

The Martyrs of the Reformation.

INTRODUCTORY SKETCH.

Christianity was soon corrupted. Unchristian men became members of the church, and sought to shape the system according to their own propensities and habits. Its simplicity offended their pride; its holiness was opposed to their love of sin. They could not practise it as it was, and yet, for various reasons, they chose to attach themselves to its interests. Some means must be adopted to make it palatable,—nor was it difficult for perverted ingenuity to suggest alterations and improvements which might bring Christianity down to the level of a depraved taste, and render it attractive to the carnally-minded. There were not a few sincere friends of the cause who fell into the snare, imagining that whatever tended to allure men to the profession of piety was allowable and good. The undue importance ascribed to outward forms greatly increased the danger. Spiritual benefits were supposed to be connected with the observance of certain ceremonies, or the assumption of peculiar modes of life, irrespective of the state of the mind. Baptism washed away sin. Fasting was meritorious. Martyrdom opened the gates of heaven. Celibacy was sanctity. Repentance towards God, and a life of faith in Christ were of little account.

The defection soon became general. Yet there were not wanting noble-minded protesters, who saw the peril, and warned their brethren. A succession of Reformers may be traced through the darkest ages, testifying for the truth, and often “resisting unto blood.”

It is not our design to speak of the earlier witnesses, of whom, in fact, but little is known, and that little from the pens of their adversaries. Novatian, in the third century, was one of the first Reformers, though in our ecclesiastical histories he is generally

styled a schismatic. Laxness of discipline in the church excited his indignation, and perhaps drove him into the opposite extreme; but his views were on the whole correct, and his motives unquestionably pure: the honourable designation of “Cathari” or “Puritans” was given to his followers. In the next century, Jovinian and Vigilantius protested boldly against the corruptions of the age, on which account they were mercilessly lashed by Jerome, the great apologist for monkish folly. Jovinian suffered, in addition, the infliction of severe bodily scourging, and was then banished to a desolate island. Vigilantius withdrew to the neighbourhood of the Cottian Alps, where he laboured for many years, diffusing pure Christianity, and where there is good ground for believing, his successors laboured, century after century, till the times of the Waldenses.*

We trace the true church, through the dark ages, by her blood: opposition to prevailing errors and superstitions never failed to bring down on the head of the opposing party the fearful curse of the hierarchy, and to involve peril of life. The names of the sufferers are seldom recorded. Historians are content to speak of them in general terms, and to state, with cool brevity, that “innumerable multitudes” were burnt, or otherwise put to death. Now and then only, an individual, whose sentiments and success attracted particular attention, is mentioned. Thus we learn, that in 1124, Peter de Bruys was put to death, at St. Gilles, in Languedoc; that in 1148, Henry of Lausanne was consigned to a dungeon, where he soon afterwards died; and that Arnold of Brescia, was burnt at Rome, in 1155. These worthies belonged to the “noble army of martyrs.” Our in-

* Prebendary Gilly's volume, entitled, “Vigilantius and his Times,” is an excellent contribution to Ecclesiastical History.