

SAINTS AND HEROES
TO THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES



ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI PREACHING TO THE BIRDS

SAINTS AND HEROES

To the End of the Middle Ages

BY

GEORGE HODGES

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS

CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA

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This edition, first published in 2006 by Yesterday's Classics, is an unabridged republication of the work originally published by Henry Holt and Co. in 1911. For a complete listing of the books published by Yesterday's Classics, visit www.yesterdaysclassics.com. Yesterday's Classics is the publishing arm of the Baldwin Project which presents the complete text of dozens of classic books for children at www.mainlesson.com under the editorship of Lisa M. Ripperton and T. A. Roth.

ISBN-10: 1-59915-093-X

ISBN-13: 978-1-59915-093-2

Yesterday's Classics
PO Box 3418
Chapel Hill, NC 27515

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CYPRIAN

200-258

JUST about the time when Cyprian was born in Carthage, Perpetua and Felicitas amazed the people. Everybody was talking about it.

Perpetua was twenty-two years old. Cyprian's father and mother must have known her very well. The two families belonged to the same high-born and wealthy society. They were all pagans together. But Perpetua had become a Christian. It was as if, in Russia, the daughter of a noble family should become an anarchist.

She joined the Christians. Then spies broke in upon a secret meeting. She and her companions were brought before the court; and they were all sentenced to be tortured till they changed their minds, or died. Felicitas, one of the company, was a slave girl. Many of the Christians belonged to the slave class. The new religion was largely recruited from the poorest people. This fact made Perpetua's association with them so much the more monstrous. Perpetua's family and friends implored her to renounce her Christian faith. They brought her little baby and begged her, for the child's sake, to sacrifice

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to the gods, and come home. But she refused. The young men who were arrested with her were thrown to the lions. Perpetua and Felicitas were tossed by a wild cow, and finally killed by the gladiators.

Amidst such scenes, Cyprian was born in Carthage. In his childhood, the Christians were still in constant peril. They were daily liable to insult, hooting, and stoning in the streets. The emperor Septimius Severus made it a crime under the law to invite anybody to join the Christian society. There was even a proposition to deny to the Christians the right of decent burial.

Then the emperors became too busy with other matters to pay much further attention to the spread of Christianity. Some of them were occupied with vicious pleasures, some with civil strife, some with the increasing dangers of barbarian invasion. There was a long peace. Maximin, indeed, broke it in 235; but otherwise it extended from the beginning of the young manhood of Cyprian till he was of an age of between fifty-five and sixty years.

When the persecution began again, in 249, in the reign of Decius, Cyprian himself had become a Christian.

He had first chosen the profession of the law, and attained a wide reputation for his eloquence, and had become a senator. He was rich both by his own efforts and by his family inheritance and lived handsomely in a great house, in the midst of extensive grounds. He had the esteem of his fellow citizens. He seemed to be in possession of all that makes life

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pleasant. He had reached the age of forty-five, when one is easily contented with a comfortable estate, and indisposed to change.

About that time he wrote a letter to his friend Donatus. "Donatus,"—he said, in effect,—“this is a cheerful world indeed as I see it from my fair garden, under the shadow of my vines. But if I could ascend some high mountain, and look out over the wide lands, you know very well that I should see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the seas, armies fighting, cities burning, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds, selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a company of quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not: they are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians,—and I am one of them.”

Cyprian was baptized. Within a year, he was ordained. Within another year, the bishop of Carthage died, and Cyprian was chosen in his place. The choice was made by the Christian people. They demanded Cyprian. They besieged his house, shouting his name. They gave him no peace till he consented. Thus he became, as the title ran, the Pope of Carthage.

Then arose the Decian persecution.

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The thousandth year of the history of Rome had been celebrated with triumphal games, and the emperor Decius was resolved to make the empire great again as it had been of old. But two things were necessary: one was the favor of the gods, the other was the unity of the people. And both of these were contradicted by the Christians. They not only refused to worship the gods, but daily reviled them; and they were a mysterious society, having their own purposes, keeping themselves apart from their neighbors. Plainly the first step toward a renewal of the old strength and glory of Rome was to put an end to the Christians.

Thus began the first general persecution. For almost a hundred years the Christians had lived in peril of their lives. Now in this city and now in that, they had been chased through the streets by mobs, and flung to lions and fire in the arena. But, at the command of Decius, the whole might of the Roman Empire was arrayed against them. In all places, Christians were thrust into prisons, scourged, starved, beaten with forks on iron, driven into the mountains and the deserts. In Rome, in Jerusalem, in Antioch, the bishop died a martyr.

