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Agnes
History

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A HISTORY OF
THE
HOLY VIRGINITY
AND
BLESSED MARTYRDOM
OF
SAINT AGNES
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 304.

LONDON :

EDWARD LUMLEY, 514, NEW OXFORD STREET.

1860.

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TO THE
VIRGINS OF CHRIST;
AND TO THE
SISTERS OF CHARITY
NOW RELIGIOUSLY SERVING GOD, UNDER THE DISCIPLINE
OF OUR HOLY MOTHER IN OUR
BELOVED ISLAND,
THIS STORY OF THE
MOST BLESSED SAINT AGNES,
VIRGIN AND MARTYR,
IS
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED BY THEIR
UNWORTHY SERVANT,
THE WRITER.

PREFACE.

THE substance of the following little book is mostly gathered from the works of S. Ambrose, S. Augustin, S. Maximus of Tours, and from other of the Fathers. The writer's endeavour has been, if without success, yet not without toil, to throw the narrative into English language, in such a way as might win English boys and girls, young men and maidens, to read it, or hear it read, for themselves; that so, through Divine Grace, some of them also, hearing of her, whose Charity and heroic Passion are here set forth, might with her desire to belong only to the VIRGIN LAMB,

and to follow the Virgin life: or, if that be unhappily for ever past, that then they would resolve to follow Him, as far as they can, and by prayers and tears, or other influence, endeavour to have represented in others, what in themselves they now have not.

WHAT wish could parent cherish for most beloved
child,
But to walk before his GOD a Virgin undefiled ?
While others train their children to graceful arts
and dress,
And all the worldly ways that wait on loveliness ;
To wed with wealth and station, and walk in high
degree,
With CHRIST'S own Virgin Poor lest they should
numbered be. . . .
Far other thoughts and training, my dearest child,
be thine,
Reared in that low simplicity which nurtures faith
divine ;
A Virgin through thy life, angel-like spirit blest,
The more thy SAVIOUR'S own and on His Love to rest.
There's found in life no sweetness like th' awakening
soul,
Which God's Love in childhood devotes the being
whole.
The bloom it hath upon it is of eternal youth,
Though with the thorns encompassed which shelter
heavenly truth.

ISAAC WILLIAMS.



HISTORY OF SAINT AGNES.

THAT godly Bishop and Doctor, John Cosin, of Durham,* declares in his sermon on marriage, that if our Blessed LORD had not been at the marriage of Cana of Galilee, men might have had cause to doubt, as they did in the Gospel, whether it were good to marry at all or no. For first (he says) He was a Virgin; and His Mother, she was a Virgin; neither He nor she would lead any other lives; and married life itself seems to be an imperfect state. The state of perfection is Virginitie, so much commended by our SAVIOUR, so

* Dr. Cosin was Bishop of Durham, from the year 1662 till his death, in 1672.

highly esteemed by S. Paul. He might have added, that the disciple whom JESUS loved was also a Virgin,—the Evangelist S. John. But in saying this, the Bishop was only echoing the voice of all the Ancient Bishops and Catholic Fathers from the very earliest times. Well have they defended what is taught by S. Paul, that though marriage is good, Virginitv is better. The great S. Augustin and the learned S. Basil, austere Jerome and the tender-hearted S. Ambrose, the affectionate Bernard and the golden-mouthed preacher, S. John Chrysostom, unweariedly chant the graces and virtues of Holy Virginitv.

The Jews turn away at the mention of it; and well they may, since they so dishonour Him, the Virgin-Born. And there have never been wanting Christians, of an heretical mind, who also have spoken against the truth, wresting the Scriptures on this as on other doctrines: some even with spiteful malice endeavouring to entrap its defenders into unwary statements on marriage. But it has only ended in failure, and in their being

covered with their own confusion. For Holy Church alone, zealous for this grace in her children, as the especial fruit of the Great Bridegroom's Incarnation, by her doctors and fathers, by martyrs and confessors, by sacraments and offices, and by her own Virgins, will ever silence the gainsayers, and in no doubtful language proclaim:—Matrimony is good, but Virginitv is better.

