



Christian Persecutions.

ONE of the worst features of Christianity is the fact that the different schools of fanatics have not only persecuted those who believe in freedom of thought, but have, and still do, persecute each other to the extent of their power. The following account, taken from an old English book, shows how cruel those who claimed to be true Christians were to those who had advanced far enough to see some of the absurdities of Christianity as it was then:

Surely, few women have so dearly and truly won the title of heroine, in the highest sense of the word, as the poor persecuted martyr, Anne Askew. Few have possessed a presence of mind so unsupported by human strength, or so uncountenanced by human friends, as this young and delicate lady. The wisdom and discreetness which she exhibited in answering the insidious questions, and baffling the crafty designs of her enemies, were no less remarkable than her clear and accurate knowledge of the word of God and her resolute spirit in cleaving to that word. And thus she met and surmounted all the difficulties to which she was exposed in one conference after another with the most skilful and subtle of the Popish party, and everyone who encountered with her was completely foiled by her truth, her simplicity of wisdom, her patience and her calm trust in God. Her piteous story is enough to melt the sternest man to tears, were it not that the heart must throb and the cheek burn at the disgraceful consciousness that Englishmen and English prelates could be found bad and base enough to make that gentle lady the victim of their diabolical malice.

We read that she was examined and questioned concerning her opinions by Christopher Dare and Sir Martin Bowes, the lord mayor and their brother commissioners. With what inimitable simplicity did she reply in that conversation, which is recorded to have taken place between the lord mayor and herself: "What if a mouse eat the sacramental bread after it is consecrated," was the absurd question, "what shall become of the mouse; what sayest thou, thou foolish woman?" "Nay, what say you, my lord, will become of it?" she answered. Thus urged, the blundering lord mayor

replied: "I say that the mouse is damned!" "Alack, poor mouse," was her quiet reply; and so at once all his divinity was discomfited.

She herself, in the most artless language, gives the account of her various examinations. In her interview with a priest she likewise called upon him to answer his own question, on which he told her "that it was against the order of the schools that he who asked the question should be required to answer it"; she at once tells him that "she is but a woman and knows not the course of schools." She then recounts her conference with his archdeacon, when sent for by Bonner, and afterward with Bonner himself, when he endeavored to gain her confidence by a pretended interest in her welfare, and so to put her off her guard, "He brought forth his unsavory similitude," she said, "that if a man had a wound, no wise surgeon could minister help unto it before he had seen it uncovered; in like case," said he, "can I give you no good counsel unless I know wherewith your heart is burdened." "I answered," said Anne Askew, "that my conscience was clear and that to lay a plaster upon a whole skin was much folly."

But we pass over these examinations, in which the patience of those adversaries who could not overcome her patience, was at length exhausted. These bold and crafty men were determined to spare neither threat nor violence by which they might extort from her some word or other as a ground of accusation against the Lady Herbert, who was the queen's sister, or the Duchess of Suffolk, and so at last Queen Katherine herself. As yet they had discovered nothing. Rich and another of the council came to her in the Tower, where she was then confined, and demanded that she should make the disclosures which they required concerning her party and her friends. She told them nothing. "Then they did put me on the rack," she relates, "because I confessed no ladies nor gentlemen to be of my opinion; and thereon they kept me for a long time, and because I lay still and did not cry, my lord chancellor and Mr. Rich took pains to rack me with their own hands till I was nigh dead." These two wretches, it is recorded, provoked by her saint like endurance, ordered the lieutenant of the Tower to rack her again. He, Sir Anthony Knevett, "tendered the weakness of the woman," positively refused to

do so. Then Wriothlesly and Rich threw off their gowns, and threatening the lieutenant that they would complain of his disobedience to the king, "they worked the rack themselves till her bones and joints were almost plucked asunder." When the lieutenant caused her to be loosed down from the rack she immediately swooned. "Then," she writes, "they recovered me again." After that, "I sate two long hours reasoning with my lord chancellor on the bare floor, where he with many flattering words persuaded me to leave my opinion; but my Lord God (I thank His everlasting goodness) gave me grace to persevere, and will do, I hope, to the very end." And she concludes this account to her friend by saying: "Farewell, dear friend, and pray, pray, pray."

She gives her confession of faith and concludes it with this beautiful prayer: "O Lord! I have more enemies now than there be hairs on my head! yet; Lord, let them never overcome me with vain words, but fight thou, Lord, in my stead; for on Thee cast I my care! With all the spite they can imagine they fall upon me, who am Thy poor creature. Yet, sweet Lord, let me not set by them that are against me; for in Thee is my whole delight. And, Lord, I heartily desire of Thee that Thou wilt of Thy most merciful goodness forgive them that violence which they do and have done unto me; open also Thou their blind hearts that they may hereafter do that thing in Thy sight which is only acceptable before Thee, and to set forth Thy verity aright without all vain fantasies of sinful men. So be it, O Lord, so be it."

Unable to walk or stand from the tortures she had suffered, poor Anne Askew was carried in a chair to Smithfield, and when brought to the stake, was fastened to it by a chain which held up her body, and one who beheld her there, describes her as "having an angel's countenance and a smiling face." She had three companions in her last agonies, fellow martyrs with herself, John Lacles, a gentleman of the court and household of King Henry; John Adams, a taylor, and Nicholas Belenian, a priest of Shropshire. The apostate Shaxton, preached the sermon. The three Throckmortons, the near kinsmen of the queen and members of her household, had drawn near to comfort Anne Askew and her three companions, but were warned that

they were marked men and entreated to withdraw.

As we now stand in the area of Smithfield we can picture to ourselves the scene on that memorable night. There it was under St. Bartholomew's church. There sat Wriothlesly, lord chancellor of England, the old Duke of Norfolk, the old Earl of Bedford, the lord mayor, with divers others.

At the very last, a written pardon from the king was offered to Anne Askew, upon condition that she would recant. The fearless lady turned away her eyes and would not look upon it. She then told that she came not thither to deny her Lord and Master. The fire was ordered to be put under her, "and thus," to use the words of John Foxe, "the good Anne Askew, with these blessed martyrs, having passed through so many torments, having now ended the long course of her agonies, being compassed in with flames of fire as a blessed sacrifice unto God, she slept in the Lord, A. D. 1546, leaving behind her a singular example of Christian constancy for all men to follow." Her crime was the denial of the Mass. "Lo, this," she wrote, "is the heresy that I hold, and for it must suffer death." She kept the faith to her God, she kept the faith to her friends, for she betrayed no one, enduring shame and agony with meek unshaken constancy. O, none but Christ, none but Christ could have made the weakness of a delicate woman so strong, the feebleness of a mortal creature so triumphant!

We do not condemn the Catholics, whose victims number legions; we do not condemn the Protestants, who were fully as bad whenever they had the power; nor do we condemn the Protestant writer of the above for saying, "Oh, none but Christ, none but Christ could have made the weakness of a delicate woman so strong, the feebleness of a mortal creature so triumphant." Ignorance was the cause of it all. They knew no better. But we now know that people of many different religions have suffered for their opinions, that Christ has no more to do with character and the ability to "keep one's faith" than Krishna, Buddha or Mohammed did, and that even the much-despised Infidels have always had their share of the Bruno spirit of faithfulness.