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F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF IRENAEUS

MATERIALS for a Life of Irenaeus are so meagre that the bare outline of his career, which is given in detached portions, must be filled in by the imagination. The same reserve in his writings conceals a personality of much charm and many gifts. The little he says of himself makes one desire to know more of one who was a scholar and a saint. It is held that he was a Greek from the mode of his thought and the form of his name. It is generally inferred that he was a native of Smyrna from the fact that he was a disciple of Polycarp, to whom he refers in expressions of love and veneration.

His early associations with that Apostolic man alone would make him an interesting character. In a fragment of his work preserved by Eusebius¹ we have an invaluable account of this intimacy. Writing to Florinus he says that he could even describe the very place in which Polycarp was wont to sit and converse, his goings-out and comings-in, the mode of his life, his personal appearance, the discourses he delivered to the people, the manner in which he would speak of his intercourse with John and the others who had seen the Lord. From a passage in the treatise *Against the Heresies*² where he

¹ *H. E.* v. 20.² III. 3. 4.

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states, "And Polycarp was not only educated by the apostles and frequently in the society of many who had seen the Lord, but he was also appointed by the apostles to be the bishop of the Church in Smyrna, wherefore I said 'in my early youth,' for he lived to a great age," we may approximately infer the relative ages of the master and pupil. The date of Polycarp's martyrdom is, in some measure, an indication of the date of the birth of Irenaeus, for it was not long after his visit to Rome, on which he was probably accompanied by Irenaeus, that the old man suffered. The death of Polycarp, described in the letter of the Smyrnaeans, is assigned by Lightfoot to A.D. 155. It is probable that he perished between A.D. 150 and 156, and being eighty and six years old at the time, was born before A.D. 70.

Irenaeus only knew him in the latter years of his life when he himself was "in his first age," and "a mere boy." The date of the birth of Irenaeus is accordingly assigned by Harvey to A.D. 130, by Lipsius to A.D. 137, but by Zahn to A.D. 115. Ropes' date A.D. 126 corresponds more nearly with the statement of Irenaeus that John beheld his vision "almost in our own generation, towards the end of the reign of Domitian¹," who perished A.D. 96, if one allows thirty years to a generation. It is also to be noticed that Irenaeus extends "the first age of youth" to forty years². The Moscow postscript of the letter of the Smyrnaeans, accepted as genuine by Bishop Lightfoot, states that a certain Gaius copied this letter from the writings of Irenaeus a former pupil of the holy Polycarp, and that this Irenaeus was living in Rome at the time of that saint's martyrdom and had many pupils, and that on the very day when Polycarp was martyred

¹ *Adv. Haer.* v. 30. 3.² 11. 22. 5.

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in Smyrna, Irenaeus heard a voice as of a trumpet saying, "Polycarp has borne testimony."

There is much probability that Irenaeus spent some years of his early manhood in Rome, where first he encountered the Gnostics, studied the works of Justin, to which he shows much indebtedness, laid the foundation of his great work against the heresies, and made that acquaintance with the history of the Roman Church and creed which is conspicuous in his writings¹. It is not unlikely that he had an opportunity of witnessing that impressive scene in the church between Polycarp and Anicetus, Bishop of Rome, which he describes so vividly in his letter to Victor.

What, then, brought Irenaeus to Lugdunum, the modern Lyons, of which he became bishop? The accounts are conflicting. Gregory of Tours, not the most reliable authority, declares that he was sent by Polycarp to Lugdunum. Mr F. E. Warren in *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church* hazards the statement that "Pothinus, the first Bishop of Lyons, had come directly from that country (Asia Minor) bringing with him Irenaeus, the disciple of Polycarp, the disciple of John." It is not unlikely, however, that Irenaeus remained in Rome until A.D. 164 when a local persecution, under Marcus Aurelius, silenced for ever the voices of several Christian teachers, and among them that of the illustrious Justin Martyr. The young student was, therefore, compelled to take refuge in the neighbouring Church of Gaul, which had an early and close connection with the Churches of the East.

But whether Gallican Christianity came originally from an eastern or a western source is a debated question.

¹ III. 3. 3.

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The ready communication of the towns in Southern Gaul (especially Marseilles) with Italy and the Mediterranean by sea inclines one to hold the Eastern origin. But L'Abbé L. Duchesne in *Fastes Épiscopaux de l'ancienne Gaule* maintains that the connection of the Christians of the Rhone valley with the East was slight, and that the idea of such a connection was largely based upon the legends of subsequent ages. But he allows that "among all the ships that entered the port of Massilia in the earliest age of Christianity some would have had evangelists on board." The greater number of these would, however, have made their way up the interior towards Lyons and Vienne, where we find the earliest settlements of the Church in Gaul. There are several things that point to an old-standing friendship between the Churches of Asia and Phrygia and these Christian settlements in Gaul. The Christians in Vienne and Lyons addressed a circular "to the Brethren throughout Asia and Phrygia¹." Among the martyrs of Lyons we find the names of Attalus of Pergamos and Alexander, a physician, from Phrygia. Some little time afterwards the martyrs of Lyons sent a letter containing their views on the Montanist heresy and defending their Asiatic brethren, to Eleutherus bishop of Rome by the hands of Irenaeus, and another epistle on the same subject to the Asiatics themselves. It is probable, therefore, that if the Church in Lyons was not the daughter of the Church in Smyrna "the Christianity of Gaul," as Lightfoot said, "was in some sense the daughter of the Christianity of Asia Minor."