No more wonderful example of this life has ever been witnessed in the Catholic Church, than that of the Virginitv and Martyrdom of the holy Agnes. For Virginitv is worthy of praise not so much because it is found in martyrs, as because it is of that power and grace that it makes martyrs. Before the period in which Agnes lived, Virgins had begun to live in Religious Houses, one or more together with others. Not that this was always the case; for some quietly practised the home duties of family life, and our Saint was one of this class. For true it is that the outward circumstances, under which a Virgin's lot may be cast, can matter nothing at all to her entire devotedness. Wherever that may be, the

LORD JESUS knoweth them that are His. The laws of Rome, under which Agnes lived, allowed of marriage to girls of the age of twelve. At that age, therefore, according to the rules of the Church, she hastened to be espoused to Him, Who first loved her, and was consecrated to JESUS CHRIST, thenceforth her only Love. 'Times of persecution were at hand; and no wonder if the young girls who in heart had betrothed themselves to the VIRGIN-LAMB for ever, should desire to have their solemn purpose strengthened and blessed in the face of the Church, before, if so it should please the Divine Will, their Virginity was crowned with martyrdom. Blessed S. Agnes, then, whose passion and triumph these pages are to set forth, was, what she is justly called, a Virgin. So that her birthday not only calls on all who can, to come up to her worthiness by striving after a like integrity; but also, since it is a martyr's birthday, it claims from the priest the offering to GOD of the sacrifice of thanksgiving. It is no marvel if, on the birthday of S. Agnes, and at the deeds that are told of her, strong men stand astonished.

But then, again, in hearing of them the youngest boys will cease to be faint-hearted: married women will be amazed: and (more blessed still) maidens may learn to aim at her excellence. It is a Holy-day, on which all should exult and rejoice, and sing hymns and psalms to GOD, young men and maidens, old men and children, praising His holy Name for the marvellous grace bestowed on His handmaiden. And then no one can be more praised than she who is praised by all.

It is a hard task to begin to speak in a fitting manner of her whose very name bespeaks her praise; for in Latin (*agna*) Agnes signifies a lamb, and in Greek (*ἀγνή*) it means chaste. She was what she was in name, and was found not unworthy of her crown. The men whom the heathen worshipped, and for whom they made temples, priests, and sacrifices, are not to be compared in their acts with the heroism of the Church's martyrs. Indeed, it were little short of a wrong done to them to make the comparison. Hercules, it is true, conquered a lion, and he vanquished the dog

Cerberus: but Agnes, a girl of thirteen years old, outstood and overmastered the very being who, through hero-worship, has slain a mighty crowd of men and women.

Come near then, ye girls and Virgins, and listen to the story of a girl and Virgin; and, in the tender years of her childhood, learn how there were enkindled within her bosom the unflickering fires of the love of CHRIST. By all, but especially by Sisters and Virgins, may the way in which Blessed Agnes suffered be carefully pondered on to edification.

In her thirteenth year by her martyrdom she for ever parted with death, and, through having her love all fixed on the Author of life, she found that Life for ever hers. Cruelty more hateful, that spared not those tender years, we cannot imagine! Passing over this, however, be it ours rather to dwell on the power of faith and grace which in her found a witness at such an age. In years little more than a child, she was yet no child in thought or speech. While her body is that of a little girl, her mind gave utterance to the wisdom of the aged. Wondrously fair as she

was in face by natural beauty, that fairness, which she had drawn to herself through faith, by a livelong gaze upon her LORD, rendered her still more beautiful, yea! all glorious within. Of His fulness had she received, and grace for grace. Her eyes had beheld the King in His Beauty, and, having caught His Sight upon herself, she reflected back, as from a burnished mirror, the glory of the LORD, and so was changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the SPIRIT of the LORD. From the story of the trial of her fidelity it will be seen how entirely her conversation was in heaven, how entirely her life was hid with CHRIST in GOD.

