

CHAPTER VI.

ENDURANCE TO THE END—SAVONAROLA.

Love masters agony: the soul that seemed
 Forsaken feels her present God again,
 And in her Father's arms
 Contented dies away.

KEBLE.

Better a death when work is done,
 Than earth's most favored birth.

GEORGE MACDONALD.

'Tis not the whole of life to live,
 Nor all of death to die.

Hymnal.

Do you ask me in general what will be the end of the conflict? I answer, Victory. But if you ask me in particular, I answer, Death.—SAVONAROLA.

LET us go back to some of the great hero-martyrs of Italy, to Arnold of Brescia, Dante, and Savonarola. Shortly after the fall of the Roman Empire the baser influences of human nature again obtained the ascendancy. The Church could not prevail against them. Indeed the Church followed them. St. Bernard of Clairvaux stigmatized the vices of the Romans in these biting words: "Who is ignorant of their vanity and arrogance? A nation nursed in sedition, untractable, and scorning to obey unless they are too feeble to resist. Dexterous in mischief, they have never learned the science of doing good. Adulation and calumny, perfidy and treason, are the familiar acts of their policy."

Corruption and frivolity in high places never fail to exert a pernicious influence on the condition of society. They extend to the lower classes, when all become alike profligate.

Italy was abandoned to luxury and frivolity by the higher classes, while poverty, misery, and vice pervaded the lower. The churchmen were no better than the multitude. "If you wish your son to be a wicked man, make him a priest," was a common saying. Thus a once brave and vigorous people were on the verge of moral destruction.

In the twelfth century Arnold of Brescia sounded the trumpet of Italian liberty. His position in the Church was of the lowest rank. He was an impassioned and eloquent preacher. He preached purity, love, righteousness. He also preached liberty. This was the most dangerous of all his teachings. Yet the people revered him as a patriot. There were not wanting enemies to report his sayings to the Pope. Innocent II. condemned his views, and the magistrates of Brescia proceeded to execute his sentence. But Arnold, forewarned, fled over the Alps into Switzerland, where he found refuge at Zurich, the first of the Swiss Cantons.

Undismayed by fear, he crossed the Alps again, proceeded to Rome, and there erected his standard. He was protected by the nobles and the people, and for ten years his eloquence thundered over the Seven Hills. He exhorted the Romans to assert the inalienable rights of men and Christians, to restore the laws and magistrature of the republic, and to confine their shepherd to the spiritual government of his flock.

His rule continued during the lives of two Popes, but on the accession of Adrian IV., the only Englishman who ever ascended the throne of St. Peter, Arnold was opposed with vigor and power. The Pope cast an interdict over the whole people, and the banishment of the reformer was the price of their absolution. Arnold was apprehended and sentenced to death. He was burned alive in the presence of a careless and ungrateful people, and his ashes were thrown into the Tiber, lest his followers should collect and worship the relics of their master.

Italy went on in its career of frivolity, dissipation, and vice. State warred against state, and Guelphs and Ghibelines wasted the country. In the thirteenth century Dante

appeared, and again sounded the note of liberty. He believed in eternal justice. In virtue of the truth and love which dwelt in his own soul, he contrasted the life of Italy with the higher and nobler tendencies of humanity. The mad Italian world trembled in the light of time; between heaven above and hell beneath. He discerned eternal justice under the wild strivings of men. His whole soul rose to the height of the great argument, and he poured forth, in unequalled song, his vindication of the ways of God to man.

During the long centuries of Italian degradation and misery his burning words were as a watch-fire and a beacon to the true and faithful of his country. He was the herald of his nation's liberty—braving persecution, exile, and death for the love of it. In his "De Monarchia" he advocated, like Arnold of Brescia, the separation of the spiritual from the civil power, and held that the temporal government of the Pope was a usurpation. His "De Monarchia" was publicly burned at Bologna, by order of the papal legate, and the book was placed upon the Roman Index. He was always the most national of the Italian poets, the most loved, the most read. He was banished from Florence in 1301. His house was given up to plunder, and he was sentenced in his absence to be burned alive. During his banishment he wrote some of his noblest works. Men thought of him, revered him, and loved him. It was desired that his sentence of banishment should be repealed, and that he should return to Florence.

