



THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR.

The Christian Martyr.*

EARLY in the morning the army of slaves who had charge of the Coliseum, were hard at work. Some at the very summit of the building, with much shouting and pulling of ropes, were stretching the great *velarium* or awning, as a protection from the rays of the sun. Others were sweeping the sand of the arena to a smooth and even surface. Many cart loads of fresh sand were heaped around the wall for the ghastly purpose of being spread upon the blood-stained surface after each act of the sanguinary drama of the day. Others were decorating with garlands of flowers, and with gold and purple bannerets, the seats of the Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, and those of the senators and other persons of distinction. The structure seemed even more striking in its vastness, as a few score figures crawled like flies over its empty seats, than when filled with its tumultuous throng of spectators. It was an immense oval six hundred and fifteen feet in its longer diameter, and five hundred and ten feet in the shorter. The circling seats rose tier on tier to the giddy height of one hundred and fifty feet.

As the present writer climbed those cliff-like walls, now crumbling into ruin, he tried to re-people those long-deserted seats with the eager and excited throngs which had often filled them to overflowing, when twice eighty thousand cruel eyes were wont to gloat upon the dying martyr's pang, "butchered to make a Roman holiday."† Then he

* From Valeria, the martyr of the Catacombs. By W. H. Withrow, D.D. Toronto: William Briggs. Illustrated, price 75 cents.

† On this very arena perished the venerable Ignatius, linked by tradition with the Saviour himself as one of the children whom he took in his arms and blessed. "Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts," he exclaimed, "by whom I shall attain unto God. For I am the wheat of God, and I shall be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may become the pure bread of Christ."

wandered through the vast vaulted corridors and stairways, eighty in number, still bearing the old Roman numerals by which access was gained to the different galleries. These were so capacious that the whole multitude could in a few minutes disperse, and were thence called *vomitoria*. He then explored the dens and caves for the wild beasts, and the rock chambers in which the gladiators and martyr victims awaited the signal that called them to their doom. The row of seats just above the *podium* was reserved for the equestrian order; those higher still, for the *populus*, or common people; and the highest of all, for persons of the lowest rank. Early in the day, multitudes of spectators began to arrive, mostly arrayed in gala dress, and many wearing the colours of their favourite gladiatorial champion. With a loud flourish of trumpets the great gates of the imperial entrance opened, and the chariots of the Emperors and their respective *suites* entered and took

their places in the grand tribune reserved for these august occupants.

At a flourish of trumpets, the iron-studded doors of the cells in which the Christians were confined were thrown open, and the destined martyrs walked forth on the arena in the sight of assembled thousands. It was a spectacle to arrest the attention of even the most thoughtless, and to move the sympathy of even the most austere. At the head of the little company walked the good presbyter, Demetrius, his silvery hair and beard and benignant expression of countenance giving him a strikingly venerable aspect. Leaning heavily on his arm, evidently faint in frame but strong in spirit, was his daughter Callirhoë. Roved in white, she looked the embodiment of saintly purity, and in her eyes there beamed a heroic courage which inspired a wonder that so brave a soul should be shrined in so frail a body. Adauctus, Aurelius, and other Christian confessors condemned to death, made up the little contingent of the noble army of martyrs.

The prefect Naso, from his place in the tribune, near the Emperors, read the sentence of the court, that the accused having been proven by ample testimony to be the enemies of the Cæsars and of the gods, had been condemned to death by exposure to wild beasts.

"Nay, not the enemies of the Cæsars," exclaimed the aged Demetrius. "We are the friends of all, the enemies of none.* We pray for the Cæsars at all our assemblies."

"Will you do homage to the gods?" demanded Diocletian. "Will you burn incense to Neptune? Here is his altar, and here are his priests."

"We worship the true God, who made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that in them

is, repud the venerable man, with uplifted and reverent countenance, "and him only will we serve. They be no gods which are made by man's device, and 'tis idolatry to serve them."

"Away with the atheists," cried the priests of Neptune; "they blaspheme the holy gods."

"The Christians to the lions!" roared the mob; and at the signal from the Emperor to the master of the games, the dens of the wild beasts were thrown open, and the savage brutes, starved into madness, bounded into the arena. The defenceless martyrs fell upon their knees in prayer, and seemed conscious only of the presence of him who stood with the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, so rapt was the expression of faith and courage on their upturned faces.

The fierce Numidian lions, and tigers from the Libyan desert, instead of bounding upon their prey, began to circle slowly around them, lashing their tawny flanks meanwhile, glaring at their victims from bloodshot, fiery eyes, and uttering horrid growls.

At this moment a loud shout was heard, and a soldier, clad in burnished mail, and with his drawn sword in his hand—one of the body guards of the Emperors, leaped from the tribune and bounded, with clashing armour, into the arena. Striding across the sand, he hurled aside his iron helmet and his sword, and flung himself at the feet of the aged priest, with the words:

"Father, your blessing; Callirhoë, your parting kiss. I, too, am a Christian. Long time have I sought you, alas! only to find you thus. But gladly will I die with you, and separated in life, we are united in death and forever."

"*Nunc dimittis Domine!*" exclaimed the old man, raising his eyes to heaven. "'Now, Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.'" And he laid his hands in blessing on the head of his long-lost son.

"Ezra, my brother!" exclaimed Callirhoë, folding him in her arms. "To think we were so near, yet knew not of each other! Thank God! we go to heaven together; and, long divided on earth, we shall soon, with our beloved mother, be a united family forever in the skies. 'And God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.'"

"Amen! even so, come, Lord Jesus!" spake the young soldier as he enfolded, as if in a sheltering embrace, the gray-haired sire and the fair-faced girl.

The utmost consternation was exhibited on the countenance of the old Emperor Diocletian. "What! have we Christians and traitors even in our body-guard? Our very life is at the mercy of those wretches!"

"I would feel safer with them," said the more stoical or more courageous Galerius, "than with the *delators* and informers who betray them," and he glanced, with mingled contempt and aversion, at Naso, the prefect, and Furca, the priest. "When a Christian gives his word, 'tis sacred as all the oaths of Hecate. I want no better soldiers than those of the Thundering Legion."*

Meanwhile the wild beasts, startled for a moment by the sudden apparition of the mail-clad soldier, seemed roused thereby to tenfold fury. Crouching stealthily for the fatal spring, they bounded upon their prey, and in a moment crunching bones and streaming gore appeased the growing impatience of the cruel mob, who seemed, like

* The *Legio Tonans*, tradition affirms, was a legion composed wholly of Christians, whose prayers, in a time of drought, brought on a violent thunder storm, which confounded the enemy and saved the army.

* This famous phrase dates from the time of Tertullian, in the third century, and is also recorded in the Catacombs.