One day, as she was coming from school through the streets of Rome, the son of the chief magistrate met with her; and, casting his eyes upon her countenance fell in love with the maiden. Not knowing who she was, he got his parents to find out, and to ask her in marriage for him. This they did, and at the same time sent her a great many love-tokens, and promised still more. Some most brilliant ornaments the young man bought him-

self, such as charm the fancies of young girls: but all were thrust aside by the Blessed Agnes, as if they had been so much dross. It was no part of her study, indeed, to please by beauty of body. But she could not but shrink from the thought of being displeasing to her LORD by any uncomeliness of soul, brought on by her own unfaithfulness to Him. From this Virgin-like feeling there was thrown back from within her, through faith, an unsullied brightness of spirit, which went for much in heightening her loveliness. For it was nothing to her to have her body thought beautiful, seeing that she only thirsted to be beauteous in soul. The love-gifts, therefore, were sent back, and her Virginity, once for all, made over by vows to the spotless LAMB, remained unshaken.

From the wisdom shown by the holy girl in this matter may all faithful Virgins learn a rule to fling back all little tokens of love that come from men, even though sent them under a show of piety. As they would start from the bite of a mad dog, with like dread should they flee such gifts. They may, indeed,

come off unharmed, if they take only that by which they may learn the more to fear GOD. But it is not becoming their character to take ought which leans towards making them love the world. Only that which furthers the good of their Eternal Love should be taken, and as often as they receive anything from man, it must be in such way as by Virgins, who have the knowledge and consciousness that they are the spouses of CHRIST. He sees into their minds, and His jealous Eye scans and marks with what diligence His Virgins attend Him.

The pagan suitor, at a loss how to account for Agnes' refusal of his gifts, and frenzied with a greater passion for her than ever, fancied she might be looking for ornaments, better, or more to her taste than those he had yet laid out before her. So he next brought with him a beautiful crown of jewelry, and by himself and through his friends began to urge his love-suit on the holy Virgin. Wealth, houses, gorgeous attire, family, and all the riches of this world he promised should be hers, if she would not turn a deaf

ear to his prayer, and would become his wife. It may be he thought that the girl's young heart must needs be won by his words and tokens, and that she never would be so foolish as to turn her back upon them. But Agnes had been too deeply wounded by holy Charity not to do so, as she earnestly coveted His Body only, Who, for the love of man, had tasted death. The Virgins of CHRIST, will understand the deep burning love which glowed within this girl, and how, upheld by it, she trampled on all earthly riches, rank, and favour as worth less than nothing. For to this end it is that the examples of the Saints are handed down in writings that every one, according to the quality of sex, or time of age, may learn, without wavering, to hold on in the purpose of their vocation. So that, in this way, Virgins, by the deeds of a Virgin, and the married, by the lives of married saints, may study to overcome the world for the love of CHRIST. This is not saying that the chaste intercourse of the married is blameworthy: yet, though allowing this, care must be taken to let the choice of

Virgins shine out in its own true beauty. For Virginité has its high grace, not from being above what is bad, but because it is better than that which is already good. For that which is cleaner than the clean, and holier than the holy, has no need, in order to set off its greater loveliness, to stand beside things clearly bad in themselves. Holy Virginité is not thus straitened, or so poverty-stricken in her grounds of greater excellence. The married, therefore, giving heed to the Sacred Writings, do well to imitate the holy marriages of the Patriarchs; and wives to strive after the patterns of Sara, Rebecca, Rachel, and Susanna. But Virgins may and should shape their lives after that of a Virgin only, the Mother of Very Light.

And so it was, that when all these jewels had been placed temptingly before her, that Agnes set her face as a flint to withstand everything that could bribe away her faith; and it is said she cried out in holy anger:—

“ Take away from me these things, which
“ are nought but the fuel of sin, the nourish-
“ ment of wickedness, and what death only

“ can feed upon: and do you yourselves
“ begone. For already has my heart been
“ won, my love wholly given to Another
“ Lover. Far better ornaments has He
“ made over to me than these; and has al-
“ ready pledged me with His betrothal-ring.
“ Though of a race and dignity far more noble
“ than yours, He has graced me with price-
“ less honours. My right hand and my neck
“ He has girded about with precious stones.
“ In my ears He has set rings of peerless
“ pearls; and has bespangled my body with
“ glistening gems. That I may admit no
“ other lover besides Himself, He has set a
“ veil, as a mark over my face; and the
“ clothing He has given me is of wrought
“ gold. To decorate my shoulders He has
“ hung around my neck immeasurable neck-
“ laces: and further, He has shown me match-
“ less treasures of untold worth, which, if I
“ let not go the thought of giving myself to
“ Him, He has in store for my use. No: I
“ must not bring such a slight on my first
“ Lover, fast linked as I am to Him in the
“ bonds of Charity, by leaving Him to look

