



St. Irenæus.

“Fear no more for the clanking chain,
Thou art free as light of heaven;
The stripes that marked thy frame with pain,
For rays of thy crown are given.”

THE sun rose in all his magnificence on the first of August, and poured a flood of glorious light on the towers of Lyons. It was a day of high solemnity in that ancient city, and even philosophers condescended to mingle with the ruder sort in the festivities which prevailed. But that which drew together the greatest crowd of people, and was the greatest object of attention, was the exhibition of gladiators, and the throwing the bodies of malefactors to the wild beasts in the amphitheatre. For the purpose of indulging the cruel propensities of our corrupt nature such exhibitions were of common occurrence, before the mild doctrines of Christianity taught mankind a more excellent way, and were not unfre-

quently taken advantage of by the heathens for sacrificing Christians who refused to bow down to idols of wood and stone.

On the day to which allusion has been made, it was reported that many atheists, for such they called those who did not believe in false gods, would be exposed to the rage of the wild beasts which were kept for such purposes. Various were the emotions which agitated the breasts of those who were hurrying to witness the cruel spectacle. A mad desire of inflicting punishment upon the contemners of their gods influenced some, while others had secret misgivings about the justice of such proceedings. "The gods," said they, "can never take delight in witnessing their creatures' sufferings." Again, there were others who sympathised with the martyrs, and had their own belief in the truths of the Gospel strengthened by the valiant manner in which the victims of persecution met their death. A breathless silence, only broken by the howlings of the wild beasts, reigned over the assembled thousands as each martyr fell beneath the savage gripe of the lions. At length the beasts themselves were weary with the work of destruction, and the

shades of night put an end to the savage scene. But the vindictive rage of the persecutors was still far from being satisfied; and the constancy which was displayed by the victims only seemed to excite their hatred to a cause which seemed to bid defiance to all their efforts.

During these sad times, St. Irenæus was performing the duties of a priest at Lyons; having left the luxuries and comforts of the east, of which he was a native, for a wild and uncultivated region of the west; for Gaul at that time was in a very rude and barbarous state. St. Irenæus, however, was undaunted by the manners of the people among whom he had taken up his abode, and he thought of nothing else than the best means of winning them to CHRIST, and prevailing upon them to leave off their savage customs, and to cease from their idolatry. It was no small trouble to him to learn the language of these strangers, without a knowledge of which he could not hope to make much impression upon them. He overcame every difficulty, and pursued his holy labours with the encouraging belief that success attended them, and that he was beneficial to Pothinus in adminis-

tering the affairs of the Church at Lyons. As St. Irenæus lived in comparative retirement, and was much beloved by all who were acquainted with him, he escaped the destruction which was now ravaging the REDEEMER'S flock. But the freedom which the priest enjoyed was not extended to the bishop: and when the persecution was at its height, the venerable Pothinus was marked for destruction; and although this holy man was more than ninety years of age, he was not permitted to descend into the grave in peace. He was known to possess great influence among the Christians of Lyons, and his enemies thought that by sacrificing him they should restore their idolatry without any further molestation. But in this, as in many other cases, God allowed the wickedness of man to accomplish His own blessed purpose. Christianity was so far from being depressed at Lyons by the death of Pothinus, that it received encouragement; and as it had often before happened, others who were rather wavering in their opinions, waxed valiant by the example which was set. It had long been the anxious desire of Pothinus to be enrolled in THE NOBLE ARMY OF MARTYRS, in order

that he might testify his devotion to his LORD and Master: and when he found that his hopes were about to be realised, a new spirit seemed to be infused into his decayed frame; and he looked forward to his martyrdom with unfeigned pleasure, as the entrance on a state of glory.

On being brought before the public tribunal, the magistrates of the city followed, attended by an immense multitude, who rent the air with their shouts, even like that infuriate rabble that hailed with acclamations the Crucifixion of our blessed LORD. When standing before his judges he was in no respect cast down, but was strengthened with might in the inner man; and when he was tauntingly asked by the governor of the city who the God of the Christians was, he firmly answered, knowing that the question was put in derision, "If thou wert worthy, thou shouldest know!" No further question was asked. His doom had previously been determined; and a trial would only defer the pleasure which his enemies anticipated from his execution. He was hurried away from the mock tribunal of justice; and although age and sickness had rendered this faithful

servant of the LORD so weak that he could scarcely crawl, no compassion was manifested for his sufferings. When he was unable to move he was rudely dragged and kicked by those who were near him, while those who were further off showed their ferocity by throwing at him whatever came in their way! So furious were they, and so mad in their rage, that they even considered it an act of piety to their gods to be able to inflict some injury upon their victim. Death, they thought, would be too merciful to one whom they were desirous of torturing in every possible manner: and accordingly, instead of an immediate execution, he was cast wounded and naked into prison, where he lingered two days ere he resigned his soul to God.

The death of this venerable man left the Church at Lyons without a head and without a guide in those stormy times, and his loss was deeply felt.

The Christians who survived this persecution were much grieved by the removal of their beloved bishop, and in their distress fixed upon St. Irenæus as the successor of Pothinus, who by his conduct afterwards proved the wisdom of their choice. His

courage was far superior to that of most men, and this was equalled by his prudence; and truly there was need for these qualities in those days, for the Church was not only beset by open enemies without, but was harassed and torn in pieces by heresies within. He was ever on his guard against those whose open object was the destruction of the Christian faith, and the restoration of that idolatry from which so many had happily been delivered: while his vigilance was no less unremitting in preventing the spread of those baneful doctrines by which the Christian religion was corrupted, and in exposing the follies by which the miserable authors of these heresies were actuated. He even summoned a provincial synod at Lyons, where with the assistance of twelve other bishops, he condemned the heresies of those who were then disturbing the peace of the Church. It is not necessary here to inquire into the nature of these heresies: it is sufficient to know that by them Christianity was greatly corrupted, and that while they allowed it a name to live, they destroyed its power.