It was an ancient custom to pardon certain criminals in Florence on the festival of St. John—the apostle who "loved much." It was communicated to Dante that he would receive such a pardon on condition of his presenting himself as a criminal. When the proposal was made to him he exclaimed, "What! is this the glorious revocation of an unjust sentence, by which Dante Alighieri is to be recalled to his country after suffering about three lustres of exile? Is this what patriotism is worth? Is this the recompense of my continued labor and study? . . . If by this way only can I return to Florence, then Florence shall

never again be entered by me. And what then? Shall I not see the sun and the stars wherever I may be, and ponder the sweet truth somewhere under heaven, without first giving myself up, naked in glory, and almost in ignominy, to the Florentine people? Bread has not yet failed me. No! no! I shall not return!" Dante accordingly refused the pardon thus offered. He remained in banishment for twenty years, and died at Ravenna in 1321.

About a century later another herald of freedom appeared—a most faithful and courageous man, who ranks among the jewels of history, Girolamo Savonarola. He was born at Ferrara, in 1452. His parents, though poor, were noble. His father waited at court, the privilege being a patrimony of the family. His mother was a woman possessed of great force of character. It was at first intended that Girolamo should be educated as a physician, but his proclivities drew him in quite another direction.

Italy was still abandoned to its passions, its corruptions, and its vices. The rich tyrannized over the poor; and the poor were miserable, helpless, and abandoned. Girolamo had early imbibed religious ideas. He devoted himself to the study of the Bible, and to the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. He found himself at war with the world, and was shocked by the profanations that existed around him. "There is no one," he said, "not even one remaining, who desires that which is good; we must learn from children and women of low estate, for in them only yet remains any shadow of innocence. The good are oppressed, and the people of Italy are become like the Egyptians who held God's people in servitude."

At last Girolamo determined to abandon the world of vice and give himself up entirely to religion. In his twenty-third year he packed up his little things in a bundle, left his home without taking leave of his parents, and walked to Bologna. He went straight to the convent of San Dominico, and asked to be admitted to the order as a servant. He was at once received, and prepared to enter his novitiate.

He forthwith wrote to his father, informing him of the reasons why he had left home. "The motives," he said,

"by which I have been led to enter into a religious life are these—the great misery of the world; the iniquities of men; their adulteries and robberies; their pride, idolatry, and fearful blasphemies. . . . I could not endure the enormous wickedness of the blinded people of Italy; and the more so because I saw everywhere virtue despised and vice honored. A greater sorrow I could not have in this world; and I was thus led to utter a prayer to Jesus Christ that He would take me out of this sink of infamy. I had this short prayer continually on my lips, devoutly beseeching God to cause me to know the way wherein I should walk. . . . Nothing more remains for me to say than to beseech you, as a man of strong mind, to comfort my mother, and I pray that you and she will give me your blessing."

The corruption of the Church at that time had become almost intolerable. The insatiable avarice of Paul II., the treachery and unscrupulousness of Sixtus IV., the unmentionable crimes of Alexander VI. (Borgia),* caused universal dismay among the good men throughout Italy. "Where," said Savonarola in his cell, "are the ancient doctors; the ancient saints; the learning, the love, the purity of past days? Oh, God, that these soaring wings, that lead only to perdition, could be broken!"

At the same time liberty had almost disappeared. The petty princes who tyrannized over the people showed neither the energy nor the sagacity of their fathers. Their only craving was for power without control. Their conduct occasionally roused the resentment of their subjects. Thus, several of them were assassinated in the open day. Duke Galeazzo was assassinated in a church at Milan. The Duke Nicolas d'Este was killed at Ferrara. The Duke Giuliano de' Medici was assassinated in the cathedral at Florence during the elevation of the Host.

* The pontificate of Alexander VI. is certainly the blackest page in the history of modern Rome. The general demoralization of that period, of which abundant details are found in John Burchard's "Diarium," as well as in Panvinius, Muratori, Fabre's continuation of Fleury's "Ecclesiastical History," and other writers, Catholic as well as Protestant, appears in our time almost incredible. — *English Cyclopaedia.*

In the midst of so much demoralization the life of Savonarola was formed. The Superior of the Dominican convent at Bologna, was not long in discovering the rare qualities of his mind. Instead of doing menial work, he was promoted to instruct the novices. Obedience was his duty, and he employed himself in his new office with a willing heart. He was then raised from the office of teacher of the novices to that of preacher. At the age of thirty he was sent to preach at Ferrara, his birthplace. His sermons met with no attention there. He was only one of themselves. What could they hear from him that they did not know before? He received no honor in his own country. He preached also at Brescia, at Pavia, and at Genoa, where his eloquence was more appreciated.