The persecution made two significant disclosures.

It showed, on the one side, how great a place the Christian religion had come to hold in the lives of the people. For the sake of it, they despised death. They withstood the whole force of the imperial power. They declared that they were Christians, and

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no torture could make them deny their faith. The storm raged for more than a year, and when, in 251, Decius fell in battle fighting against the Goths, and the persecution ceased, the Christians were not defeated. They had suffered untold distresses, but the endeavor to destroy them had failed.

On the other side, the persecution disclosed an unexpected weakness. The long peace which preceded it had brought into the Church a great number of persons who had brought their sins along with them. That quiet and holy company which Cyprian had described to Donatus had come to contain men and women without any real understanding of religion, led astray by avarice and evil temper and offenses of the flesh, and ministered to by priests and even by bishops who were neglectful of their duties, and examples of evil rather than of good. When the persecution fell, these bad Christians, and a still greater crowd of weak ones, appeared immediately. They renounced their religion. They sacrificed to idols. The pagan altars were crowded with throngs of Christians in desperate haste to forsake Christ.

When the persecution was over the Church was confronted with two serious problems.

The first problem concerned the proper treatment of those who had denied the faith. A great number of these weak and frightened people who had deserted their religion desired to return. What should be done about that? Some proposed to meet them with charity, and welcome such as were really ashamed and sorry, with all loving kindness. Others

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proposed to meet them with severity, and were reluctant to take them back on any terms whatever. Let them wait for the everlasting verdict of God.

The second problem arose from the increasing bitterness with which this debate was carried on. The advocates of severity refused to yield anything to the advocates of charity. And when the charitable people won the day in the decisions of Christian assemblies, the severe people declared that they would not belong to a church which could deal with mortal sin so lightly. They went apart by themselves, and chose their own bishops and made their own laws. Thus to the question, What shall we do with those who have denied the faith? was added the question, What shall we do with those who have separated from the Church?

Cyprian came back from the safe place which had sheltered him during the storm of persecution and met these difficult problems. To his clear, legal mind, trained in the conduct of Roman administration, the need of the moment was a strong, central authority. As regarded the lapsed, he was on the side of charity. How could he be otherwise who, in fear or in prudence, had concealed himself from the perils of martyrdom? But as regarded the separatists, he took the position to which his experience as a Roman lawyer inclined him. He maintained the authority of the Church. There is only one church, he said, and outside of it is no salvation. "Whoever he is and wherever he is, he is not a Christian who is not in the Church of Christ." And the Church, he said, consists of those who obey the regularly

CYPRIAN

appointed bishop. "The bishop is in the Church, and the Church is in the bishop, and if any one is with the bishop, he is not with the Church." The statements are important, because they are the first clear utterances of a new era. They mark the definite beginning of the Church as a factor of essential importance in the Christian religion.

Then the persecution under Decius was followed by a persecution under Valerian.

The attack of Decius had been directed against all Christians; the attack of Valerian was directed mainly against the clergy. The idea was that if the leaders were taken away the Christian societies would fall into confusion. Thus, in Carthage, the storm fell on Cyprian. He made no attempt to escape. He was arrested, and brought to the court through streets lined with people, Christian and pagan. "Your name is Cyprian?" asked the proconsul. "It is," "You are the pope of a sacrilegious sect?" "I am." "The emperors require you to offer sacrifice." "I refuse to do so."

Thereupon the inevitable sentence was pronounced. "Thanks be to God!" said Cyprian.

He was led to the place of execution, the whole city attending. There was no pagan shouting. The man of blameless life and devotion to the good of others had won the esteem and affection of his neighbors. He took off his red cloak, and knelt in prayer. He directed that twenty-five pieces of gold should be given to the executioner. Then he bowed his head, and the ax descended.

ATHANASIUS

296-373

ONE day, in Alexandria, a bishop was standing by a window in his house, which looked out over the sea. He had invited some people to dinner, and they were late in coming, and he was waiting. When they came they found the bishop so interested in what he saw out of the window that they looked also. On the shore of the sea a little group of boys were “playing church.” One was the minister, the others were the congregation. The boy who was the minister called up the others one by one and baptized them in the sea; and this he did just as it was done in church, saying the right words and doing the right acts: The bishop beckoned to the boy. “What is your name?” he said. And the boy answered, “Athanasius.”

Some years after, when Athanasius had come to the last year of school, the bishop took him into his own house, and he became his secretary, and the bishop loved him as a son. The lad desired to be a minister in earnest, and the bishop taught him, and at last ordained him.

