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THE THEBAN LEGION.

BY PROF. W. M. BLACKBURN.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BELT AND THE VINE-BRANCH.

IT was March, 292. The emperors were in council at Nicomedia. The empire was governed too much, and hence rebellions were frequent in the provinces. But they resolved to govern it more, and terrify men into submission. These two Augusti determined to appoint two Cæsars, or sub-emperors.

"I choose Galerius," said Diocletian. Thus the milder man selected a savage.

"I choose Constantius Chlorus," said Maximian. The savage man chose one of the most humane, liberal, temperate and tolerant of all his generals. Constantius was the only one of the four who had in his veins the blood of the old Roman nobility. He was now forty-two years of age. At Drepanum, it seems, he had married Helena, an innkeeper's daughter, who became the beautiful Josephine of that age, the heroic saint of the traditions.

To bind them closer to the emperors, these two Cæsars must be divorced from their wives, and marry into the imperial families. The law was made. Certain women were shocked; others

fairly shrieked. Poor Helena! It was heart-breaking to see Theodora wedded to the man whom she knew was acting from mere political interest. She retired with her son Constantine, then twenty years of age, and waited until he should overthrow the tyrants, rise above paganism, and lift her out of obscurity.

"Must it be so?" said Valeria, when told that Galerius was to be her husband. "I hated him when he was bringing us home from Alexandria." Had Maurice been chosen Cæsar she would have sung for joy. "Romans have no heart in these affairs." Nor did they teach their children to have much conscience.

Galerius, the lowest in rank, was bent upon making himself chief of the four rulers. One of his plans was to force men to enlist in the army, and then corrupt or crush the Christian element in it. Maximian agreed with him. This was the process of years; it began with the lesser tests; it ended in deathly trials. He breathed his malice at court; it slowly ate like rust upon the finer qualities of Diocletian.

The tests were two: the adoration of the emperor and sacrifice to the gods. In the one case it was to deify a man; in the other to make offerings to an

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THE NOTABLE WOMEN OF CHRISTIANITY. No. II.

Vittoria Colonna.

BY PROF. L. J. HALSEY, D. D.

IN illustration of our theme—The Notable Women of Christianity—we pass, at a single bound, from the opening of the fourth to the opening of the sixteenth century—from Helena, the queenly mother of Constantine, to Vittoria Colonna, the queen of Italian song, the friend of Michael Angelo, the noble wife of the Marquis of Pescara. In many respects she was the most accomplished lady of her day, though contemporary with Veronica Gambara, Gabrielle de Bourbon, and many others, highly gifted and distinguished. She may be taken as the representative woman of the period immediately preceding, and ushering in the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Wide indeed is the interval from Helena to Vittoria, one standing at the opening, and the other at the close of all those grand events and influences which fill up the history of more than twelve centuries. On the record of these long ages many a shining name had been inscribed to show what woman could do or endure. Margaret of Denmark, the Semiramis of the North, had illustrated with what grace female brows could wear the crown, and with what statesmanlike skill female hands could wield a scepter. In France, Joan of Arc had astonished the nations by her military exploits, and the beautiful Heloise had linked her name in unenviable renown with that of Abelard. In Italy, Beatrice had been immortalized in the verse of Dante, and Laura in the songs of Petrarch. In every part of Europe woman had signalized her ability, and made her influence felt, in shaping the destinies of men and nations.

In Helena we see the woman of Christianity as modeled by the sacred

influences of the early centuries. In Vittoria Colonna we have a type of character, matured and ennobled by the virtues and the graces which all the added centuries had developed. Christianity claims them both as her daughters—the elder and the younger sister. For it was Christianity that made them what they were, took the rough stone from Nature's quarry and wrought it into forms of living beauty. Rome lays claim to them; but Christianity is wider than Rome—wider than any sect or nation. We claim them, and all others like them, in the name, and by the right of the great Church of all the ages—the Church of the Gospel—and of all who believe in and love Christ. Vittoria Colonna shows what Christianity can do for woman, even under the overshadowing influences of the Papacy.

In the stormy history of Italy no period is more eventful than the first half of the sixteenth century, when that country became the battle-field whereon kings and emperors struggled for the supremacy, and where the destinies of Europe were decided. Army after army swept over the fertile plains of Lombardy, marking their course by pillage and desolation; monarchs were deposed and reinstated; kingdoms were lost and won, while the masses of the people, nothing bettered by change of rulers, and having no interest in the conflict, lived on in subjection and ignorance, the common prey of all parties. The internecine strife of former times had resulted in an almost total departure of patriotic feeling from Italian breasts, and the most high born and powerful of Italy's sons were ever ready to enlist under the banner of that prince who assured the greatest glory and most plunder. Thus it was

that at this period the land resounded with the notes of war, and the horizon was always red with flame; glory was to be found on every battle-field, and the noblest knights of Christendom were seen rushing in its pursuit.

