



90 St. George.



St. Michael.

The Patron Saints of Christendom.

BEFORE entering on the general subject of the early martyrs, I shall place together here the great Patron Saints of Eastern and Western Christendom. All saints are, in one sense, patron saints, either as protectors of some particular nation, province, or city; or of some particular avocation, trade, or condition of life: but there is a wide distinction to be drawn between the merely national and local saints, and those universally accepted and revered. St. Dennis, for instance, is not much honoured out of France; nor St. Januarius, the Lazzarone saint, out of Naples; but St. George, the patron of England, was at once the GREAT SAINT of the Greek

VOL. II.

B

Church, and the patron of the chivalry of Europe; and triumphed wherever triumphed the cross, from the Euphrates to the Pillars of Hercules.

Those patron saints who had not, like St. Peter of Rome, St. Mark of Venice, St. James of Spain, St. Mary Magdalene, a scriptural and apostolic sanction, yet were invested by the popular and universal faith with a paramount dignity and authority, form a class apart. They are, St. George, St. Sebastian, St. Christopher, SS. Cosmo and Damian, St. Roch, and St. Nicholas. The virgin patronesses, to whom was rendered a like universal worship, are St. Catherine, St. Barbara, St. Margaret, and St. Ursula.

I place them here together, because I have observed that, in studying the legendary subjects of art, they must be kept constantly in mind. In every sacred edifice of Europe which still retains its mediæval and primal character, whatever might be its destination, whether church, chapel, convent, *scuola*, or hospital, — in every work of art in which sacred personages are grouped together, without any direct reference to the scenes or events of Scripture, one or other of these renowned patrons is sure to be found; and it becomes of the utmost importance that their characters, persons, and attributes should be well discriminated. Those who were martyrs do not figure principally in that character. They each represent some phase of beneficent power, or some particular aspect of the character of Christ, that divine and universal model to which we all aspire; but so little is really known of these glorified beings, their persons, their attributes, the actions recorded of them are so mixed up with fable, — in some instances so completely fantastic and ideal, — that they may be fairly regarded as having succeeded to the honours and attributes of the tutelary divinities of the pagan mythology. It is really a most interesting speculation to observe how completely the prevalent state of society in the middle ages modified the popular notions of these impersonations of divine power. Every one knows by heart those

THE PATRON SAINTS OF CHRISTENDOM.

exquisite lines in which Wordsworth has traced the rise and influence of the beautiful myths of ancient Greece :—

“ In that fair clime the lonely herdsman, stretched
 On the soft grass through half a summer’s day,
 With music lulled his indolent repose :
 And, in some fit of weariness, if he,
 When his own breath was silent, chanced to hear
 A distant strain, far sweeter than the sounds
 Which his poor skill could make, his Fancy fetched
 Even from the blazing chariot of the sun,
 A beardless youth, who touched a golden lute,
 And filled the illumined groves with ravishment.
 The nightly hunter, lifting up his eyes
 Towards the crescent moon, with grateful heart
 Called on the lovely wanderer, who bestowed
 That timely light, to share his joyous sport :
 And hence a blooming goddess and her nymphs.—

Thus the mythology of the ancient Greeks was the deification of the aspects and harmonies of nature. The mythology of Christianity was shaped by the aspirations of humanity ; —it was the apotheosis of the moral sentiments, coloured by the passions and the suffering of the time. So in an age of barbarity and violence did St. George, the redresser of wrongs with spear and shield, become the model of knighthood. So when disease and pestilence ravaged whole provinces, the power to avert the plague was invoked in St. Sebastian ; and the power to heal, ever a godlike attribute, revered in St. Cosmo and St. Damian. So at a time when human life was held cheap, and beset by casualties, when the intercourse between men and nations was interrupted by wide forests, by unaccustomed roads, by floods and swamps, and all perils of sea and land, did St. Christopher represent to the pious the immediate presence of divine aid in difficulty and danger. So also were the virgin patronesses to all intents and purposes *goddesses* in fact, though saints in name. The noble sufferance, the unblemished chastity, the enthusiastic faith of a St. Catherine or St. Ursula, did

not lose by a mingling of the antique grace, where a due reverence inspired the conception of the artist :—Venus and Diana, and Pallas and Lucina, it should seem, could only gain by being invested with the loftier, purer attributes of Christianity. Still there was a diversity in the spirit which rendered the blending of these characters, however accepted in the abstract, not always happy in the representation ; — a consideration which will meet us under many aspects as we proceed.

I will now take these poetical and semi-deified personages in order ; giving the precedence, as is most fit, to our own illustrious patron, the Champion of England and hero of the “Fairie Queen,” St. George.

ST. GEORGE OF CAPPADOCIA.

Lat. Sanctus Georgius. *Ital.* San Giorgio. *Fr.* Saint Georges, le très-loyal Chevalier de la Chrétienté. *Ger.* Der Heilige Georgius, or, more popularly, Jorg or Georg. Patron of England, of Germany, of Venice. Patron Saint of Soldiers and of Armourers. April 23. A. D. 303.