Now the minister of the largest church in Alexandria was named Arius. He was a tall, pale

ATHANASIUS

man, careless in his dress, and with his hair tumbling about his head, but kind and pleasant to everybody whom he met, and a great preacher. His church was always crowded, and he was much admired for his goodness and his eloquence. But Arius and the bishop did not agree. And one time, in the presence of a large number of ministers, at a convention, Arius said aloud and publicly that the bishop was not a good teacher of religion. The bishop, he said, was seriously mistaken.

Alexandria, at that time, was much like Athens when it was visited by St. Paul. It was a place where the people loved to argue and debate.

Now, there are two quite different things about which men may argue. They may debate matters which can be decided by weights or measures; as, for example, the height of a house. And they may come to a speedy decision about which there is no further doubt. Or they may debate matters which nobody understands or can ever understand completely; as, for example, the question whether human beings have any existence before they are born. Here one may say, "Yes, the soul of each man has always been in the world, now in a tree, now in a lion, and, at last, in the man"; while another may say, "No, the soul and the body came into being at the same time." And such a question they may go on debating forever, because neither can prove his position. The Alexandrians were fond of discussing these hard problems. They were, therefore, greatly interested in the debate between Arius and the bishop, and everybody took part in it, on one side or on the other.

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Arius said to the bishop, "You teach that Christ is only another name for God, and that there is no difference. How can that be, when God is the Father and Christ is the Son? Is not the Son different from the Father? Is He not, indeed, inferior to the Father? There must have been a time in the far spaces of eternity when the Son began to be, when He was created like the rest of us. He is, of course, divine but in an inferior position." At this the bishop was filled with horror and declared that Arius was either making Christ a creature like man, or at least was robbing Him of so much of His greatness that He was not truly divine, or was setting such a difference between Him and God that there were two gods according to his teaching, two distinct Gods.

This is not the place in which to discuss this difficult matter, as they discussed it in Alexandria. This much, however, may be said, that Arius in taking the names "Father" and "Son" literally, and making such inferences from them, was putting Christianity in danger of a pagan invasion. For if there may be two distinct gods, the Father and the Son, why not twenty, why not two hundred? We have to remember that a great part of all the people of Alexandria and everywhere else were pagans, and believed in many gods. Out of this the Christians had been saved. They had daily evidence of the confusion and doubt and evil living into which that belief brought men. Thus the doctrine of Arius, while to some it seemed reasonable enough, to others was an attack upon the very central meaning of religion.

ATHANASIUS

The emperor of the Roman world, at that moment, was a Christian. Constantine was the first Christian emperor. One day, as he was crossing the Alps at the head of an army, on his way to fight for the Roman throne which he presently won, he saw a bright light in the sky, like a blazing cross. And that night, in a dream, he saw Christ coming to him and telling him to go to battle with the cross upon his banner. Then when he was victorious, and was made at last sole ruler of the world, he took the side of Christianity. He stopped the long series of bitter persecutions. He put an end to the effort which had been made by emperor after emperor to destroy the Church. He became, in a way, a Christian; though not a particularly good one.

So when the debate which Arius began spread from Alexandria to other cities and threatened to divide the Christians into contending armies, Constantine interfered. One of his great hopes in siding with the Christians was thereby to bring about the unity of the people; and here were the Christians themselves divided. He determined to stop it by calling a great Christian council to decide the question.

The appointed place was Nicæa, near to where Constantine soon founded the city of Constantinople. To Nicæa, then, came bishops from all parts of the empire, from Carthage and Italy and Spain in the West, from India and Persia in the East. Some were lame and some were blind after the tortures of the persecutions. The president for the eastern churches was Eusebius of Nicomedia, the president for the western churches was Hosius of

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Cordova. All Christendom was represented. With the bishop of Alexandria came Athanasius.

The purpose of the council was to present to the world a statement of the true belief of Christians concerning the nature of Christ. This they did in terms which were afterwards used in what is called the Nicene Creed. Arius refused to sign it, and a few others agreed with him. They were expelled from the Church. Then the council was disbanded, and Constantine and everybody else thought that the trouble was happily ended. As a matter of fact, it was only begun.

No sooner had the bishops returned to their homes than the contention arose anew. Some liked the Nicene decision; others, as they considered it further, were not satisfied. And the unsatisfied ones were influential at the court. One was the chaplain of the emperor. Constantine was thus persuaded that Arius was right, after all. And what Constantine thought was the immediate opinion of many who knew little about it but were very anxious to stand well with Constantine. Against these Arians was Athanasius. Old Bishop Alexander had now died, and Athanasius had been made bishop in his place.

