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It's Saint Patrick's Day, and while you're quaffing green beer and doing a jig, you might stop and doff your hat to the Irish Wolfhound

for making it all possible.

Let's take a closer look at the saint's miraculous escape from slavery. There are several versions of St. Patrick's story. This one will make the most sense to Irish Wolfhound owners...

Before he was a bell-slinging miracle worker and apostle to the pagan Irish, Patrick was Patricus, a teenager living in Roman Britain, the son of a church deacon and the grandson of a bishop. Around 400 A.D., he was taken into slavery by wild Irish raiders.

He herded sheep for six years in County Antrim in the north, where he roamed the hills alone with his sheep and his prayers. Then one night he heard a voice in a dream commanding him to go to the coast where a boat would be waiting to sail him home.

The voice failed to mention the boat was crammed to the gunnels with Irish wolfhounds.

Renowned all over the world as ferocious fighters and fleet hunters, the wolfhounds were being shipped to the continent for sale. And they were getting testy about being stuffed like sardines into a wooden boat.

The boat's crew was increasingly leery about sailing across the sea with a hundred rowdy giants in a little wooden ship because, you know, wood splinters, and the hounds were already testing the seams. Then the teenager showed up.

The wolfhounds, every one of them, quieted in the presence of the future saint. The sailors who were about to send the boy packing couldn't help but notice the eerie calm. They scrambled to cut a deal. The boy could stay if he could convince the hounds to behave themselves.

The voyage went smoothly until they reached an isolated stretch of

the English coast where a storm dashed to boat on the shore. Stranded and starving, they were in a fix. Suddenly, a herd of wild pigs burst from the bushes.

The wolfhounds killed them all and — perhaps also miraculously — shared them with the crew. All survived to go on their merry way.

Patrick went home, became a priest and, after another dream, returned to the Emerald Isle to spread the gospel. Considering the warlike nature of the Irish and that no Christian priests were martyred, you might have another miracle on your hands.

But so was this: Patrick was greeted when he landed back in Ireland by a pagan Irish prince named Dichu, who was hunting with his wolfhounds. Their blood was up when the prince set them on Patrick.

He spoke a few quiet words, the hounds all went belly down and licked his outstretched hand. And Patrick had his first Irish convert.

One legend says that towards the end of his life, Patrick had a chance to repay the wolfhounds. He encountered a strange, old man one day who turned out to be the legendary Oisín, son of Finn McCoul, leader of a roving band of Irish heroes called the Fianna. The heroes all had wolfhounds.

Oisín had been away for 300 years living under the sea in Tir na nÓg with a mysterious princess, but he'd gotten heartsick. She let him return with a warning: If he got off his horse and touched the ground, he could never return to her and the magical land.

So, of course, when he reached the Irish shore, his saddle strap broke and he hit the sand — instantly reverting to his natural age. Near-blind and toothless, the ancient Irish hero debated the merits of Christianity with the famous saint.

It went on for days. Finally, it came down to this: Oisín said if his Irish Wolfhounds couldn't get into heaven with him, he'd never go. And the legend goes that Patrick remembered how wolfhounds had assisted him.

So he opened the gates of heaven for the old man and his heart hounds.