“ upon another. His Birth is higher, and
“ His countenance is fairer, than the children
“ of men ; and there is more sweetness in
“ His Love. In Himself, too, is He richer
“ in every grace. His couch is already set
“ beside me ; and for me does His organ
“ sound forth sweet melody. Already have
“ I got honey and milk from under His
“ tongue ; already am I tied in His chaste
“ embraces ; already is His Body coupled
“ with my body ; and His Blood it is that
“ empurples my lips. He has a Virgin for
“ His Mother ; and His FATHER knows not
“ woman. The angels are His servants ;
“ and the sun and moon stand amazed at His
“ Beauty. By the smell of His raiment the
“ dead are alive again ; by His touch the
“ weak are made strong. Unfailing are His
“ riches, and will never become less. I pre-
“ serve my troth for Him alone. To Him
“ do I entrust myself with entire devotion.
“ And though I love Him, I still keep my
“ chastity ; though I touch Him I am still
“ pure ; I receive Him, and am still a
“ Virgin.”

It is a spirit-stirring thing to listen to these noble words. It is a spirit-stirring thing to see the heights to which Virginitv can climb. Virginal goodness is seen asserting its heaven-sprung birth, by turning away (as from dull, dead things) from all that earth can bring forth, in nothing swayed; yea, coming out of the ordeal unspotted and unscathed. Through the excellency of the Saints, the Divine Goodness becomes to us conceivable. S. Agnes, by her answer at this crisis, shadowed out the loftiest idea of chastity, when, to clasp safe her Virginitv, she risked her life, while she calmly confessed that the marriage of this world was a thing no way belonging to her. Jealous over herself with a godly jealousy, as knowing that, as a chaste Virgin, she had been espoused to one Husband, even CHRIST, she tossed away from her all wicked love, put forward for her acceptance, and laid hold on the trophy of His Cross. And so, as well as against lust, as against all kinds of punishment, armed rather by her faith than by the sword, she bravely fought and conquered. She looked upon the flatterer, and

loathed to be ensnared by the deceitfulness of riches. For while she loved Him Who from everlasting had been in the bosom of the FATHER, and for her had been made Flesh, she knew not how to love anything that as the flower of the field withereth away. Longing to be presented to her Betrothed, holy, both in body and spirit, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, she had no mind to let herself be scarred by the endearing words of an earthly lover. And being already robed in His Righteousness, and clothed with the graces of the mind, what care could she have for mere glittering ornaments of the body!

Thwarted in his desire, and given over to an evil passion, the young man fell ill. Through the physicians his parents were made aware of the cause; they again pressed his suit, as he had done. The most Blessed Agnes would by no means listen to them, and could not, on any account, (she said) break her plighted word with her first Spouse. The pagan magistrate was at a loss to think who this Spouse could be that Agnes boasted

herself to belong to, and which made her so dislike the courtship of his son. After a careful inquiry, however, he learnt from a certain parasite that Agnes was a Christian, and that it was CHRIST whom she would call her Spouse. Overjoyed at hearing this, he again sent for the maiden; and, first of all, tried to betray her into wrong doing by fair speeches; and then to frighten her with foul. But it was alike in vain. That he might part the Saint from CHRIST by fear, no torment which the craftiness of man, or the hate of Satan could stir up for afflicting the body, in order to undermine the purpose of the soul, was spared. Yet amidst all the storm of unabating rage, and the threats of physical torture the unfriended child, with a world of fiends set against her, her eye fixed on the steadfastness of CHRIST, and her soul bathed in His everlasting and changeless Love, stood out unshattered by the shock, and flinched not to the last. She heard him threatening fire and flames, and smiled. It was not in her to love otherwise than as she did. Nor, whilst she loved her Virginity so well, could

either flames or punishment or scornful mockery work a change in her mind. Nay, not death itself, nor the sword of the striker, could daunt her fearless heart.