The dispute became a struggle between Alexandria and Constantinople, between Athanasius and Constantine. Arius himself presently died. He had been received by the emperor, and an order was issued that he should be restored to the communion of the Church. The old man was actually on his way to the service when he was seized with a bitter pain,

ATHANASIUS

so that he stopped in the street and sought refuge in the nearest house. The triumphal procession waited for him at the door. At last a man came out and said that Arius was dead. Constantine too came to the end of his great life, but his sons who succeeded him were on the Arian side.

Athanasius was banished from his city, and came back only to be banished again. Once on his return the rejoicings were so great that in after years, when the youth of Alexandria praised the splendor of any festival, the old men said, "Yes, but you should have been here on the day when Pope Athanasius came home."

Troops were sent to Alexandria. Athanasius was besieged in the church where he was holding service. It was in the night, and the great church, crowded with worshipers, was dimly lighted with lamps. The soldiers broke down the doors, and with drawn swords made their way through the congregation, in the midst of wild disorder, to the chancel. Athanasius was rescued by his friends after being nearly torn in pieces. He escaped to the desert.

One time he was pursued by his enemies on the Nile. As he rounded a bend of the river, in the dusk, he ordered his rowers to turn back. His pursuers came on with all haste and in the dusk of the late afternoon the two boats met. "Have you seen Athanasius?" the soldiers called across the water. "Yes," replied the bishop, "he is not far away!" Thus he escaped again.

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This life of hardship and danger Athanasius lived because he was not willing to deny what he held to be the faith. The whole Church seemed to be against him. Council after council was called by the emperors, attended by hundreds of bishops, making Arian creeds. The whole empire was thrown into confusion. Athanasius, on the other side, was preaching sermons and writing books and letters. The one man defied the Church. And he gained the victory! Year by year, it became plain that the theology of Arius was filled with confusion. People were perplexed by the long series of different Arian statements of belief. Athanasius maintained the divinity of Christ, in whom God dwelt among men. People were dismayed at the energy with which the Arian court used the swords of soldiers to maintain its side. The Church grew weary of the fierce debate. Then the last of the Arian emperors fell in battle with the Goths, and the war was ended. Theodosius, who followed him, was of the faith of Athanasius.

AMBROSE

340-397

THE experience of Athanasius showed plainly that while a pagan emperor might be a dangerous enemy to the Church, a Christian emperor might be a very inconvenient friend.

Not many of the rulers of Rome declared so bluntly as Constantius that they meant to rule the Church, but that was the intention of most of them. They wished to use the Church as a general uses an army, and the first necessity was obedience. It took hundreds of years to work out the idea, under which we live, that the state is to attend to matters political, and the Church to matters religious.

Meanwhile, the Church and the State fought for the mastery. The beginning of that long struggle, in which the Church was defeated in the East and the State was defeated in the West, appears in the lives of Chrysostom and Ambrose.

In the city of Milan, they were electing a bishop. Some of the Christians were Arians, some were Athanasians, and there was much excitement. The great church was crowded with people, shouting

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the names of their favorite candidates. In the high seat where the bishop was accustomed to sit, sat the Roman governor Ambrose, presiding over the assembly to keep order. Back in the church, a man had lifted his small child to his shoulder to give him a good look over the crowd, and the child saw Ambrose, in his robes of office, in the bishop's chair. In his surprise, he called out in his shrill voice, over all the noise, "Ambrose is bishop!" Immediately the words were taken up, and in a moment all the other names were set aside, and everybody was shouting: "Ambrose is bishop! Ambrose is bishop!"

Nothing was further from the plans of Ambrose. He was a great Roman noble. His father, as Prefect of Gaul, had been ruler over the greater part of Europe, and Ambrose was following in his steps. He was interested, indeed, in the Christian religion; but he had never been baptized. He had never even thought of the possibility of entering into the work of the Christian ministry. He was both astonished and displeased. He refused to consent to the demand of the people. Still the crowd shouted, and, though the governor dismissed the assembly, and sent them home, they besieged him as the Christians of Carthage had besieged Cyprian. Finally, much against his will, he agreed to do as they desired. He was baptized, confirmed, admitted to the Holy Communion, ordained deacon, ordained priest, and consecrated bishop of Milan, all in one week.