To Lyons, accordingly, Irenaeus came, bringing testimonials and letters to the venerable Pothinus, bishop

¹ Eusebius *H. E.* v. 1.

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of that city. There is reason to believe that he was admitted to the priesthood by that bishop. Jerome describes him as “the Presbyter of the Bishop Pothinus who ruled the Church of Lugdunum in Gaul,” and Eusebius calls him “the Presbyter of *the Church of Lugdunum*.” In the office of presbyter Irenaeus distinguished himself by his zeal, tact and scholarship, and rose so high in the estimation of bishop and people that he was regarded as the most suitable man to succeed the aged Pothinus. But in the year A.D. 177 a storm of persecution broke over the south of Gaul, and the Christians of Vienne and Lyons suffered. The narrative of their trials is recorded in a letter they sent to the brethren in Asia and Phrygia preserved in the fifth book of Eusebius’ history. Thrown into prison the leading Christians of these communities awaited the advent of the Roman governor and death. Among them was Pothinus, a veteran of ninety years, Sanctus deacon of Vienne, Attalus of Pergamos, Alexander of Phrygia and Blandina. Their letters intervening in the dispute between Eleutherus and the Montanists, no doubt in the interests of peace and the Church, have already been referred to.

Of these letters Irenaeus, who was, fortunately for the Church, passed over by the Roman government, was made the bearer. Whatever may have been the purport of this communication we can hardly believe that Irenaeus would support views which were contrary to the ideas of Church life and doctrine that are to be found in his treatise. Of course he may have thought differently upon this subject in his earlier days. He was a Chiliast. But it is more probable that it was from his early connections with Asia Minor and from Papias, Justin

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and Barnabas that he imbibed his ideas of the millennium, which seem to have been diffused from a single source, than from the Montanists. He also held that the gift of miracles and the prophetic charisma were still in the Church¹. He describes “the spiritual man,” adopting the Montanist distinction of “Spiritales” and “Psychici².” But he proceeds “the spiritual man will judge those who create schisms being without the love of God, and who do not consider the unity of the Church, but on the slightest pretext will rend and divide, and, as far as they can, destroy the great and glorious body of Christ³.” As the Montanists were the active opponents of Church government and the principal aspirants to prophetic gifts the reference is evidently to them. Irenaeus’ position seems to have been “central” between the Montanists and their opponents, holding some of the views of those people while rejecting others, and maintaining the compatibility of certain views on subjects which were matters of pious opinion with sound churchmanship.

The presbyter carries his letter, whatever its contents may have been, safely to Rome and is received by Eleutherus the bishop. To him he hands the following introduction from the martyrs of Gaul. “Father Eleutherus, we wish you joy and continued prosperity in the Lord. We send our brother and colleague with these letters to you, and we commend him to your favour as a zealous adherent of the covenant of Christ. If position conferred goodness we would emphatically recommend him, who is what his name implies, a man of peace, as a presbyter of the Church.” This greeting from the

¹ II. 32. 4, III. 2. 9.² IV. 33. 6.³ IV. 33. 7.

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representatives of one national Church to another is an illustration of Tertullian's resonant phrase, "*contesseratio hospitalitatis*¹," the bond and token of friendship between the Churches.

We have no facts on which to construct a picture of that interview, but we may draw certain inferences. It can hardly be doubted that Eleutherus, who had been a deacon of Anicetus, gladly welcomed the presbyter of Pothinus and the pupil of Polycarp. It is probable too that he was impressed by the personality of the envoy whose previous connection with the East and Rome marked him out as a man with a history, and whose present position in the Church made him a man with a future. His previous studies under Justin must have brought him into touch with many of the leading Roman clergy. And his mission to the bishop having been accomplished, he would have been duly escorted by some of these, his own pupil, Hippolytus afterwards Bishop of Portus, among them, on the way to Ostia and home. Arriving in the Christian quarter of the city of Lugdunum he learnt the harrowing details of the executions that had taken place during his absence, rumours of which may have reached him when abroad. The gruesome details of this baptism of blood in which Pothinus, Maturus, Sanctus, Attalus, Alexander and Blandina were baptized are related in the letter of the Gallican Churches inserted by Eusebius in the fifth book of his history, and the persecution is assigned by him to the "seventeenth year of the reign of Antoninus Verus." This is intended for L. Aurelius Verus, who was emperor with Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. The seventeenth year

¹ *De Praescr.* 20.