To break down this unfaltering steadfastness to Virginitv, the magistrate said, that if she were altogether against entering into wedlock, that then she must do sacrifice to Vesta, the heathen goddess of virginitv. To this Blessed Agnes made answer, " If I, for
" the love of CHRIST, would not listen to
" your son, vexed, it is true, and vexing me
" with an evil spirit of love, but who is still
" a man, a breathing, living man, shall I pay
" respect to dumb idols, and by so doing
" wrong the great GOD?"

In spite of this answer, he had her dragged off to the smoking altar; where she was bidden to offer incense. Now when she was thus forced to stretch out her hands, it was for nothing else but to make the Sign of the health-giving Cross. Baffled in his endeavours, the spitefulness of Satan from the depths of hell upheaved another scheme, a more searching trial than the rack, or the

greatest bodily tortures, or than fighting with wild beasts. For now the judge gave the word for her to be borne off to a shameful house, that there she might lose what she so highly thought of.

“ If you knew, dread sir,” said Blessed Agnes, “ who my GOD is, never would you “ speak in this way : but it is far otherwise “ with me ; for I well know the virtue of my “ LORD JESUS CHRIST. With a sure trust “ in His gracious help, I am heedless of your “ threats ; and as to being forced to sacrifice “ to idols, or if not to run the risk of having “ my body with foul unlawful touch be- “ stained, I own to no fear on that score. “ For I have an Angel who is the guardian “ of my body ; and the Only-Begotten SON “ of GOD is around me as a strong shield that “ cannot be pierced, and He never slumbers, “ nor sleeps. You may dye your sword in “ my blood, but never will you be able to “ bring shame upon my body hallowed to “ CHRIST.”

At these words, the judge, mad with rage, flashed forth his orders for her to be stripped,

and led away naked. And a crier, going before, gave out who she was, and where she was being taken to. Now, no sooner was she uncovered than her hair fell down as a veil, over her body; and, by Divine grace, its thickness was so great, that even her own clothing was not a better covering. On having to enter the abode of shame, she found an angel already there. He overshadowed her with so powerful a light, that, from the brightness of her appearance, no eye could bear long to gaze upon her. And, while she fell down on her knees in prayer, a stainless white robe was given into her hands. Taking this, she said:—

“ I thank Thee, O LORD JESU CHRIST,
“ for reckoning me in the number of Thy
“ handmaidens. This garment is indeed a
“ fit covering for the size of my little body ;
“ and, from its dazzling whiteness, none can
“ doubt that it is the handiwork of Angels.”

Meanwhile the magistrate's son came on, with some lewd companions, and thought to do what he lusted after. He mocked at the weakness of those who dared not to draw

near the Saint; and, to show his boldness, he leapt forward into the very light; but, before he could touch her, was struck blind, and fell quivering to the ground. So did the **ALMIGHTY** keep the feet of His saint.

We see how Agnes followed Mary through reproaches. No trial or punishment availed to damp the spirit of that holy maiden. Nor need we wonder, when we learn that for her the house of sin was turned into the house of prayer; and, where the devil had prepared the shaming deed of darkness, there the **LORD** was careful that to her should be awarded the crown and palm of Virginity. This is the greatness of her conquest, that she conquered the enemy on his own ground. She was led a captive Virgin to the shrine of the king of lusts, and that very king goes out, after the Virgin's triumph, bound and conquered by the Virgin whom he had led captive. Then, stripped by bad men, she was forthwith clothed by good Angels; the house of shame became a house of prayer; and the den of evil spirits the oratory of Angels. Doomed to enter the haunt of the unclean,

she herself is seen to be securely resting in the bosom of chastity. And where that brightest pearl was wont to be foully lost, there, in her, undimmed Virginity is crowned. The young man, too, whom the devil had armed, as his servant, against the maidenhood of Agnes, came out, and became the servant of God. In every way was Satan overcome, and GOD'S strength made perfect in her weakness.

Since no sooner was news of what had befallen his son brought to the magistrate, than he came and upbraided Agnes with being his son's murderess. She told him, however, that it was not she, but his own hardihood which ought to be blamed for it. For while the rest had bowed in awe before the power of Him who had been her Protector, he had not paid that same reverence to GOD, Who, nevertheless, would not let that body be shamefully handled, consecrated, as it was, to CHRIST. Yet the holy maid, at his desire, besought the LORD, and, restored to health, he came forth, confessing the GOD of the Christians.