THE legend of St. George came to us from the East ; where, under various forms, as Apollo and the Python, as Bellerophon and the Chimera, as Perseus and the Sea-monster, we see perpetually recurring the mythic allegory by which was figured the conquest achieved by beneficent power over the tyranny of wickedness, and which reappears in Christian art in the legends of St. Michael and half a hundred other saints. At an early period we find this time-consecrated myth transplanted into Christendom, and assuming, by degrees, a peculiar colouring in conformity with the spirit of a martial and religious age, until the classical demi-god appears before us, transformed into that doughty slayer of the dragon and redresser of woman’s wrongs, St. George—

ST. GEORGE OF CAPPADOCIA.

5

“Yclad in mighty arms and silver shield,
 As one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fit”

Spenser, however, makes his “patron of true holiness” rather unwilling to renounce his *kighthood* for his *sainthood*: —

“But deeds of arms must I at last be fain
 To leave, and lady’s love so dearly bought?”

The legend of St. George, as it was accepted by the people and artists of the middle ages, runs thus: — He was a native of Cappadocia, living in the time of the Emperor Dioclesian, born of noble Christian parents, and a tribune in the army. It is related that in travelling to join his legion he came to a certain city in Libya called Selene. The inhabitants of this city were in great trouble and consternation in consequence of the ravages of a monstrous dragon, which issued from a neighbouring lake or marsh, and devoured the flocks and herds of the people, who had taken refuge within the walls: and to prevent him from approaching the city, the air of which was poisoned by his pestiferous breath, they offered him daily two sheep; and when the sheep were exhausted, they were forced to sacrifice to him two of their children daily, to save the rest. The children were taken by lot (all under the age of fifteen); and the whole city was filled with mourning, with the lamentations of bereaved parents and the cries of the innocent victims. or Berytus.

Now the king of this city had one daughter, exceedingly fair, and her name was Cleodolinda. And after some time, when many people had perished, the lot fell upon her, and the monarch, in his despair, offered all his gold and treasures, and even the half of his kingdom, to redeem her; but the people murmured, saying, “Is this just, O King! that thou, by thine own edict, hast made us desolate, and behold, now thou wouldst withhold thine own child?” — and they waxed more and more wroth, and they threatened to burn him in his palace unless the princess was delivered up. Then the king submitted, and asked only a delay of eight days to

bewail her fate, which was granted; and at the end of eight days, the princess, being clothed in her royal robes, was led forth as a victim for sacrifice, and she fell at her father's feet and asked his blessing, saying that she was ready to die for her people: and then, amid tears and lamentations, she was put forth, and the gates shut against her. Slowly she walked towards the dwelling of the dragon, the path being drearily strewn with the bones of former victims, and she wept as she went on her way. Now, at this time, St. George was passing by, mounted on his good steed; and, being moved to see so beautiful a virgin in tears, he paused to ask her why she wept, and she told him. And he said, "Fear not, for I will deliver you!" and she replied, "O noble youth! tarry not here, lest thou perish with me; but fly, I beseech thee!" But St. George would not; and he said, "God forbid that I should fly! I will lift my hand against this loathly thing, and will deliver thee through the power of Jesus Christ!" At that moment the monster was seen emerging from his lair, and half-crawling, half-flying towards them. Then the virgin princess trembled exceedingly, and cried out, "Fly, I beseech thee, brave knight, and leave me here to die!" But he answered not; only making the sign of the cross and calling on the name of the Redeemer, he spurred towards the dragon, and, after a terrible and prolonged combat, he pinned him to the earth with his lance. Then he desired the princess to bring her girdle; and he bound the dragon fast, and gave the girdle to her hand, and the subdued monster crawled after them like a dog. In this guise they approached the city. The people being greatly terrified, St. George called out to them, saying, — "Fear nothing; only believe in the God through whose might I have conquered this adversary, and be baptized, and I will destroy him before your eyes." So the king and his people believed, and were baptized, — twenty thousand people in one day. Then St. George slew the dragon, and cut off his head; and the king bestowed great rewards and treasures

ST. GEORGE OF CAPPADOCIA.

7

on the victorious knight; but he distributed all to the poor, and kept nothing, and went on his way, and came to Palestine. At that time the edict of the Emperor Dioclesian against the Christians was published, and it was affixed to the gates of the temples, and in the public markets; and men read it with terror, and hid their faces; but St. George, when he saw it, was filled with indignation, the spirit of courage from on high came upon him, and he tore it down, and trampled it under his feet. Whereupon he was seized, and carried before Dacian the proconsul, and condemned to suffer during eight days the most cruel tortures. First they bound him on a wooden cross and tore his body with sharp iron nails, and then they scorched and burned him with torches, and rubbed salt into his smarting wounds. And when Dacian saw that St. George was not to be vanquished by torments, he called to his aid a certain enchanter, who, after invoking his demons, mingled strong poison with a cup of wine and presented it to the saint. He, having made the sign of the cross and recommended himself to God, drank it off without injury:—(an expressive allegory, signifying the power of Christian truth to expel and defeat evil.) When the magician saw this miracle, he fell at the feet of the saint, and declared himself a Christian. Immediately the wicked judge caused the enchanter to be beheaded; and St. George was bound upon a wheel full of sharp blades; but the wheel was broken by two angels who descended from heaven. Thereupon they flung him into a cauldron of boiling lead: and when they believed that they had subdued him by the force of torments, they brought him to the temple to assist at the sacrifice, and the people ran in crowds to behold his humiliation, and the priests mocked him. But St. George knelt down and prayed, and thunder and lightning from heaven fell upon the temple, and destroyed it and the idols; and the priests and many people were crushed beneath the ruins, as at the prayer of the son of Manoaah in ancient times. Then Dacian, seized with rage and terror, commanded that

the Christian knight should be beheaded. He bent his neck to the sword of the executioner, and received bravely and thankfully the stroke of death.