Ambrose found that, as bishop of Milan, he was in a place of as much public importance as had been held by his father who ruled Europe. He took a

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great part in three notable contentions of his time: against paganism, against Arianism, and against the emperor.

Ambrose saw the end of paganism. He was himself concerned in one of its last defeats, and the others occurred during his lifetime. His own fight against the old gods was over the Altar of Victory. In the senate house at Rome had stood from times immemorial an Altar of Victory. Above it was a winged figure with hands uplifted, standing on a globe,—Victory herself, the goddess of the Good Luck of Rome, in shining gold. This altar a Christian emperor had taken away, and the statue with it.

But the senate was still, for the most part, pagan. The great and ancient Roman families were pagan. However much or little they still cared for the old religion, they cared greatly for the old ways of their ancestors. They loved the customs which were glorified in the literature and sculpture of Old Rome. They felt toward the Christians as people of long descent and gentle breeding are tempted to feel to-day toward new neighbors, rich but ill-educated, with new ways.

The senate, therefore, petitioned for the return of the Altar of Victory. The humble terms of their request showed how completely the old era of pagan power had passed. They asked only for permission to keep a few of the ancient ceremonies and to say their own prayers in their own way. "Let us have one altar out of the destruction of the old religion. Pestilence and famine are abroad, and the

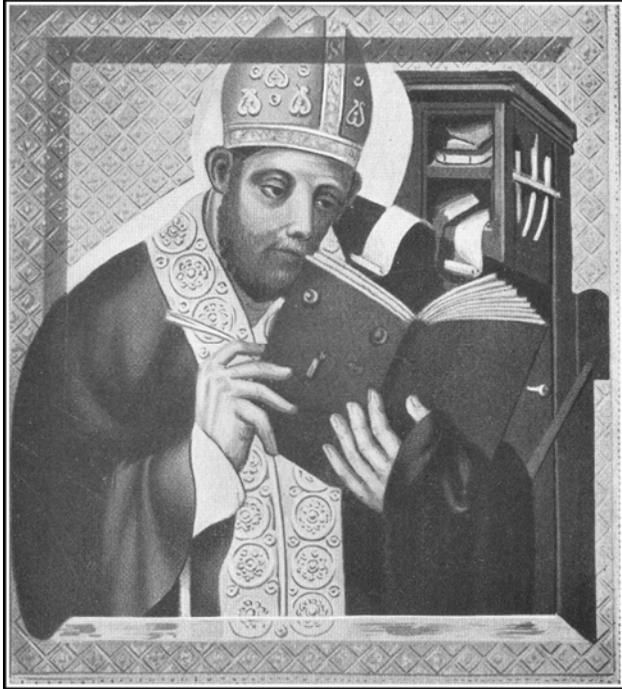
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barbarians are pressing down across the Danube and the Rhine; let us who are still of the old faith implore the protection of the gods who in the ancient days saved Rome when the Goths besieged it.”

Against this petition Ambrose protested. The gods, he said, had nothing to do with the saving of old Rome; it was the geese whose cackling waked the guard. And the altar was not replaced.

But the conflict was not over. In Alexandria, the Christians and the pagans fell to fighting, as they fought in the days of the persecutions; but now the pagans were on the defensive. The Christians attacked the mighty pagan temple, the Serapium, high on vast stone terraces in the midst of the city, approached by an ascent of a hundred steps. In the shrine stood the great image of Serapis, at whose fall, men said, the world itself would fall. Up went the victorious Christians, clambering with clubs and axes over the hundred steps, and breaking at last into the splendid shrine. Here they stopped, and for a little space nobody dared to proceed further. What if the ancient legend should prove true, and Serapis should avenge the insult to his image by earthquake, and lightning, and destruction! At last a soldier raised his ax and struck the idol full in the face. The cheek of Serapis was broken, and out swarmed a troop of frightened mice whose nest in the idol's head had been thus invaded. Then the silence of the destroyers changed to great laughter and shouts of derision; the image was pulled down and dragged about the streets. And there was no more public paganism in Alexandria.

AMBROSE



ST. AMBROSE

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In the West, the conflict came to an end in a mountain battle beside the Frigidus. The pagans had chosen a pagan emperor, and he went out at the head of an army to fight with Theodosius, not only for his throne, but for his religion. As they passed Milan, the pagans promised that when they returned they would stable their horses in the church of Ambrose. Thus the battle was joined; a fierce storm of snow beat in the faces of the pagan army, and they fled in hopeless defeat. It was the last stand of the old religion.