After this, the magistrate himself was somewhat softened in his temper, and became wishful to befriend the girl, by rescuing her from an untimely end. But it was too late ; for the wretched rabble, stirred up by the heathen priests, cried out for their victim, calling her a sorceress. Like Pilate, therefore, he gave way, and, by an underling, sentenced her to die.

A pitiless piece of malice against so tender a maiden ! For what place was there for the sword in that tiny body ? And yet in that tiny body there was the grace of CHRIST which overcame the sword. At her age, girls cannot bear the cross looks of their parents, and will cry at the prick of a needle. Amongst blood-thirsty men Agnes stood undaunted, and fearless amid clattering chains. In short, hardly conscious of what it is even to die, without one misgiving throb she yielded up her body to the sword of a savage soldier ; having scarcely the ability to suffer, and yet quite ripe for a triumph ; weak in her agony, and yet worthy of her crown. No bride ever hastened to the bridal-chamber so cheerfully as Agnes

to the scene of death. With joyous step the Virgin came forth; her head not set off with braided locks, but with CHRIST; crowned not with flowers, but with the halo of holiness. All were in tears; she alone was tearless. The lookers-on, for the most part, were awe-struck, that she should be so lavish of a life which she had scarcely so much as tasted of, and should be giving it up as if she had done with it. Even to the last did the headsman, with beguiling flatteries, allure her to snatch herself from harm by yielding to marriage. Or, with fearful speeches, sought he to stagger her from meeting the quick-coming deathstroke.

She, however, stood forth, undismayed, and said:—"Nay, for a bride to keep needlessly hanging back, when her Betrothed is calling for her,—why, this in itself is putting a slight upon His Love. He Who was the first to love me, and chose me, shall have me. Why do you delay your blow? It is well that this body of mine should perish, which is evilly loved by eyes that I would not."

She stood; she prayed; she raised her

voice, and cried:—"Behold what I have
" long coveted, I already see; what I have
" hoped for, I hold safe. With Him alone
" I feel already associated in heaven, Whom
" here on earth I have loved with entire de-
" votedness. O Eternal Ruler, open wide
" the gates of heaven, until lately barred to
" man. O CHRIST, call to Thyself the soul
" that cleaveth unto Thee, beforetime Thine,
" a Virgin, and now at this time a Victim to
" Thy FATHER'S glory."

She bent her neck, ready for the blade. You could see the deathsman shuddering, as if he were the doomed. Yes, the swordsman's hand was quaking; the colour forsook his face at the danger of another, while the girl blenched not for her own. At one blow her head was struck off, and the bride was united more closely and for ever to the Heavenly Bridegroom.

Her parents took up the body, and laid it in their own burying-place, a little way out of the city. Shortly afterwards came a great number of Christians to worship there, and to pray. The pagans attacked them, and

drove them all off, but one, named Emerentiana, foster-sister of the Blessed Agnes. She, staying behind, was killed; and on the following night her body was laid by the side of S. Agnes.

The parents still, from time to time, sought her tomb; till, one night, when they saw her in a vision, along with a band of heavenly Virgins, clad in white raiment. A spotless lamb, of snowy whiteness, was at her side. After this the mourning parents knew that they should thenceforth weep no more. And ever since in the Church has the Lamb been placed beside her, or in her hands, in the representations of this Saint. While everywhere throughout the Catholic Church, her birthday, as in the English Kalendar, has been kept holy on the twenty-first of January. The Greek and the Roman Churches make commemoration of her on other days also. At Rome, year by year, in S. Agnes' Church, built on the spot of her martyrdom, the Pope, on S. Agnes'-day, blesses two lambs, from whose wool are made the palls sent to the Archbishops of his communion.

In England, the Churches of S. Agnes, London-wall, that of S. Perran in Cornwall, and the village of Papworth S. Agnes in Cambridgeshire, and of Burton-Agnes in Yorkshire, remind English boys and maidens of her whose name they bear, and that, from one generation to another.

