

ONESIMUS.

In its series of "After Lives of Scripture Saints," Father Bamfield, in *St. Andrew's Magazine*, gives the following sketch of the slave whom St. Paul ranked among the converts of his love:

A pleasant glimpse of a Catholic household in the first times St. Luke has given us in his picture of St. Philip and his daughters at Cesarea, or Aquila and Priscilla at Corinth. The great Apostle himself shall be our painter to-day, and he shall take us, as becomes the Saint who made himself all things to all men, into the quarters of the slave. "The Slave in the Christian Household" is St. Paul's picture, and as he draws it he himself is a more beautiful picture, for he is in his bonds at Rome before his first trial by Nero: as he writes—for he is writing part at least with his own hand, "I Paul, have written it with my own hand"—his chain, by which he is bound to the soldier on his left, clanks. It is a wonder that there are not more pictures from Sacred Writ. The story of St. Paul alone might fill more than an artist's life; and amongst the pictures, the delicate form of the refined thoughtful Saint chained to the strong pillar-like soldier, while he preaches to those who come to hear, or is writing or dictating letters of love, would not be the least rich in beauty. The prisoner is writing now on behalf of the slave to his rich master, the slave himself doing willing service the while to the Apostle who has bound him in new bonds of love.

How did the slave, Onesimus—the "Profitable," for so means his Greek name—come across St. Paul in Rome? We may be sure that the Saint was always laying snares for souls, whether of slave or of noble Roman, spite of his bonds; and one of his fellow-labourers, St. Luke perchance himself, or Demas, or Mark, might have brought the slave to the inspired prisoner, the dweller in the prison room who was guest also of the third heaven. But, probably enough, Onesimus would have known the Apostle before in the house of his master Philemon at Colossæ. For Philemon seems to have been, like Aquila and Priscilla, one of those richer Catholics who opened a mission in their own houses, private chapels, as we should say in these days, to which the neighbouring Catholics were admitted; and who gave long and princely hospitality in those days of persecution to the clergy and others who were obliged to hide themselves, or who had no means of support. For St. Paul writes, "to the Church which is in my house," and amongst the members of the Church in his house he salutes Archippus, "our fellow-soldier. It is a strong word, meaning more than fellow-labourer," which is the title of honour given to Philemon himself, and would seem to agree with what St. Ambrose and St. Jerome tell us, that Archippus was a Bishop in charge of Colossæ and of the neighbouring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. "Say to Archippus," writes the Apostle to the Colossians at the same time, "take heed to the ministry which thou hast received from the Lord that thou fulfil it." Yet it is also said that Epaphras, of whom St. Paul speaks as at Rome with him, "my fellow-prisoner in Christ," was Bishop of Colossæ. This agrees with the Apostle's words to the Colossians (iv. 12): "Epaphras salutes you, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, who is always solicitous for you in prayer that you may stand perfect and just in all the will of God: for I bear him testimony that he hath much labour for you, and for them that are at Laodicea, and for them at Hierapolis." Probably both may be true: Epaphras the Bishop of Colossæ, and, during his captivity at Rome, Archippus acting in his place, "Bishop

Auxiliary," as we should say in these days.

Onesimus was a slave in the house of this rich and noble Colossian, and Colossæ was in Phrygia, and the Phrygian slave was even among slaves a name of reproach; the lowest of the low was the lazy rascal from Phrygia. But we need not think so of Onesimus. St. Paul clearly did not think so. In the huge "slaveries" of a wealthy Roman, not a few of whom had in their own town-house and farms or country villas more than a thousand slaves, every kind of labour, bodily or mental, was done by slaves. There were degrees of rank even in slave life; some rose to be petty officers in the household, having command over others. The management of farms, the distribution of labour, the collecting of rents, and the keeping of accounts, might all be in the hands of slaves who had won their master's confidence, and freedom was the prize held out for deserving that confidence. If the master was a man of thought and literary tastes, he would look among his slaves for help. For all this many of them must be well educated, and become more or less friends and companions of their masters, even while their lives lay at his mercy, and were sometimes sacrificed to his anger or to his whim.