Meanwhile, Ambrose was contending with the Arians. There were not many of them in Milan, and they were discouraged by the gradual and general failure of their cause; but they had the Empress Justina on their side. She was the mother of the young emperor of whose domains, in the division of the empire, Milan was the capital. The Arians had been turned out of their churches, as the pagans had been turned out of their temples. But Justina was an Arian still. She asked the permission of Ambrose to have for herself and those who were of her belief, a single church in Milan. Ambrose refused to give it.

The long fight of the Arians against the Nicene Creed had been fought and lost. It had filled the Church with clamor and bitterness and division and tragedy. Now it was ended, and Ambrose would give no opportunity for beginning it again. He told the empress that she could not have a church. The empress, thereupon, proposed to take one. She had her imperial soldiers, and she gave them orders to drive Ambrose out of the city and to seize such

AMBROSE

churches as she wished. The bishop took refuge in a church, and his people gathered about him. There they guarded him day and night, passing the time in singing psalms.

At last, the bishop had a dream. He dreamed that beneath another church two martyrs of some old persecution had been buried. So men went to the place and dug into the ground with spades, and there, sure enough, they came upon the bones of these forgotten saints! And immediately the saints' bones began to work the most astonishing miracles. The lame were made to walk, and the blind to see. The whole city was filled with new excitement. It was plain, men said, that heaven and the saints were on the side of Ambrose. In the face of such reinforcements the empress prudently retreated. Thus was fought the last battle with the Arians in Milan.

The Roman emperors, after Constantine, were most of them weak rulers, sometimes quite young men, like Constantine's own sons, and, for the most part, governing only a portion of the empire. It was divided into east and west, with an emperor for each division; and each of these divisions was parted into imperial provinces. But there was one strong emperor, who in his time ruled the world. That was the great Theodosius.

But Theodosius had a hasty temper, and it brought him into a memorable conflict with Ambrose.

The people of that time were tremendously interested in athletic games. They went in great

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crowds to the vast amphitheaters where gladiators fought, and the circuses where chariot races were run. One side was for the Blues, the other for the Greens. In every city these sports brought together thousands of spectators.

Now it happened that in Thessalonica, a very popular charioteer had committed a crime, and had very properly been put in prison for it. The time for the races approached, and there was the charioteer still in the prison, and with no likelihood of release. The people, for the sake of the race, demanded of the governor that he should pardon the charioteer and let him out. But the governor refused. Thereupon a mob arose. They attacked the governor's house, and killed him, and dragged his body about the streets; and they released the charioteer.

Tidings of these disorders came speeding to the ear of Theodosius. The murdered governor had been his intimate friend. His anger knew no bounds. Straight he sent messengers to a commander of his troops with orders to avenge this tragedy upon the whole people of Thessalonica. The soldiers found the races in full swing. The immense circus was crowded to the topmost seat. The avengers entered, closed the gates and drew their swords, and proceeded to kill everybody in sight. For three hours they murdered the unarmed people. Seven thousand men, women, and children fell before them.

The story is still remembered of a father who had taken his two boys to the races, and begged the murderers to spare one, and to this they agreed, but

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he could not decide which one. He could not choose either of his sons to be put to death before his eyes. So the hasty soldiers killed them both, and their father with them.

Ambrose immediately wrote a letter to Theodosius. "You are a Christian," he said, "and have done this horror. Into this has your hasty anger led you. As for me, I pray for you, but you and I cannot stand together in the same church. Do not venture to appear where I am present. You have done the most horrible thing that was ever heard of. Repent before God, ask His pardon as David did. May He be merciful to your sinful soul."

In spite of the letter, the emperor came to church. The bishop met him in the outer porch. "You may not enter," he said. "This is no place for such as you, unless they come in the deepest shame and sorrow. Go back to your palace. Your hands drip with blood. Repent! repent! and then come; but not now."

It is one of the noblest scenes in history. Never has the Church stood out more splendidly against the world. There were later times, as we shall see, when bishops made themselves masters of kings, but sometimes their victory was spoiled by pride and selfishness. The triumph of Ambrose was a triumph of the Christian conscience. He was strong because he was right. And the great emperor knew it. He did repent. He humbled himself before God. In the church, in the presence of the people, he bowed himself to the ground with tears. "My soul

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cleaveth to the dust," he said. "O God, quicken me according to Thy word." He made a law, which still holds in all civilized countries, that no capital sentence should be carried into effect until thirty days after the condemnation.

Thus in the West, in the person of Ambrose, the Church asserted the rights of man against the injustice and tyranny of the State, and prevailed over the power of kings.