But while this was the condition of political affairs, this period also marked an era in the world of literature and art. There, under the beneficent patronage of the Medici, the intellectual stagnation of centuries was disturbed, a revival of letters took place, and thought, released from the narrow channels which had hitherto confined it, sought out for itself new and ever-widening paths. Poetic inspiration touched the lips of Tasso and Ariosto, and guided alike the chisel of Michael Angelo and the brush of Raphael. The palmy days of Greece seemed to be renewed, and Rome and Naples became the abodes of genius and intellect of the highest order.

Upon such a scene of activity, both political and mental, did the life of Vittoria Colonna open in the year 1490. She was the eldest child and only daughter of an ancient and noble Roman family, whose unbridled lawlessness and freebooting proclivities involved them in constant warfare, and made them the terror of their less powerful neighbors. Their strong castles of Marino and Paliano, beautifully situated on the hills to the southeast of Rome, and overlooking their broad and fair domains, yet bear witness to the former power and grandeur of the Colonnas. Alliance with such a race would bring increasing influence and an ample dower, and consequently the hand of Vittoria was eagerly sought in marriage by prince and noble.

When she was about four years of age affairs of state policy shaped her destiny for life. Her father, although a vassal of the Holy See, had offered his services to the King of Naples, in the war with France. But as he had changed his colors once, it was probable he would do so again, if by so doing he could better his fortunes. Accordingly Vittoria was delivered to the keeping of the Neapolitan sovereign as a pledge of the Colonna's fidelity,

and betrothed to his youthful subject, Ferdinand d'Avalos, Marquis of Pescara. Under the motherly care of Costanza d'Avalos, the sister of the marquis, she grew to womanhood, perfecting every grace of mind and person.

The poets of her day declare that she was the most beautiful woman of that period, and the portraits of her, still preserved at Rome, are said to uphold this judgment. The most authentic portrait is one in the Colonna Gallery at Rome, supposed to be a copy by Girolamo Muziano, from an original painting by some artist of higher note. Of this painting Trollope says: "It is a beautiful face of the true Roman type, perfectly regular, of exceeding purity of outline, and perhaps a little heavy about the lower part of the face. But the calm, large, thoughtful eye, and the superbly developed forehead, secure it from any approach to sensualism. The fullness of the lip is only sufficient to indicate that sensitiveness to, and appreciation of beauty, which constitutes an essential element in the poetical temperament. The hair is of that bright golden tint that Titian loved so well to paint; and its beauty has been especially recorded by more than one of her contemporaries."

Toward the young Pescara, the companion of her studies, and playmate of her leisure hours, an affection sprang up in Vittoria's bosom, which was ardently reciprocated, and the union planned for political purposes became fraught with happiness to those so deeply concerned. When they were both seventeen years of age the long arranged marriage was celebrated with all the pomp and splendor of that period. The rocky islet of Ischia, in the beautiful bay of Naples, which had been the retreat of her childhood, became the home of her married life. For a brief season the presence of the marquis, a man of kindred tastes and inclinations with herself, made amends for all the pleasures of society of which her seclusion deprived her. But, high-spirited and eager for fame as he was, he could not long remain in inactivity and retirement. His duty to

his sovereign called him to the wars, where he was to achieve a high military reputation, and become the most distinguished general of Italy.

Vittoria was thus left to cherish pleasant memories of bygone years in her little domain of Ischia. Here the accomplished Costanza d'Avalos, aided, no doubt, by the presence of the beautiful Vittoria, had gathered around herself a choice circle of kindred spirits, among whom we may mention Museflo, Giovio, Cariteo and Bernardo Tasso, who sang, in polished verse, the praises of the young marchesana. Doubtless the poetical element in Vittoria's nature was at this time first developed, although she seems to have written little before the death of her husband. At this period, however, she penned her first poem, an epistle to the marquis, who had been made a prisoner by the chances of war, in which she laments his ill-fortune and prolonged absence from her side. That they were devotedly attached to each other may be gathered from their letters, as well as from the poems in which she afterward bewails her departed lord. His continued absence, varied only by occasional short and happy meetings whenever the fury of war abated, served to keep alive all the romance and ardor of their early love. Vittoria touchingly describes such an interview in one of her sonnets, in which admiration for her warlike lord mingles with awe of his martial appearance, and sorrow for his so soon renewed absence.