After remaining for about seven years in the Dominican convent at Bologna, Savonarola was at last sent to Florence. The road took him through a new country. He had never travelled so far south before. He went on foot, and had time enough to survey the beautiful scenery around him. He went steadily up the hill to Lugana, looking back toward Bologna and the landscape toward the north, which he was never again to see. He passed through the wild mountains, bleak and bare, to the summit at La Futa, about three thousand feet above the sea. He went by the valley of the Seive, and crossed the spur of the Apennines which divides the valley of the Seive from that of the Arno. And there lay the magnificent Florence beneath him—the scene of his brilliant career, of his courageous life, and also of his martyrdom."

On arriving at Florence, Savonarola went at once to the convent of St. Mark, where he was admitted as a brother. At that time Lorenzo the Great was in the zenith of his power. He had got rid of his enemies by exile, imprisonment, or death. He kept the people at his feet by his fetes, dances, and tournaments. He was alike the favorite of the nobles and of the rabble. All the profligacy of his life seems to have been forgotten because he was the patron of letters and the fine arts. Villari says that in his time "the artists, men of letters, politicians, the gentry, and the com-

mon people, were alike corrupt in mind; without virtue, public or private; guided by no moral sentiment. Religion was used either as a tool for governing, or as a low hypocrisy. There was no faith in civil affairs, in religion, in morals, or in philosophy. Even scepticism did not exist with any degree of earnestness. A cold indifference to principle reigned throughout.*

Savonarola was disgusted with all this. When he first preached at St. Lorenzo he launched out against the corruptions of the times. He smote vice with whips of steel. He denounced gambling, lying, and cheating, quoting largely from the Bible. The audience were at first surprised, then disgusted, then indignant. Who was this brown-clad monk who had come across the hills to denounce the corruptions of Florence? They sneered and laughed at him. In a city of beauty he was anything but beautiful. He was a man of middle stature, and of dark complexion. His features were coarse and sharp; his nose was large and aquiline; his mouth was wide, with full lips; and his chin was deep and square. Even at twenty-three his forehead was furrowed with wrinkles. Was this a man to achieve influence or position in Florence?

When another learned monk preached, crowds flocked to hear him. He knew the people, and tickled their vices. He denounced nothing—not even the loss of piety or liberty. He was a friend of Lorenzo the Magnificent. When Savonarola was taunted with the success of his rival, he answered, "Elegance of language must give way before simplicity in preaching sound doctrine." He felt convinced of his divine mission. He held it to be the highest duty of his life, and his only thought was how he should be best able to fulfil that duty.

At St. Mark's he resumed the instruction of the novices, and lectured occasionally in the cloister to a select number of indulgent hearers. He was urged to lecture from the pulpit. He agreed, and preached an extraordinary sermon

* Professor Villari, "History of Girolamo Savonarola and his Times."

on the 1st of August, 1490. He was then thirty-eight. The following year, during Lent, he preached in the Duomo. The people crowded to his sermons. He roused in the excited multitude the fervor of his own feelings. He was no longer the insignificant man he had appeared at St. Lorenzo. He fulminated with all his might against the vices of the slumbering people, and endeavored to rouse them from their lethargy. They hung upon his lips, and their enthusiasm for him increased from day to day.

All this caused the greatest displeasure to Lorenzo de Medici. He sent five of the principal citizens of Florence to represent to Savonarola the dangers that he was incurring, not only to himself but to his convent. His reply was, "I am quite aware that you have not come here of your own accord, but have been sent by Lorenzo. Tell him to repent of his sins, for the Lord spares no one, and has no fear of the princes of the earth."