They call for imitation of her example, who, after holy Mary, and, outshone by none else, has always been held out in the Church as a shining light of Virginal grace and purity. In her is embodied the utmost perfectness of her high vocation. In an evermindful consciousness the unseen Face of her Beloved lived before her. We have seen how evident it was that, as His bride, she saw Him, heard Him, spoke to Him. For the affections of her heart, being knit to His, were more really and truly drawn out towards Him, than on earth one heart can be towards another. So that, although sorely harassed in spirit by the behaviour of wicked men, her soul was, nevertheless, all the while, calm and stilled with the vision of the Eternal Beauty. These are the true tokens of Vir-

ginity of soul, the very life of which is the never wanting leisure, however tried, to wait upon the LORD without distraction. It is because this singleness of aim and purpose was so fully unfolded and beautified in S. Agnes, that she is the admiration and pattern of faithful Virgins, and who, so far as they fail in this, fail in their religious profession.

But not only has the standard of her lofty loveliness been lifted up for the sympathizing admiration of her Sister-Virgins; but even from others it has called out a wondering awe, who, it may be, would not altogether have much liking to have her life held up, as a pattern, worthy of imitation by all who can attempt it. Be this as it may, from the heaven-soaring poetry of her festal-day, a poet* of our own days, has, by happy inspiration, drawn so truthful and so exact a portraiture of the innermost life, longings, and aspirations of a Virgin espoused to the LAMB, that it would not be easy to gain a better insight

* Alfred Tennyson, the present Poet-Laureate.

into that holy estate, or a deeper knowledge of it than may be found underneath the words of the following stanzas:—

SAINT AGNES' EVE.

Deep on the convent roof the snows
Are sparkling to the moon :
My breath to heaven like vapour goes :
May my soul follow soon !
The shadows of the convent towers
Slant down the snowy sward,
Still creeping with the creeping hours
That lead me to my LORD :
Make Thou my spirit pure and clear
As are the frosty skies,
Or this first snowdrop of the year
That in my bosom lies.

As these white robes are soil'd and dark,
To yonder shining ground ;
As this pale taper's earthly spark,
To yonder argent round ;
So shows my soul before the LAMB,
My spirit before Thee ;
So in my earthly house I am,
To that I hope to be.
Break up the heavens, O LORD ! and far,
Through all yon starlight keen,
Draw me, Thy Bride, a glittering star,
In raiment white and clean.

He lifts me to the golden doors ;
 The flashes come and go ;
 All heaven bursts her starry floors,
 And strows her lights below,
 And deepens on and up ! the gates
 Roll back, and far within,
 For me the Heavenly Bridegroom waits,
 To make me pure of sin.
 The sabbaths of Eternity,
 One sabbath deep and wide—
 A light upon the shining sea—
 The BRIDEGROOM with His Bride !

The Catholic Religion alone can bring into
 life and practice this ennobling ideal. Well
 may holy Virgins look forward to the con-
 summation of their espousals. For them,
 who follow the LAMB whithersoever He
 goeth, above all others will it be a glorious
 day, when His marriage is come, and when
 the Church, His Virgin-Bride shall have
 made herself ready :—

Virgin souls by high profession,
 To the LAMB devoted here ;
 Strewing flowers in gay procession,
 At the marriage feast appear.

Blessed are they which are called to the
 marriage supper of the LAMB. There is He

the Beloved, white and red. Beautiful is He exceedingly who is surrounded with the red flowers of the rose and the white lily of the valleys, that is, with the choirs of Virgins, and with the army of Martyrs; and He, thus sitting in the midst of them, is Himself both a Virgin and a Martyr. Ten thousand times ten thousand are around Him; and yet no fear is there, O Virgin soul, lest thou shouldest mistake any other for Him, Whom thou lovest. Easily wilt thou recognize Him out of the thousands, more beautiful than all; and thou wilt at once say, This is He, glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of His strength.

