

springing in virgin purity from the muddy ooze, they are more lovely by contrast with their foul environment. Like flowers that deck a sepulchre, breathing their fragrance amid scenes of corruption and death, are these holy characters, fragrant with the breath of heaven amid the social rottenness and moral death by which they were encircled. It is difficult to imagine and impossible to portray the abominable pollutions of the times. "Society," says Gibbon, "was a rotting, aimless mass of sensuality." It was a boiling Acheron of seething passions, unhallowed lusts, and tiger-thirst for blood, such as never provoked the wrath of Heaven since God drowned the world with water, or destroyed the cities of the plain by fire. Only those who are familiar with the scathing denunciations of popular vice by the Roman Satirists and the Christian Fathers, can conceive the appalling depravity of the age and nation. Christianity was to be the Hercules to cleanse this worse than Augean impurity. The lofty morals and holy lives of the believers were a perpetual testimony against abounding iniquity. The Christians recoiled with the utmost abhorrence from the characteristic vices of the times, and became emphatically "the salt of the earth"—the sole moral antiseptic to prevent the total disintegration of society.

Although three-fourths of the Pagan epitaphs are those of slaves or freedmen, out of eleven thousand Christian inscriptions scarce half a dozen are designated as of these classes.\* The Gospel of liberty smote the gyves at once from the bodies and souls of men. The wretched bondsman, in the intervals of toil or torture, caught with joy the emancipating message, and sprang up ennobled by an immortalizing hope. Then

"Trampled manhood heard and claimed its crown,"

and the meanest hind was elevated by faith in the Unseen to the loftiest peerage of the skies.

It was the especial glory of Christianity, however, that it rescued woman from the unspeakable degradation into which she had fallen,—that it clothed her with the domestic virtues, enshrined her amid the sanctities of home, and employed her in the gentle ministrations of charity. "The Greek courtesan," says Lecky, "was the finest type of Greek life—the one free woman of Athens." But how world-wide was the difference between these Greek hetairæ—a Phryne or an Aspasia, though honoured by a Socrates or a Pericles—and the Christian matrons, Monica, Marcilla, or Fabiola! So much does woman owe to Christianity! "Under Pagan institutions," says Gibbon, "woman was not a PERSON, but a *thing*." Her rights and interests were lost in those of her husband. She could be repudiated or divorced at will. Woman, in turn, reckless of her good name, had lost the most immediate jewel of her soul. The Lucretias and Virginias of the old heroic days were beings of tradition. The Julias and Messalinas flaunted their shame in the high places of the earth; and to be Cæsar's wife was *not* to be "above suspicion." But Christianity taught the sanctity of marriage as a type of the mystical union between Christ and his Church, and asserted the absolute sinfulness of divorce save for one supreme cause. In its recoil from the abominable licentiousness of Paganism it regarded modesty as the crown of all the graces; and against its violation the heaviest ecclesiastical penalties were denounced.

The rites and benedictions of the church were early invoked to give their sanction to Christian marriage; and doubtless in the dim recesses of the Catacombs, and surrounded by the holy dead, youthful hearts must have plighted their troth, and have been more firmly knit together by the common perils and persecutions they were called

\* "Apud nos inter pauperes et divites, servos et dominos, interest nihil." "With us there is no difference between the poor and the rich, slaves and masters."—(Lactant. *Div. Inst.*, V., 14, 15.)