



St. Polycarp.

“Fear no more for the torturer’s hand,
Nor the dungeon dark that bound thee;
The choirs of heaven about thee stand,
Bright shining homes surround thee.”

THE night had long set in, and the moon, as she slowly rose, cast her silvery beams upon the rippling waters of the Ægean sea, which gently washed the Lydian coast, affording by their serenity a striking contrast to those deeds of violence which that coast had witnessed in former times. At such an hour a band of venerable men proceeded silently from the city of Smyrna, apparently occupied with deep and solemn thoughts. A hurried whisper, indeed, occasionally broke the silence which prevailed, and showed that their minds were engaged with a common subject; and the glances which they ever and anon cast around them, indicated an apprehension of some danger from which they were endeavouring

to escape. The times to which we are now alluding were full of trouble to those who professed to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, against whose holy religion a fierce persecution was raging under the direction of the Roman emperor Verus. Although the greatest possible cruelties were practised in order to compel the Christians of those days to turn away from the glorious hopes set before them in the Gospel, and to again become the worshippers of those dumb idols from which, through the grace of God, they had been withdrawn, yet a wonderful constancy of mind was for the most part shown by the holy men who were exposed to such severe trials.

Among those who thus suffered, there was a youth named Germanicus, who manifested a very extraordinary degree of courage in resisting the entreaties with which even the Roman proconsul besought him to renounce the Christian religion, and save his life. "No," said he, "I will not hearken to your wicked proposal. The God in whom I put my trust, He will deliver me; and although you in your madness may destroy my poor body, yet in my flesh shall I still see God,

whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another. Your power extends not to the soul; and I feel assured that it will be safe in the hands of Him whom I serve, and whose power can not only kill the body, but can also destroy both soul and body in hell. Why then, should I try to save my body? No, wreak your vengeance on it; I will not renounce the glorious Gospel of CHRIST." So far, indeed, was Germanicus from wishing to save his life on the terms proposed by the proconsul, that he advanced towards the wild beast which was destined to devour him, and offered himself as a willing victim, being desirous of exchanging the miseries of this life for the glorious rewards of that which is to come. The intrepidity which Germanicus displayed gave great encouragement to his fellow sufferers; and the fortitude which was manifested on every side caused the heathen multitude, who were greatly astonished at the spectacle, to exclaim, "Destroy the impious!" for so they termed those who refused to worship their idols. "Let Polycarp be sought after." Polycarp, after whose life there was this cry, was the bishop of Smyrna; and having been

When St. Polycarp was brought before the tribunal, the assembled multitude raised a loud shout as soon as they learned who the prisoner was. The proconsul having inquired whether he were indeed the Polycarp whom they had long sought after, and being informed that he was, he, like Herod and Nicetes, endeavoured to persuade him to renounce CHRIST, saying, "Have a regard for thine age, and do not expose it to the dangers which now threaten thee. Change thy resolves; swear by the fortunes of Cæsar; say, Destroy the impious." But St. Polycarp, beholding with a grave and severe countenance the assembled multitude, stretched forth his hand towards them, and as he sighed and looked up to heaven, said, "Destroy the impious!" The proconsul thinking that he should prevail with his prisoner, was urgent with him, and said, "Swear, and I will release thee: speak reproachfully of CHRIST, and thou shalt be free!" Polycarp, however, replied, "I have served CHRIST these eighty and six years, during which time He never did me any injury; how then, can I blaspheme my King, who is my SAVIOUR?" The proconsul then said, "Swear at least by the for-

tunes of Cæsar." To which the saint again replied, "Because you are so vainglorious as to be urgent with me to swear by the fortunes of Cæsar, know plainly that I am a Christian; and if you are desirous to learn what Christianity is, allow me one day's space, and you shall be informed." But the proconsul treated the offer with derision, and threatened to cast Polycarp to the wild beasts which were at hand, unless he would alter his mind. This threat was so far from daunting the holy man, that he immediately exclaimed, "Bring the wild beasts forth: for our minds are not to be changed from better to worse; we account that change good which is from vice to virtuous actions." Finding that wild beasts had no terror for his prisoner, the proconsul threatened to consume him with fire. To which threat he replied, "You threaten me with a fire which burns for one hour and then becomes extinct; but you are ignorant of that fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment which is reserved for the impious. But why do you make delays? Order which you will to be made use of against me." No sooner had Polycarp uttered these words, than he was filled with confidence

and joy ; and the serenity of his heart beaming forth on his countenance, filled even his enemies with astonishment. The proconsul himself was much surprised at his boldness, and caused it to be proclaimed among the people that St. Polycarp had professed himself to be a Christian ! This so greatly exasperated the spectators that they were urgent to have this faithful servant of God immediately torn in pieces ; which, however, the proconsul dared not permit, as the shows in which the wild beasts were let loose in the amphitheatre were over. Although they were disappointed with regard to the wild beasts, they were determined to destroy their victim, and besought the proconsul that he might be burned. As soon as consent was given, the multitude collected together all the dry wood they could find, and the pile being ready for the fire, St. Polycarp partly undressed himself, and having loosed his girdle, was proceeding to put off his shoes, when the faithful Christians who attended him entreated that they might assist, as each was desirous of touching the flesh of so holy a man. Everything being now prepared, they were about to fasten the martyr to the stake,

which had been firmly fixed in the ground, but he drew back, saying, "Let me be as I am: for He that gives me strength to endure the fire, will also grant that I shall continue within the pile unmoved and undisturbed by reason of my pain, even without your securing me." Instead, therefore, of fastening him as they had intended with iron, they merely bound him with a cord; and when he was thus bound, he offered up the following prayer. "Thou FATHER of Thy well-beloved and blessed SON JESUS CHRIST, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee! Thou GOD of angels and might, and of the whole creation, and of all the generations of the just who live in Thy presence! I bless Thee because Thou hast vouchsafed to bring me to this day, and this hour, wherein I may take my portion among the number of the martyrs, and participate in the cup of CHRIST, in order that I may attain to the resurrection both of soul and body to eternal life, in the incorruption of the HOLY SPIRIT: among whom let me, I beseech Thee, be this day accepted in Thy sight, as it were a sacrifice well pleasing to Thee, according as Thou hast prepared, foreshown, and fulfilled, Thou

GOD of truth, who canst not lie. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all these things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal High Priest, JESUS CHRIST, Thy well-beloved SON, through whom to Thee, together with Him in the HOLY GHOST, be glory, both now and for ever. Amen." When with a loud voice he had said "Amen," those who had the charge of the fire kindled it; and the flames rising up spread like the sail of a ship swollen with the wind, and formed an arch over the martyr, who stood in the midst uninjured by it, like those holy men of old who were cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace by order of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

When those who were eagerly bent on the destruction of Polycarp saw that the fire did not touch him, they commanded the executioner to advance to the pile, and to put an end to the holy man with his sword. No sooner, however, had he plunged his sword into the body of the martyr, than, it is said, there issued from the wound such a stream of blood as completely extinguished the flames!

So died one of the most eminent of God's saints, of whom the world was not worthy, and who, by his patient endurance of suffer-

ing, and his constancy under the most trying circumstances, has left us an example of what human nature is still capable of doing when assisted by divine grace. While, therefore, we admire these instances of remarkable faithfulness to our holy religion, exhibited by men of like passions with ourselves, we should ever strive and pray that we may be able to follow in their steps whenever it may please God to exercise our patience; and in all the lesser trials and temptations of life we should be careful to remain faithful unto death, that we too may hereafter receive a crown of life.