In the same year he was chosen Prior of St. Mark's. He preserved his integrity and independence. Notwithstanding Lorenzo's rich presents to the convent, Savonarola judged his character severely. He knew of the injuries which he had inflicted on public morality. He regarded him as not only the enemy but the destroyer of liberty; and that he was the chief obstacle to an amelioration of the habits of the people, and to their being restored to a Christian course of living. In his sermons he continued to denounce gambling, though it might be profitable to the state; he condemned the luxuries and extravagances of the rich, as demoralizing to the people at large.

Savonarola always insisted on the necessity of good works, and consequently on human free will. "Our will," he said, "is by its nature essentially free; it is the personification of liberty." God is the best helper, but He loves to be helped. "Be earnest in prayer," said Savonarola; "but do not neglect human means. You must help yourself in all manner of ways, and then the Lord will be with you. Take courage, my brethren, and, above all things, be united." And again he says, "By veracity we understand a certain habit by which a man, both in his actions and in

his words, shows himself to be that which he really is, neither more nor less. This, although not a legal, is a moral duty; for it is a debt which every man, in honesty, owes to his neighbor, and the manifestation of truth is an essential part of justice."

At length Lorenzo the Magnificent retired from Florence to his Villa Corregi,* to die. He went in the early part of the month of April, when nature was at its freshest and brightest—when the voice of the nightingale never is mute. The villa lies in the wide valley of the Arno, about three miles to the northeast of Florence. You see from its windows the Duomo and Campanile, and the spires of many churches, rising above the trees. Toward the north are the heights of Fiesole, and in the distance the soft outline of the Tuscan hills.

But all this beauty could not shut out disease and pain. Lorenzo was on his death-bed. All remedies had been tried. Draughts of distilled precious stones produced no effect. Nothing relieved the great man. Then he turned his thoughts to religion. His sins appeared to grow in magnitude as he approached death. The last offices of religion afforded him no relief. He had lost all faith in man; for every one had been obedient to his wishes. He did not believe in the sincerity of his own confessor. "No one ever ventured to utter a resolute no to me." Then he thought of Savonarola. That man had never yielded to his threats and flatteries. "I know no honest friar but him." He sent for Savonarola, to confess to him. When the friar was told of the alarming state of Lorenzo, he set out at once for Corregi.

Professor Villari thus tells the story of the last interview between Lorenzo and Savonarola. Pico della Mirandola had no sooner retired than Savonarola entered, and approached respectfully to the bed of the dying Lorenzo, who said that there were three sins he wished to confess to him, and for which he asked absolution: the sacking of Volterra;

* The villa has passed into private hands, and is now called Medici-Sloane.

the money taken from the Monte delle Fanciulla, which had caused so many deaths; and the blood shed after the conspiracy of the Pazzi. While saying this he again became agitated, and Savonarola tried to calm him by frequently repeating, "God is good, God is merciful."

Lorenzo had scarcely left off speaking when Savonarola said, "Three things are required of you." "And what are they, father?" Savonarola's countenance became grave, and raising the fingers of his right hand, he thus began: "First, it is necessary that you should have a full and lively faith in the mercy of God." "That I have most fully!" "Secondly, it is necessary to restore that which you unjustly took away, or enjoin your sons to restore it for you." This requirement appeared to cause him surprise and grief; however, with an effort, he gave his consent by a nod of his head.

Savonarola then rose up, and while the dying prince shrank with terror in his bed, the confessor seemed to rise above himself when saying, "Lastly, you must restore liberty to the people of Florence." His countenance was solemn, his voice almost terrible; his eyes, as if to read the answer, remained fixed on those of Lorenzo, who, collecting all the strength that nature had left him, turned his back scornfully, without uttering a word. And thus Savonarola left him without giving him absolution; and Lorenzo, lacerated by remorse, soon after breathed his last.

His son Piero succeeded him. He was in all respects worse than his father. He cared nothing for letters or the arts, but gave himself up to frivolity and dissipation. Savonarola went on preaching as before. His intensity increased, and his name spread far and wide. Through the influence of Piero he was sent away from Florence for a time, and preached at Pisa, Genoa, and other towns. He again returned to Florence. He enforced the law of poverty in his convent, and desired that the monks should live by their own labor. He gave special encouragement to the study of the Holy Scriptures, and desired that he and his brethren should go forth to teach among the heathen. When troubles came upon him he thought of leaving Florence and giving himself up to missionary work,