

cognomen, which attest their lofty social position or civil power. The costly carving and elaborate bas-reliefs of many of these monuments indicate the wealth of those whom they commemorate. The elegantly-turned classic epitaph, with its elegiac hexameters, breathing the stern and cold philosophy of the Stoa, or an utter blankness of despair about the future, or, perchance, a querulous and passionate complaining against the gods,* show how the races without the knowledge of the true God met the awful mystery of death. The numerous altars to all the fabled deities of the Pantheon, the vaunting inscriptions and lofty attributes ascribed to the shadowy brood of Olympus—"unconquered, greatest and best"—read, by the light of to-day, like an unconscious satire on the high pretensions of those vanished powers.

On the other side of the corridor are the humble epitaphs of the despised and persecuted Christians, many of which, by their rudeness, their brevity, and often their marks of ignorance and haste, confirm the truth of the Scripture, that "not many mighty, not many noble are called." Yet these "short and simple annals of the poor" speak to the heart with a power and pathos compared with which the loftiest classic eloquence seems cold and empty. It is a fascinating task to spell out the sculptured legends of the Catacombs, that vast graveyard of the primitive Church, which seems to give up its dead, at our questioning, to bear witness concerning the faith and hope of the Golden Age of Christianity. As we muse upon these half-effaced inscriptions:

* As in the following: PROCOPE. MANVS. LIBO. CONTRA. DEVM. QVI. ME. INNOCENTEM. SVSTVLIT; "I, Procope, lift up my hands against the God who has snatched away me innocent."

ATROX O FORTVNA TRVCI QVÆ FVNERE GAVDES
QVID MIHI TAM SVBITO MAXIMVS ERIPITVR.

"O relentless Fortune, who delightest in cruel death, why is Maximus so suddenly snatched away from me?"

"Rudely written, but each letter
Full of hope and yet of heart-break,
Full of all the tender pathos
Of the Here and the Hereafter,"

we are brought face to face with the Church of the early centuries, and are enabled to comprehend its spirit better than by any other evidence extant. These simple epitaphs speak no conventional language like the edicts of the emperors and the monuments of the mighty, or even the writings of the Fathers. They lift the veil of ages from the buried past and make it live again, lit up with a thousand natural touches which we seek in vain from books. They give us an insight into the daily life and occupations, the social position, domestic relations, and general character of the Primitive Christians, of which we get few glimpses in the crowded page of history. To him who thoughtfully ponders them, these unpretending records become instinct with profoundest meaning. They utter the cry of the human heart in the hour of its deepest emotion, and in the solemn presence of death. We hear the sob of natural sorrow at the dislocating wrench of hearts long knit together in affection's holiest ties; we witness the dropping tears of fond regret over the early dead; and seem to listen to

"The fall of kisses on unanswering clay."

We see the emblematic palm and crown rudely scratched upon the grave wherein the Christian athlete, having fought the fight and kept the faith, "after life's fitful fever sleeps well." We read, too, the intimations of the worldly rank of the deceased—sometimes exalted, more often lowly and obscure, and frequently accompanied by the emblems of their humble toil.† The very names writ-

† Many of the inscriptions are in Greek, which seems to have been largely employed even by the Latin-speaking Christians, probably because in it the new Evangel was first proclaimed. Thus the new wine of the Gospel flowed from that classic chalice which so long had poured libations to the gods.