But Pescara was winning laurels and covering himself with glory as a successful leader and able general, beloved by his soldiers, and feared by his enemies. Upon his first entrance into the army his rank procured him a high position, and he was at once appointed to the command of the light cavalry. But in his first campaign, as we have already mentioned, the fortunes of war were against him, and he was wounded and made prisoner in the disastrous battle of Ravenna. Through the mediation of friends he was soon ransomed, and returned to Ischia on a short furlough. But we soon afterward find

him again in the field gaining distinction with the army in Lombardy, and greatly contributing to the success of the Spanish arms. At the age of thirty-five we see him general-in-chief for the Emperor Charles V., in Lombardy, enjoying his highest confidence and favor. Under his masterly generalship the armies of the emperor in Italy were everywhere victorious against the French under the veteran leaders, La Tremouille and La Palissa, driving them from their strongholds, and defeating them on every field. In the year 1525 he crowned his rapid and glorious career by the signal victory of Pavia, when, in conjunction with the Constable de Bourbon, he defeated an army composed of the chivalry of France, headed by her most experienced generals, and animated by the presence of her warlike sovereign, Francis I. This victory, and the capture of the French monarch, justly raised its hero to the pinnacle of fame, caused his name to resound through Europe, and gave him almost unlimited power in Italy. So great was his power, and so widely acknowledged were his talents, that numerous attempts were made to turn him from the line of duty, and the crown of Naples was offered him as the reward of treachery.

Dissatisfied with the removal from his hands of his illustrious prisoner, Francis I., and dazzled by the splendid lure, he hesitated, and even entered into negotiations. Before he decided, however, he sought his wife's counsel. Had he done so sooner, he might have left to future generations a reputation unsullied by a single spot. She wrote in reply, "For me, believe that I do not desire to be the wife of a king; I am more proud to be the wife of that great captain, who in war, by his valor, and in peace by his magnanimity, has vanquished the greatest monarchs." Whether this noble reply or the fear of discovery induced him to shrink from the intended treason, we do not know, but by the betrayal of his accomplices into the power of his master, he impaired a character, hitherto, to all outward appearance, fair

and unspotted. Overwhelmed, either by remorse or chagrin, he soon afterward died, without any apparent malady, leaving Vittoria, a young and beautiful widow, to bewail her loss.

For a time she was inconsolable, and even meditated taking the veil, and retiring from a world, which no longer had any charms for her desolate heart. But the entreaties of her friends, who could not endure that the literary world should lose so fair a jewel, aided by the injunction of the Pope, changed her intention, although she spent some time in the solitude of the convent of San Silvestro at Rome. In this place her life as a poetess may be said to have begun, for she had heretofore written only occasional short sonnets. At length, when her grief had become more subdued, she returned to her favorite Ischia, where she spent the greater portion of her life. The youthful widow of a renowned warrior, in the prime of life and beauty, possessed of an ample fortune, and gifted with the highest talents, it is not strange that she was sought in marriage by many powerful princes. But to all she replied, "that though her noble husband might be by others reputed dead, he still lived to her, and to her heart." In one of her sonnets she thus declares her determination to remain faithful to the memory of her departed lord: "I will preserve the title of a faithful wife to my beloved—a title dear to me beyond every other, and on this island rock, once so dear to him, will I wait patiently, till time shall bring the end of all my griefs, as once of all my joys."

After several years, her mind, elevated and chastened by her great grief, turned to a higher source for comfort and guidance. Her later poems are not only characterized by a spirit of Christian resignation and trust, but also contain sentiments which have caused some to place her among those who held the Reformed doctrines, then so prevalent in Germany, but more rarely met with in Italy. That she was strongly inclined to these doctrines, if not a secret believer in them, is shown both by her later friendships

and by her devotional poems. Among her intimate friends, we may mention Contarini the Venetian, Cardinal Pole, and Ghiberto, Bishop of Verona, men of distinguished piety, who strove both by precept and example to reclaim the church from profligacy and corruption. But she also numbered among her friends and correspondents, those, who boldly cutting loose from the Mother Church as incapable of regeneration without a radical change, denounced the pernicious doctrines she held, and the corrupt lives of her clergy. Such a one was Bernardino Ochino, General of the Capuchins, and one of the most powerful preachers of that day, who fled from Rome, and cast in his lot with the Reformers.