If so it was with the Roman, much more was it the case with the Greeks, who were far kinder to their slaves than the dwellers in the Empress City, the masters of the world who in some sense held all men in bonds. Still kinder and more careful would be a master's conduct when he had learned of God's slave-death upon the Cross, and the lessons which it taught of humility and charity to all.

Clearly Onesimus, the profitable one, was among the more educated and intelligent. "I would have retained him with me," says St. Paul, "that in thy stead he might have ministered to me in the bonds of the Gospel;" and, playing on his name, "he hath heretofore been unprofitable"—no Onesimus—"to thee, but now is profitable"—Onesimus in very truth—"both to me and to thee." Is this play on words unworthy of a great Apostle, unworthy of Sacred Writ? Nay! it was a private letter, and if it would help charity, why not make Philemon smile? The Saints and the Church herself have not been above such playful jingling of sound of words; as when she notices that "Ave" reverses "Eva," and has imprisoned the sacred quip, like a fly in amber, in one of her sweetest and most undying hymns. The puns of Saints might fill a long paper.

Well educated and intelligent Onesimus must have been; nor need we think that his fault against his master was of the gravest kind; St. Paul does not so think of it. "If he hath wronged thee in anything, or is in thy debt, put that to my account. I, Paul," he adds in words that read almost business-like, "have written it with my own hand, I will repay it." St. Paul had been in bonds two years, he could not have been rich, the injury could scarcely have been great, and he writes of it as an uncertain matter; possibly it was such injury as would arise from a slave's absence, or some carelessness in accounts or mismanagement in estates, rather than intentional robbery. At all events, he was now a "most dear brother," and he was going back to his master to submit himself entirely, and to undo whatever wrong had been done.

It was a private letter, yet St. Paul knows the value of united prayer, and he gains on his side not only St. Timothy, well known, probably, to Philemon, in whose name, as well as his own he writes his appeal, but also, being wise and prudent in his charity, the partner of Philemon's good works who ministered to the Church in his

house, his wife, St. Appia. Partner also she was, when the time came, of his martyrdom, for thus does the Roman Martyrology tell of her death on November 22: "At Colossæ in Phrygia the birthday of SS. Philemon and Appia, disciples of St. Paul. In the times of the Emperor Nero the heathen, on the Feast of Diana"—we know how great was the worship of Diana in Ephesus and all that part of Asia Minor—"had rushed into the Church"—the Church was in their house—"all fled, but they remained, were seized, and by order of the chief magistrate Artoclos were scourged, buried to the waist in the ground, and so stoned." A cruel martyrdom indeed, the preparation for which could have been no other than a holy life. It was to so saintly a couple, deserving clearly the praises "our beloved fellow-labourer" and "our dearest sister," that the "old man, now a prisoner of Jesus Christ," is pleading.

Surely the captive Apostle will gain his prayer. It was a wise and gentle prayer. The Apostle does not condemn slavery as sinful and wrong. He does not order, or even counsel, Philemon to discharge all his slaves. It was a state of society of which the Church would get rid gradually, as gradually her spirit leavened the whole lump. He does not in his authority as an Apostle command Philemon to set free even this one slave. It would be a good act to do, but he will rob the rich Colossian of no tittle of his merit. He is yours, and you must give him to God and return him to me as a free gift. "Without thy counsel I would do nothing, that thy good deed might not be as it were of necessity, but voluntary."

The prayer was granted; it needs no tradition to tell us that, our own hearts make us certain; a friend of St. Paul, from whom the Saint "gave thanks to God always because he heard of his charity and faith," a friend in whose obedience he could trust, knowing that you will do more than I say," who deserved that so great a Prince of the Church should bid him prepare a lodging for me;" one who knew the Apostle's heart so well could not possibly refuse such a petition on behalf of "his most dear brother" from Christ's prisoner at Rome. Onesimus was forgiven, welcomed as a brother, and the debt, we may be sure, if such there was, never asked from himself who had nothing, nor from the prisoner who had guaranteed its payment. Still further, he was sent back to St. Paul in Rome, to "minister to him in the bonds of the Gospel," the educated freedman, full of profit now to many.

