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Alban, the First Martyr in Britain

(H. D., in 'Little Folks.')

You have all heard, I dare say, of the holy Stephen, who was the first to suffer death for the name of Jesus, and who is, therefore, called the first Christian martyr. And you know how he was pelted to death with large stones outside the city of Jerusalem, and how, with his last breath, he prayed that his persecutors might be forgiven.

That was in the far-off land of the Jews, which was sometimes called the land of Canaan, and sometimes Palestine, and the Holy Land.

But the good Christians 'knew' the truth of what they believed, and willingly and cheerfully suffered for the sake of their Lord and Master; therefore, after Stephen many more were put to death for His name, who had died for them.

And so for centuries, one after another, the Roman emperors, who were at that time masters of the world, and who hated the name of Jesus, inflicted on His humble followers the most cruel tortures they could think of; and for a long time persecution raged wherever Christianity was professed; and that was in many places.

It soon reached to our own island. For even in those far-back ages there were in Britain many good Christians, men and women, who, rather than deny that Name, which to them was sweeter than honey, chose to suffer persecution and death.

They 'chose' to suffer, I say; for offers of pardon were generally made to them, on condition that they would turn from the living and true God, and worship the many gods of heathenish Rome. But, having once known and felt that He was the only God and their Father in heaven, they could not forsake Him; and so, though He allowed many to be put to death, He did not forsake them, but gave them such peace and joy in all their sufferings, that their persecutors might well have envied them.

Now, as you know who was the first Christian martyr in the land of the Jews, I think you would like to know also who was the first in our own land; and so I am going to tell you about him.

He was a young man, named Alban, who was of Roman descent, but was born in the ancient town of Verulam, which, if you will turn to your atlas, you will find marked under the name of St. Albans, in the county of Hertford.

In his childhood he had been taught to worship the false gods of his forefathers, and had, no doubt, often longed to visit the great city where the emperor lived, and to know more about its gods, and its temples, and its worship.

At length, when a youth, he went to Rome, in company with a good Christian man named Amphibalus; and while there he had the opportunity every day of witnessing his holy life, and of comparing it with the careless wicked lives of those who believed in Mars, and Jupiter, and Saturn, and Venus, and many other false gods and goddesses, who could not

help those who trusted in them to do what was right.

And so Alban began to think that the Christian religion must be better than that which he had been taught, and he desired to know more about it. Amphibalus readily taught him, and in time he became a Christian, bravely taking up the cross which all the followers of Jesus Christ had then to carry; for they were not allowed to remain peacefully in their own quiet homes, but were driven to take refuge in holes underground, or in caves in the rocks, and to suffer hunger and thirst.

For seven years Alban, it is said, had to serve abroad in the armies of the Roman emperor, Diocletian; but when he returned to his native land he did not forget the good man who had first led him to believe the glorious Gospel.

Amphibalus, I must tell you, was at that time an outlaw for his religion. To give him food or clothes, or to offer him shelter, was death. But Alban was no coward. He could not selfishly go back to his own home, and know that the good old man was a homeless wanderer, and, if not succoured, must soon die of hunger and cold. So, remembering that they were brethren, and resolved to share his fate, he invited Amphibalus to come and live with him.

No sooner did the Romans hear of it than they carried tidings to the governor, who sent messengers to seize Amphibalus. But Alban would not betray his guest. Clothing himself in the garments of Amphibalus, he delivered himself up in his stead. At once he

was taken before the Roman governor, who was just then sacrificing to his gods. Ordering Alban to be dragged before them, he cried in angry tones, 'Because you have sheltered and concealed a sacrilegious and rebellious person, and prevented him from suffering the punishment due to him as a contemner of the law, you yourself shall undergo that punishment, if it be true that you are guilty of the same offences.'

But the young man was unmoved, and, when questioned by the governor as to his family, said, 'That it cannot concern you to know. But if you wish to be informed as to my religion, be it known unto you that I am a Christian, and bound by Christian duties.'

'I insist upon knowing your name,' said the offended judge. 'Tell it me immediately.'

'I am called Alban by my parents,' was the young man's reply; 'and I worship the living and true God, who created all things.'

The judge then told him that if he wished to live and be happy he must lose no time in offering sacrifices to the gods of the Romans.

But Alban firmly replied that he would not do so; that it could do no good to pray and offer sacrifices to idols that could neither hear nor help; and that those who wilfully turned from the true God must incur His wrath.

The Roman governor, seeing that his prisoner still remained firm, ordered him to be scourged, hoping that that painful punishment might shake his resolution. But Alban, following in the steps of his holy Master, bore it all meekly and patiently, and even joyfully, which enraged his persecutors the more;



MEDAL OF THE ROMAN EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN.