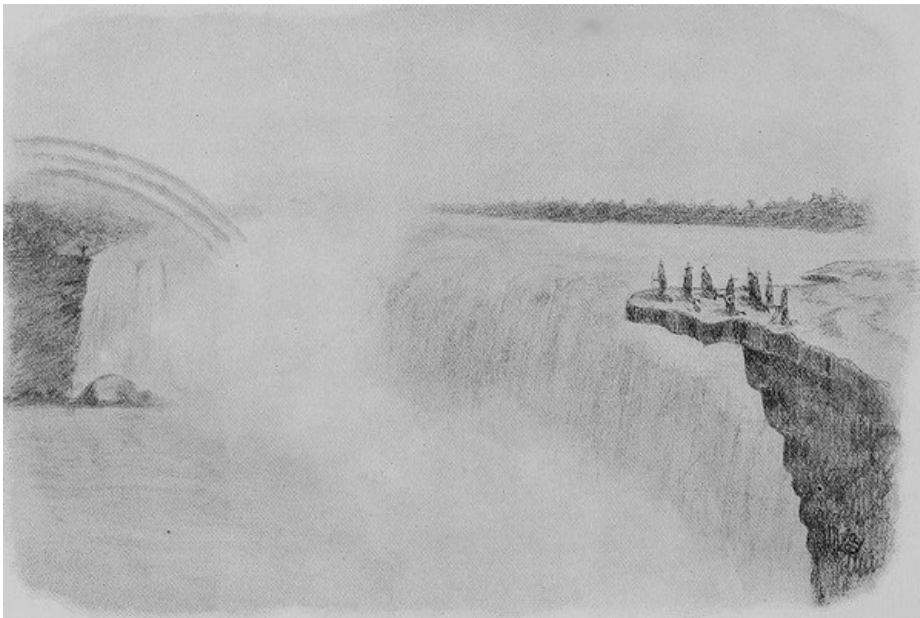
**"... The Island, which divides Niagara's tumultuous tides, At the brink
of the mighty Fall."**



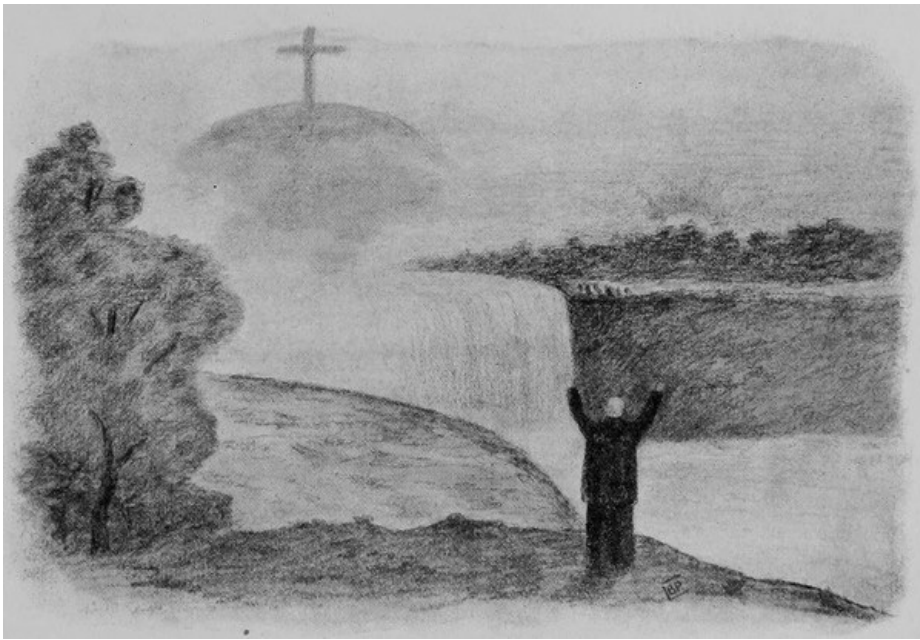
**"And, from a jutting shelf of stone, Saw Ni-a-gáh-ra, then unknown,
Save to the red man's Race alone."**



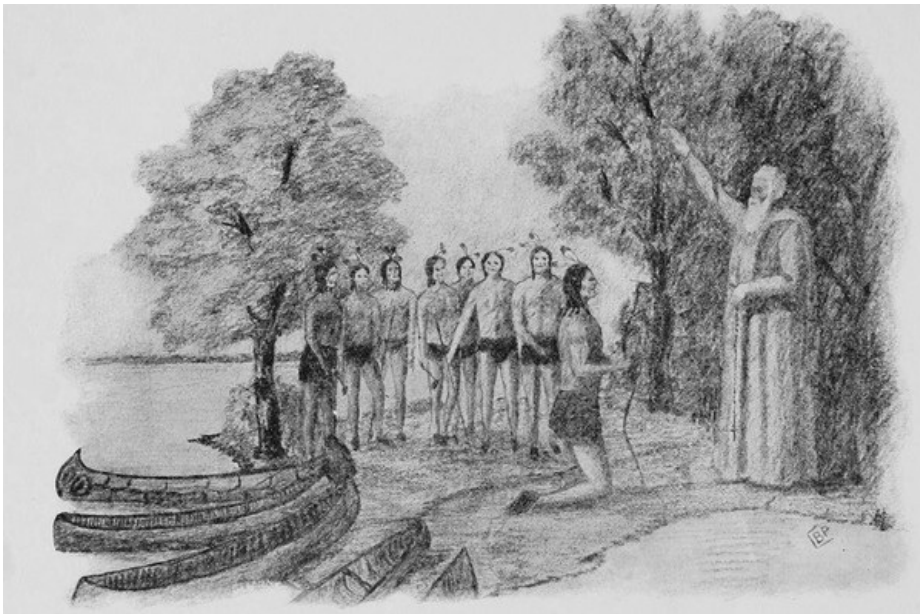
"The Priest stood up, above his head The holy Cross he raised."



"Thus, in the way the Church decrees To suplicants, tho' afar, on their knees, Was the Benediction given."



"While, like a Baldachin, o'erhead The spray-cloud, in its glory, spread."



"... On this wondrous Island's sod Before that holy man of God, Knelt their baptizéd Chief."

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Transcriber's Notes:

Punctuation errors repaired.

Page 7 gound replaced with ground

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