The systems of ancient philosophers could teach men to tread under foot the pleasures of sense, and to brave suffering and death with an untameable spirit. But not seldom was this seeming heroism rooted in an evil pride; or, if not, founded only on the often misleading light of a but dimly enlightened conscience. The end of which is, to lead men, through an unholy contempt, to outdo their fellows in bearing pains of body and

the agonies of the mind. Not so with the Saints. Their crowns of glory have been won by the bringing under the yoke of self-abasement, every thought that has up-raised self against GOD; and by crushing down everything which has given rise to vanity in the human heart. When, then, we cast our eyes backward upon the life and death of this saintly Child, it is well to bear in mind the teaching and practice of the Eternal Master, as a contrast to those systems, whose fruits wither in time and perish in eternity. Even amid the countless throng of the Blessed, who have entered into the joy of their LORD, the Church can point to no brighter likeness of the purity and constancy of CHRIST, than to that of the Child-Martyr, against whom every wile of Satan was tried only to prove its failure. Her trials were sharp and short, a night of agony ushering in the day of everlasting rest. Yes:—Agnes has gone before. She has gone to sing the new song which none but Virgins sing in the kingdom of her LORD. She has gone to place her double crown of Virgin-martyrdom at His Feet.

But though mingling with the brightest of the Church triumphant, still has she by her pure charity and passion bequeathed, to everyone born into this world, the knowledge of what the child of man can do. Wrapt in human frailty, as he is; and a prey to human misery, as he is; what deed may he not dare, upholden by the Love and strengthened by the example of the SON of Mary.

Then, O ye Christian girls and maidens, of the present day, whose hearts are ill at ease, when in the fiery glare of the crowded ball-room, with everything around to chain the souls of the worldly to that which perishes; or when in the glittering opera-house, where the senses are strung up to what is almost suffering through the hour-long strain upon them—should it chance to such as you, by Divine Providence, to have read this story, Oh! then do you, when there, turn your thoughts in silence, from all around, from all the whirl and dazzling splendour of such scenes, to that noble-hearted Child-Saint. See her standing alone. See her fearlessly bearing up against the well-nigh overwhelm-

ing flood of malice that, on every side, beat down upon her—without a pang of sorrow—without even the dread of evil; shuddering only at the one thought of accepting all that the world could offer, and so losing the SON of GOD.

Alas! that ye the mighty, elegant, and wise, who, if you dared, might pant after not less than the Virginity and Martyrdom of S. Agnes, should waste your days in empty, sickening sacrifice. You seek for happiness. It is not to be found in luxury, nor in gold, nor yet in fame, nor in the envied sway for which you sell your hearts and lives, a dear-bought homage. You dream of peace and love, and when you die no evil to befall you; and 'tis a dream. None other better or so well as you know how joyless are the joys of earth. Oh! that by this Virgin-Martyr's history, your ears might now be won to dare to be glorious, great and calm! that you would cast into the dust the tokens of your woe—purple, and gold, and steel. You, too, could then go forth to tell to those from whence you came, that pining want, and

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plague of heart, or ghastly fear have been your cup, while in this gilded slavery ; while freedom and peace are found alone in JESUS CHRIST, and in His deathless Love.

Ah ! happy troop of Virgins now on earth, whose study it is, under the discipline of Holy Church, to follow the steps of your confession. Who look forward to the joys already reaped by others and laid up for you. For to you with them will a crown be given, whose unspotted Virginitv proves you to be the Brides of CHRIST, and to have overcome the enemy in the world.

In the words of a great living Doctor* of the Church :—“ Blessed, thrice blessed, they whom CHRIST alone sufficeth, the one aim of whose being is to live to Him and for Him. For Him they adorn themselves ; His eyes alone they desire to please through His graces in them. Him they long to serve without distraction ; at His Feet they long to sit ; to Him they speak in their inmost souls, to Him they hearken ; He is their

* Dr. Pusey ; Professor of Hebrew in Oxford University.

light, their love, their holy joy; to Him they ever approach with trustfulness. Him they consult in all things; on Him they wait; Him they love even because they love Him, and desire nothing from Him but His love, desire no love but only His. Blessed foretaste of life eternal, to desire nothing on earth but the life of Angels, and the new song; to be wholly His, whom her soul loveth, and He the LORD of Angels, be wholly hers, as He says, 'I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine.'"

HALLOWED BE THY NAME,
O LORD,
FOR THE BEAUTY OF VIRGINS.*

* Bishop Andrewes' "Devotions for Saturday."

THE END.

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