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of M. Aurelius and Lucius Verus gives the date A.D. 177, an important landmark in the life of Irenaeus¹.

After or during the persecution the Christians who survived met and elected Irenaeus to the vacant post. The presbyter of Pothinus thus became "bishop of the paroikiai in Gaul²" and "leader of the brethren in that country³." His consecration, however, presents a difficulty. There may have been a bishop of Vienne, the neighbouring city, as there was a deacon. If so, he might have performed the ceremony. But Bishop Adon's list of Bishops (IXth century), which begins with Crescens, assigns the fourth place to Verus who attended the Council of Arles (A.D. 314), so that there could hardly have been a bishop in Vienne one hundred and thirty years before. Failing a bishop of Vienne he may have returned to Rome to be consecrated by Eleutherus, out of pure necessity not out of any consideration for the *potior principalitas* of Rome, or he may have been consecrated by some of the eastern bishops.

Irenaeus cannot have been a young man at this time, and his work in Lugdunum, to say nothing of his acquaintance with the philosophies and heresies of his time, had fitted him, above all his contemporaries, for the episcopal office. In addition to his many qualifications he had also before his mind the example and counsel of the great Polycarp. Indeed, the brief record of his old master's passion, enshrined in the circular letter of the Church of Smyrna read in the Churches of Gaul in the days of Gregory of Tours on the nativity of the saint, is said to have been copied out and studied

¹ Dr Abbott (*Expositor*) suggests that this persecution took place in the reign of Antoninus Pius, and should be dated A.D. 155.

² Eus. *H. E.* v. 23.

³ *ibid.* v. 24.

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by Irenaeus that he might have it imprinted on his heart. It is a matter of regret that Irenaeus did not give us a complete list and collection of the many letters which Polycarp wrote to the neighbouring Churches, a work which Polycarp himself performed for Ignatius. There is, however, an invaluable reference in the treatise¹ to Polycarp's letter to the Philippians. "There is also," he said, "an excellent letter from Polycarp to the Church in Philippi, from which any one who wishes, and who cares for his salvation, may learn the nature of Polycarp's faith and exposition of the truth." The difficulties the new bishop had to face are not to be minimized. On the one hand, he complains of the teaching and influence of the followers of one Marcus in his own district of the Rhone where they had led away many women. "Some of these," he says, "made open confession of their sins, others ashamed to do this had abandoned the faith, while some were still hesitating, being as the proverb says, 'neither within nor without.'" And on the other hand the storm cloud of persecution still hung heavily over the little Christian camp in Gaul. But in spite of dangers without and fears within the new bishop was enabled by the grace of God both to disregard the intimidations and to disarm the suspicions of the Roman government in his private and public life, and in his treatise against the heretics to disprove the subtle refinements and plausible arguments of the Gnostics.

At length by his consummate ability and stirring addresses he succeeded in reestablishing the Church in the country. For his labours were not confined to the city of Lyons. Eusebius² says that he succeeded

¹ III. 3. 4.

² *H. E.* v. 5.

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Pothinus in the charge¹ of the district² around that city. Theodoret describes him as “the light of the Western Gauls,” “the apostolic man who gave light to the west,” and “the admirable Irenaeus who brought learning, culture, and religion to the tribes of Gaul.” And Gregory of Tours declares that “in a very short time he brought the city back to Christianity.” This he did mostly by preaching, which was the special prerogative of the bishop, who generally sat when speaking from the “magisterii locus³.” He is chiefly connected in legend with Besançon and Valence. To the former place he is said to have sent a priest Ferréol and a deacon Ferjeux, and to the latter Felix a priest and Achilles and Fortunatus deacons.

Irenaeus sketches an outline of the teaching which the apostles gave the Gentiles and which he himself most probably followed in his sermons and catechetical addresses to the tribes of his districts. “In dealing with such,” he says⁴, “no appeal can be made to the Old Testament or its fulfilment in Christ, but one has to teach a doctrine altogether new to his hearers, namely that the gods of the Gentiles are not gods but the images of demons, that there is one God who is above every principality and power and every name which is named, that His Word, invisible by nature, had become visible and palpable among men, and descended to death, even the death of the Cross, and that they who believe in Him shall be incorruptible and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Such truths are proclaimed to the

¹ ἐπισκοπήν.

² παροικία. In Eusebius *H. E.* v. 23, the plural is used. The word is employed in the letter of the Dublin diocese of Dublin clergy to Randolph of Canterbury (Ussher IV. 530).

³ *Adv. Haer.* III. 3. 1.

⁴ IV. 24. 2.