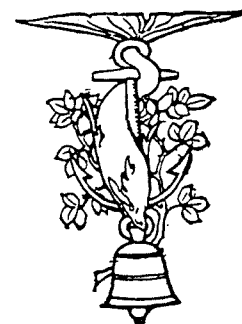


LIVES AND LEGENDS OF THE EVANGELISTS, APOSTLES, AND OTHER EARLY SAINTS

BY

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Popolo. The body of the victim was buried near the scene of his death, but removed later to the Church of S. Prassede, where it is supposed still to be.

The usual attribute of St. Valentine in works of art is a sword, but he also sometimes holds a sun in his hand, that emblem or a heart marking his fête-day in some old calendars. The symbol of the sun is explained by some as having reference to the miracle of the restoration of sight to the blind child; others see in it an allusion to the constant preaching by the Saint that Christ was the light of the world; whilst yet others suppose it to be merely used because the sun begins to be powerful and spring flowers to appear in the warmer parts of Europe about February 14th.

As is well known, St. Valentine is the patron Saint of lovers, who for centuries have exchanged love-tokens on his fête-day, and this, too, has been very variously accounted for. Certain serious writers assert that an old heathen custom prevailed until the time of St. Valentine of boys and girls drawing lots, on which names were written, on the 14th February, and pairing in accordance with the leading thus given; but that after the martyrdom of the young priest, Christian pastors substituted his name in the lots for that of all others. Others think the association of the Saint with betrothal is the result of the fact that February is the pairing time of birds, whilst yet others say that it is merely the outcome of a play upon words, the name Valentine being very similar to *Valetudo*, which means vigorous and joyful; or, again, it has been suggested that the martyr's restoration of sight to the blind implied a special sensitiveness to *les beaux yeux*. Whatever may be the cause, however, the devotion to him as the guardian of lovers is very persistent, and he is also supposed to be able to save old and young from the plague, from epilepsy, and from fainting fits.

CHAPTER XXVI

MARTYRED SOLDIERS AND LAYMEN OF THE THIRD CENTURY

A REMARKABLE phenomenon of the third century was the great number of conversions which took place amongst the Roman soldiers whose duty it was to carry out the cruel orders of the

authorities with regard to the Christians. Of these soldiers, the most widely celebrated were Sebastian, Quintin, Hippolytus, Romanus, and Maurice, all of whom, after refusing to injure their fellow-believers, were martyred for their new faith.

St. Sebastian was born at Narbo Martius, the present Narbonne, but he was of Italian parentage, and is said to have been converted to Christianity before he entered the army. Through the influence of his father, he was early made captain of a company of the famous Prætorian Guards, whose duty it was to be always about the person of the Emperor. The fact that Sebastian was a Christian was first revealed to the heathen authorities by his conduct at the martyrdom of two young men named Marcus and Marcellinus, with whom he had long been intimate. It is said that he had secretly visited them in prison, and that his exhortations had had much to do with their steadfastness at their trial. When they were led forth to die, already weakened by much torture, they showed signs of yielding to their fear of death; but Sebastian, leaving the ranks of the Guards, hastened to them, entreating them not to lose the crown of martyrdom at the last moment. The result of this appeal was indeed extraordinary. Not only did the condemned men take heart again, but the rest of the Prætorians on duty were converted on the spot, the executioners followed suit, and Marcus and Marcellinus were released. The respite, however, was short. The Emperor, enraged at the account given to him of the scene, condemned nearly all the actors in it to death. Marcus and Marcellinus were nailed to a post and shot to death with arrows; several of the Guards were tortured in various ways and finally drowned, whilst Sebastian, whom Diocletian would fain have saved, for he loved him as a son, was promised his life if he would recant.

A very touching scene is said to have taken place between the Emperor and the rebellious young officer, the former examining the culprit himself, and saying: 'Why hast thou thus rebelled against me, who honoured thee above all thy comrades?' To which the Saint replied: 'O Cæsar, I have ever been true to thee in all due service, and I have even prayed to Jesus Christ for thy prosperity, but I cannot worship thy gods, who are but idols of wood and stone.' Seeing that there was no hope of winning back the traitor, as he considered him, Diocletian then condemned Sebastian to be bound to a stake and shot to death.

with arrows, adding the unusual order, a touching token of the affection he still felt for the culprit, that an inscription should be fastened to the stake to the effect that the punishment was for being a Christian, not for any military fault.

The sentence was carried out in the presence of immense crowds, the young Saint showing the greatest heroism; and after the executioners had simply riddled his body with arrows, they left him for dead. That same night the Christians came to carry away and bury the body, led by a widow named Irene, who, as she examined the wounds, suddenly cried out that the victim still breathed. St. Sebastian was therefore carried to her home, and there he was cared for till he recovered. He was now urged by his friends to leave Rome, for they knew that he was not likely to escape a second time; but he refused, for to him it had been a terrible disappointment to have lost the martyr's crown at the last moment. As soon as he could walk, therefore, he went to the gate of the Emperor's palace, and there waited till his old friend came out, when he cried aloud to him for mercy on the Christians condemned to torture.