St. George is particularly honoured by the Greeks, who place him as captain at the head of the noble army of martyrs, with the title of **THE GREAT MARTYR**. The reverence paid to him in the East is of such antiquity, that one of the first churches erected by Constantine, after his profession of Christianity (consequently within twenty years after the supposed death of the saint), was in honour of St. George. In the West, however, his apocryphal legend was not accepted, and was, in fact, repudiated from the offices of the Church by Pope Gelasius, when he reformed the calendar. It was then decided that St. George should be placed in the category of those saints "whose names are justly revered among men, but whose actions are known only to God." After this period we do not hear much of him till the first crusade, when the assistance he is said to have vouchsafed to Godfrey of Boulogne made his name as a military saint famous throughout Europe. The particular veneration paid to him in England dates from the time of Richard I., who, in the wars of Palestine, placed himself and his army under the especial protection of St. George. In 1222 his feast was ordered to be kept as a holiday throughout England; and the institution of the Order of the Garter, in 1330, seems to have completed his inauguration as our patron saint.

A. O. 494.

The devotional representations of St. George, which are of very frequent occurrence, may be divided into two classes. 1. Those in which he is standing as patron saint, alone, or grouped with other saints in the Madonna pictures. 2. Those in which he vanquishes the dragon.

1. In the single figures St. George is usually represented young, or in the prime of life. In the Greek and Italian

pictures he is generally beardless, but bearded in the German pictures; his air and expression should be serenely triumphant: he ought to wear a complete suit of armour, being the same specified by St. Paul; namely, "The breast-plate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Sometimes he wears the classical armour of a Roman soldier, sometimes he is armed as a knight of romance. In one hand he bears the palm, in the other a lance; from which, occasionally, floats a banner with a red cross. The lance is often broken, because in his legend it is said, that, "his lance being broken, he slew the dragon with his sword." The slain dragon lies at his feet. This is the usual manner of representation, but it is occasionally varied; for instance, when he stands before us as the patron saint of England and of the Order of the Garter, he has the garter buckled round his knee, and the star of the order embroidered on his mantle. When he figures as patron saint of Venice, he stands leaning on his sword, the lance and banner in his hand, and the dragon usually omitted.

Ephes. vi.

Miniature,
Bedford
Missal.

Such representations in the early Italian pictures are often of exquisite beauty, combining the attitude and bearing of the victorious warrior with the mild, devout expression of the martyr saint. For example, in a picture by Cima da Conegliano, he stands to the right of the throne of the Madonna, one hand grasping the lance, the other resting on the pommel of his sword, and in his youthful features an expression divinely candid and serene: there is no dragon. Again, in the famous Madonna del Trono, by Fra Bartolomeo, St. George stands by the throne in a full suit of steel plate armour, with an air which Vasari has truly described as "*fiera, pronta, vivace*;" and yet, on his clear open brow, an expression becoming the Christian saint: he bears the standard furled.

Acad. Venice.

Fl. Gal.

In a picture by Tintoretto, St. George, as patron of Venice, is seated on the steps of the throne of the Madonna, like a

Venice.
SS. Gioe
Paolo.

celestial guard; while the Venetian Signoria are approaching to worship.

St. George, standing in armour, points upwards with one hand, and in the other holds an inscription, "*Quid bono retribuā Dnō.*" In a picture by Giolfino.

Verona.
S. Anastasia.

Among the most celebrated single figures of St. George must be mentioned the fine statue by Donatello: he is in complete armour, without sword or lance, bare-headed, and leaning on his shield, which displays the cross. The noble, tranquil, serious dignity of this figure, admirably expresses the Christian warrior: it is so exactly the conception of Spenser, that it immediately suggests his lines —

Fl. Or San
Michele.



91 St. George. Donatello.

“Upon his shield the bloodie cross was scored,
 For sovereign help, which in his need he had.
 Right faithful, true he was, in deed and word;
 But of his cheere did seem too solemn sad;
 Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.”

Dresden Gal. As a signal example of a wholly different feeling and treatment, may be mentioned the St. George in Correggio's "*Madonna di San Giorgio*:" here his habit is that of a Roman soldier; his attitude bold and martial; and, turning to the spectator with a look of radiant triumph, he sets his foot on the head of the vanquished dragon.

2. In the subject called familiarly *St. George and the Dragon*, we must be careful to distinguish between the