In her poems Vittoria frequently advances doctrines opposed to the teachings of the Romish Church. In the lines below, she evidently indicates her disbelief in the necessity of the confessional:

"Confiding in His just and gentle sway,
We should not dare, like Adam and his wife,
On others' backs our proper blame to lay;
But with new-kindled hope and unfeigned
grief,
Passing by priestly robes, lay bare within,
To Him alone, the secret of our sin."

She here clearly shows that she did not recognize the need of a human mediator, to come between her conscience and her God.

In the following lines she brings out some of the points of the Calvinistic belief:

"When I reflect on that bright noble ray
Of grace divine, and on that mighty power,
Which clears the intellect, inflames the heart
With virtue, strong with more than human
strength,
My soul then gathers up her will, intent
To render to that Power the honor due;
But only so much can she, as free grace
Gives her to know and feel the inspiring fire.
Thus can the soul her high election make
Fruitful and sure; but only to such point
As, in His goodness, wills the fount of good,
Nor art nor industry can speed her course;
He most securely and alertly runs
Who most by Heaven's free favor is upheld."

Here she plainly expresses her opinion that the soul is powerless, even to worship, unless assisted by divine free grace, and that no labor or work of

man can avail anything to his salvation, but under God's favor.

To give any selections from Vittoria's poems which would be intelligible to the general reader, for the sake of illustrating their poetic beauty, would be to defeat the intention in quoting them, as a translation always fails of the original, and the above lines have been introduced only for the sake of the sentiments expressed. But we have the testimony of many who have enjoyed them in the original, that these sonnets display a rare combination of polished harmony and graceful measure, with touching and genuine feeling. The highest tribute of praise was paid to her talents and virtues by the first writers of her age. "In Tuscan song," says one of them, "she was inferior only to Petrarch; and in her elegiac poems on the death of her husband, she has beautifully expressed her contempt of the world, and the ardent breathings of her soul after the blessedness of heaven."

But although Vittoria Colonna is generally celebrated as a poetess, it is not for this reason that we have given her a place in our list. As one of the distinguished women of Christianity, she affords to us far higher interest than in any other respect. Her high position in society, her gifted intellect, and her acquaintance with the first men of her day, gave her an influence which must not be overlooked. That this influence was ever exerted in the cause of truth and virtue, is unanimously declared by all her biographers, who with one consent testify to the integrity of her life, and the genuine worth of her character.

The last years of her life were passed at Rome, where she enjoyed the friendship of that distinguished man Michael Angelo, who, in several poems addressed to her, attributes his conversion, which occurred late in life, entirely to her influence. Her last moments were cheered by the presence of this noble and devoted friend. Before her remains were committed to

the tomb, he reverently raised her hand to his lips. He afterward declared to an intimate friend his regret, that at that solemn moment, he had not dared to imprint a kiss upon her marble brow. She died at Rome, in February of 1547, deeply regretted by a large circle of friends, whom her sweet and gentle disposition had gained from all ranks. She was interred in the convent of St. Anne at Rome; and as the place of her burial was, at her own request, by no mark distinguished from those of the sisters of that religious house, no memorial of any kind now remains to designate the spot. But though no costly marble commemorates her last resting-place, she was destined to live in the memories of succeeding ages, as a devoted wife, a gifted poet, and a sincere Christian—a noble illustration of the true-hearted and lovely woman.

"Her rare virtues and consummate talents," says Mr. Hallam, in his *Literary History*, "were the theme of all Italy in that brilliant age of her literature. She was surnamed by the public voice of her cotemporaries, the *divine*, and her name is familiar to the ordinary reader at the present day." Much more might be said on the character of this noble woman, but we close our brief account of her with the following sonnet from the *Rinie Spirituale*, as given in Colquhoun's *Life in Italy and France in the Olden Time*. It beautifully illustrates the evangelical type of her piety and the fervor of her religious devotion:

"Would that a voice impressive might repeat,
In holiest accents, to my inmost soul,
The name of Jesus; and my words and works
Attest true faith in Him, and ardent hope.
The soul elect which feels within itself
The seeds divine of this celestial love,
Hears, sees, attends on Jesus. Grace from
Him
Illumes, expands, fires, purifies the mind.
The habit bright of thus invoking Him
Exalts our nature, so that it appeals
Daily to Him, for its immortal food.
In the last conflict with our ancient foe,
So dire to nature, armed with faith alone,
The heart, from usage long, on Him will call."