Diocletian recognised him at once, and asked: 'Art thou Sebastian whom I condemned to death?' 'Yes,' was the reply, 'I am he, whom God Himself has delivered out of thy hands, that I may plead once more for His servants and bear witness to Christ the Lord.' Not unnaturally enraged at this public defiance, the Emperor ordered the bold speaker to be seized and beaten to death with clubs. The order was carried out, the executioners taking care this time that there should be no mistake about the death.

When life was quite extinct the body was thrown into the great sewer known as the Cloaca Maxima, whence it was removed later to the Catacomb of St. Calixtus by a Christian lady named Lucina, to whom, it is said, St. Sebastian himself appeared, begging her to give him Christian burial. A church named after the Saint was later built above his relics, which from very early times was one of the seven so-called Stationary Churches of Rome, and was rebuilt in the seventeenth century. The body was, however, translated in the ninth century to the Church of St. Medard at Soissons, and the shrine containing it was rifled in the sixteenth century by the Calvinists, who threw the bones into the river, whence they are said to have

been recovered some fourteen years afterwards, and dispersed amongst various churches.

Although St. Sebastian was not actually shot to death by arrows, it is as a martyr at the stake that he is almost always represented in art, and he has become throughout Europe the patron Saint of archers and arquebusiers, as well as of dealers in old iron; it is suggested because, as an officer of the Prætorian Guard, it was his business to look after military equipments. He is also said to protect cattle from distemper and human beings from infectious diseases, a power some learned authors suppose to have been attributed to him through an association in the popular mind between the pestilential arrows of Apollo alluded to in the 'Iliad' and the arrows aimed at the Saint. However that may be, it is certain that the young martyr was first appealed to for aid against the plague in 680, for during a pestilence then raging in Rome it was revealed to a holy man that all that was needed to appease the wrath of Heaven was the erection of an altar to St. Sebastian in the Church of S. Pietro in Vincoli. The suggestion was, of course, at once carried out: there were no more deaths, the sick recovered, and the fame of the Saint spread throughout the whole of Europe, church after church being erected to him.

The memory of St. Sebastian's intervention is preserved at Rome by a mosaic effigy near his altar in S. Pietro, beside which is a tablet telling the story of the plague and its cessation. In this effigy St. Sebastian is represented bearded, a manifest error, repeated later by Albert Dürer and Pinturicchio in their various renderings of the martyr, all the legends respecting him agreeing in making him quite a young man scarcely out of boyhood. In course of time indeed he became the very ideal of adolescent beauty, and it has not been uncommon amongst the passionate and imaginative Southern races for young girls to fall in love with the image of St. Sebastian, as did Pygmalion with his own creation, Galatea.

St. Sebastian is very constantly introduced in devotional pictures, and is generally standing near the Virgin, pierced with many arrows, and gazing up to heaven with a rapt expression of ecstasy. To quote but a very few amongst the immense number of fine representations of him, either with other Saints or alone, may be mentioned as specially beautiful the painting by Sodoma in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, in which the martyr

looks up with a face full of devotion and an angel hovers above, about to place a crown upon his head; the Odoni altar-piece by Crivelli in the National Gallery, London; the 'Madonna and St. Sebastian,' by Correggio, in the Dresden Gallery; the 'Virgin in Glory,' by Andrea del Sarto, in the Pitti Gallery, Florence; and that by Luini in the Santuario della Vergine, Saronno, in which, as is very often the case, St. Sebastian is the pendant to St. Roch. Very beautiful also is the figure of the favourite Saint in the bronze relief by Donatello in the André Collection, Paris, and the marble statue by Matteo Civitale in the Cathedral of Lucca, whilst the recumbent figure by Bernini beneath the high-altar of S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, is a fine modern interpretation of the same theme.

The so-called 'Martyrdom of St. Sebastian' has perhaps been more often painted than that of any other Saint, although the young soldier did not actually die from the arrows with which he was pierced. Perhaps the greatest pictures of this class are the large oil-painting by Domenichino in S. Maria degli Angeli, Rome; that by Vandyck in the Munich Gallery; and that by Antonio Pollajuolo in the National Gallery, London. Scenes from the life of St. Sebastian are of rare occurrence, the interest of the so-called martyrdom having eclipsed that of every other subject; but Paolo Veronese painted for the Church of S. Sebastiano at Venice the scene at the Execution of Marcus and Marcellinus, and the actual 'Death in the Circus' of St. Sebastian himself, and Vandyck, in a fine picture now at St. Petersburg, represented the Restoration to consciousness of the Martyr by the widow Irene.

St. Quintin was of noble birth, and held an important command in the Roman army when he became convinced of the truth of Christianity. He at once, it is said, deserted his post and fled secretly to Gaul, where he preached the Gospel with great success, especially at Samarobriua, the present Amiens, and in its neighbourhood. Thrown into prison by order of the cruel Prefect, Rictius Varus, who had earned an evil notoriety by his zeal against the Christians, St. Quintin was rescued by an angel, only, however, to be seized again and put to death after horrible tortures. It is related that he was first fastened to a wooden chair by great bolts driven through his hands and knees, and he is thus represented in various mediæval seals and in a wooden statuette in the possession of



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THE MADONNA WITH SS. BENEDICT AND QUINTIN

By Francesco Bianchi