St. Paul had been awaiting, now for some twelve months, his trial in Rome—it was his first imprisonment—for the law dragged on 1800 years ago, as it drags on still, but he felt confident of his release: "I hope that through your prayers I shall be given unto you." It was not, however, until another spring had come that he was actually acquitted, and able to pay his promised visit to the rich man near the source of the Meander at Colossæ. For not far from the head of that river which has given a word to the English tongue, the many windings and muddy waters of which made fruitful all the land through which it flowed, Colossæ stood; an old famous city of which Herodotus chats, telling how the river Lycus, one of the feeders of the Meander, slips there for some half mile beneath the soil, hiding itself, mole-like, in a tunnel worked through the porous rock. A famous city rich with its fertilizing stream, with the caravans of merchandise which passed through it to the seaports, with its breed of glossy black sheep. As time went it was outshone, indeed, by its neighbour town of Laodicea and Hierapolis, this last a city sacred to the nymphs, for all around it bubbled up hot springs, every spring to Greek

thought the home of a water-nymph, notable springs which petrify all things which they touch, leaving cliffs white as chalk where they have overflowed the hill-side, or building long stone walls of a single unbroken stone in their course as they run on. We shall not wonder that these were signs of volcanic power working beneath, and that Colossæ is now a shepherd's mound, and that the splendour of Hierapolis and Laodicea, and their still grander though younger sister, Apamea, often humbled, often renewed, lies now still visible, indeed, but visible only in the fragments of broken columns, or the relics of vast theatre or immense circus built into or out of the hillside.

It must have been a happy meeting, the master and the slave, and the saintly host and hostess with their still more saintly guest; the transfiguration of the slave must surely have brought others to the Faith. But the Apostle could not stay long, for he was to journey, as some of the Fathers tell us, into Spain, there to preach the Gospel for some two years; happy Spain, sacred by the labours of St. James and St. Paul, blessed to be the mother of many and greatest Saints; blessed to be Europe's bulwark not only against the ocean, but against the still more furious attack of Turk and of Protestant—the Apostle nation chosen to carry the Faith of its Apostle teachers across the Atlantic to new worlds as yet unknown. It was here in Spain that Onesimus would rightly earn the title given to him by the Greeks of "Apostle." He seems to have been soon ordained by St. Paul, first as deacon, and no doubt soon as priest; but—still higher—it would seem that the slave, whose conversion is well-nigh as striking as that of St. Paul himself, was consecrated to be Bishop. We have seen that while Epaphras, the Bishop of Colossæ, was in prison in Rome, Archippus was made Bishop to act in his place; and so Onesimus would seem to have been made Bishop Auxiliary of Ephesus, to fill the place of Timothy while he was with his spiritual father in Rome, or employed in parts of his Archdiocese outside Ephesus. And, again to use modern language, Onesimus was apparently appointed with the right of succession, it being understood that, on the death of St. Timothy, he should become the Bishop of the great Metropolitan See of Ephesus. And this may have been the case, even though on the death of St. Timothy, the last of the Apostles, St. John, yielded to the petition of the Ephesians, and himself acted for a while as their chief ruler, Onesimus still retaining dignity next to him.

So we find that when St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch was being led to Rome for his martyrdom, he writes of the kindness of Onesimus, and of the holiness of the united and faithful Ephesians, who came out to greet and cheer him on his way. It was in the year afterwards, A.D. 109, that the same Roman governor who had sent St. Ignatius to his martyrdom, laid hands upon the Archbishop of Ephesus, the leading bishop of Asia Minor, and sent him also to martyrdom at Rome. And there on February 16 the slave went to join his master and his teacher, "a most beloved brother" indeed; "the birthday," as the Roman Martyrology calls it, "of St. Onesimus, of whom the Apostle St. Paul writes to Philemon, whom also he ordained as Bishop of Ephesus after St. Timothy, and committed to him the Word to be preached. He was brought in chains to Rome, and for the faith of Christ stoned." Not the death of the Roman citizen by the sword, which was given to St. Paul, nor the slave's death, as the cross, which was the greater lot of St. Peter; but the death of the blasphemer which he shared with St. Stephen, and also with his saintly owners in the old times, SS. Philemon and Appia.