St. Irenæus was particularly distinguished for his opposition to the heretics alluded to,

because they actually invaded his own province, and were anxiously endeavouring to draw aside the faithful at Lyons from the form of sound words which had been delivered to them. Grievous wolves had indeed entered in, and were making havoc of the flock.* The field of the Church, as our blessed LORD had predicted, was then overrun with tares; which not only threatened to choke the seed of divine truth, but also had a powerful tendency to hinder the propagation of the Gospel among those who were without, since the schisms and divisions in the Church were then, as they ever will be, brought forwards by the opponents of Christianity, as arguments against its truth. It was with reference to these divisions, and the evils which resulted from them, that our blessed LORD once said, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another:"† and when He prayed that His disciples might be one: "As Thou, FATHER," said He, "art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be ONE in Us; that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me."‡ Happy would it be if this prayer were remembered,

* Acts xx. 29. † St. John xiii. 35. ‡ St. John xvii. 21.

and if men endeavoured to act in the spirit of it! But the great enemy of man and God is still allowed to tempt men to their destruction, that the constancy of the sincere Christian's faith may be the more conspicuous.

A dreadful storm was now beginning to darken on the horizon, which afterwards shook not only the Church, but, as it were, the whole world. St. Irenæus had long been bishop of Lyons, when Eleutherius, bishop of Rome, died, and was succeeded by Victor, a man of furious and ungovernable temper, and who was impatient of the least opposition. A dispute had previously existed with regard to the proper time of keeping the feast of Easter, and Victor revived the dispute, and endeavoured to impose upon the Churches of Asia Minor the Roman custom of keeping Easter on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover: and when they refused to obey, he actually excommunicated them! The Christians of Asia, however, disregarded the threatenings of Rome, and under the guidance of Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, resolved to observe their own custom, which was, to keep Easter on the fourteenth day of the first Jewish month, on whatever day of

the week it might be.' They declared that they had received this custom from St. John and St. Philip, and would on no account change it. This declaration, however, had no effect on the wilful mind of Victor, and he determined to have his own way, even if he rent the Church asunder. Every branch of the Church was interested in the question, and synods were everywhere convened in order to heal, if possible, the unhappy schism which was likely to occur. A synod of the Church of France was summoned to meet by St. Irenæus, in which, with the assistance of thirteen bishops, he deliberated on this important question. Before the synod was dissolved, it was determined that a letter should be written to Victor, informing him that the French bishops agreed with him in the main part of the controversy, but gravely advising him to take heed how he excommunicated whole Churches for observing the ancient customs which they had received from their ancestors. "What agreement," said they, "is there in the manner of keeping the fast preparatory to Easter? Do not some think one day is sufficient, and others two; while others maintain that still more are ne-

cessary? These variations have crept into the Church in times when the bishops were careless about customs, and now they are in, they ought not to cause a want of love and peace. When Anicet and Polycarp disagreed, and each determined to pursue his own way, did they not mutually embrace, and receive the holy communion together? And when they parted, did they not part in friendship? Why, then, should we destroy our unity for the sake of a custom? Surely we, who represent the apostles of the Lord, ought to follow in their steps, and be of one mind and one accord, that CHRIST may be glorified!" The bishop of Rome, however, remained immovable in his determination, and persevered until the eastern and western Churches were completely separated.

The bitterness occasioned by these divisions had scarcely ceased, when the peace of the Church was once more disturbed by the hand of persecution. For some time after Severus had ascended the throne, he appeared to be favourably disposed towards the Christians; but at length he changed his policy, and commenced a bloody persecution against them in all parts of the empire. Having been pre-

viously governor of the province and city of Lyons, he had noticed St. Irenæus, and had remarked upon the flourishing condition of the Church which was under his care; and for this reason it is supposed he selected the city of Lyons as the theatre of his especial enmity against the Christians. Their beloved bishop, St. Irenæus, was soon seized upon by the bloodthirsty servants of the emperor, and no respect was shown either to his person or to his exalted character.

It being now determined that the Christian religion should be destroyed, no place seemed so suitable for commencing its destruction as that city where it flourished under so great and holy a man as St. Irenæus. No sooner was the bishop in the hands of his enemies, than all sorts of torments were applied to his body in order to shake his constancy, and induce him to apostatize. But all was in vain. His heart was firmly fixed on that blessed crown which awaited him in the world to come. "Take my body," said the saint to his persecutors, "and do your worst. A few more years in the natural course of events, would have destroyed it, and you can only anticipate its destruction. The

death of my body will hasten the release of my soul, and hasten my exceeding and eternal great reward."

Grievous, indeed, were the tortures which were inflicted on this holy man, before his enemies had satisfied their ferocity. At length, however, when they found they could make no impression on their victim, they beheaded him; and devoted friends, such as were always found in days of persecution, came and took up his lifeless body, and having conveyed it to a suitable place, there buried it with much solemnity. Long and bloody was the persecution which raged at Lyons after the death of St. Irenæus; and it is even said by some writers, that the streets flowed with the blood of Christians. But all this had a very powerful influence in strengthening those who remained; and who thus became powerful instruments in the hands of God in enlarging the boundaries of that kingdom which shall survive the destruction of earthly monarchies, and shall endure throughout all ages.