ST. MARTIN OF TOURS.¹

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THERE is hardly a spot on earth where the pure sense of beauty so permeates the very air as at Tours. Tours is the heart of the real France, of French royalty, of the irrepressible aristocracy that inheres in everything French, whatever the prevailing government or political theory. It is as hard for a French peasant to be plebeian. From the earliest period of the Middle Ages down to the present day, dwellers in Tours have created beautiful things, their interests and accomplishments varying with the ages.

I will not detain you with the history of Tours under the Romans or of the introduction of Christianity at the time of the persecution of Decius in the third century. St. Gatian was traditionally the founder. He is hardly more than a name, though his spirit animates that most beautiful of outer forms, the cathedral of Tours. The religious annals of Tours really begin with St. Martin, whose sweet and gentle nature drew the worship of the earlier Middle Ages as that of St. Francis of Assisi did that of the later. Martin was born about 316 A.D., and his life filled the fourth century. He came of a respectable though not noble family from Sabaria in Lower Hungary. He was baptized in early youth, but his parents were heathen; his father, despite the pleas of his famous son, remained so. Martin at first enlisted in the army, serving in North Italy and Gaul under the Emperor Julian. His philanthropy was first manifested one day when a shivering beggar appealed to the passing cohorts, and Martin, tearing off his cloak, cut it in two with his sword and gave the beggar half. The

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part that he retained was preserved in the oratory of the Frankish kings under the name of St. Martin's Cloak. Martin's heart was not in the military career, and he meant at the first chance to get his discharge. Matters came to a head when the commander, planning an incursion into Germany, first distributed donatives among the soldiers,—a not infrequent means of strengthening military morale in those days. Martin, as a conscientious objector, refused his donative. When taunted with cowardice by his officers and his fellow-men, he offered to attest his bravery by standing in front of the army and warding off the foe with the sign of the cross. His challenge was accepted and Martin would have fulfilled his pledge, had not a messenger come from the enemy next morning, bearing their unconditional surrender.

Martin therefore left the army, and after receiving instruction from no less a person than Hilary of Poitiers, took Holy Orders, beginning in the humble office of an Exorcist. After returning for a visit to his parents and attempting to settle in Illyrium and then in Milan, he found the Arian heresy too strong for his powers, and withdrew with a friend to a small island in the Mediterranean. Martin had not the intellectual armor for taking the field against heretics. That was the task for a Hilary or an Augustine. Martin's equipment was a holy life and the faith that works miracles and moves mountains. These were the appropriate weapons against Paganism. He therefore returned to Gaul, where there was plenty of Paganism to combat. He established a simple monastery at what is now Ligugé, near Poitiers, but he was not destined long to remain in the career that would have pleased him most, that of a simple monk and humanitarian. On the death of St. Lidorius, Bishop of Tours, in 372, Martin was chosen to succeed him. Like Ambrose and Gregory, he was made a Bishop against his will; _noluit episcopari_. But he could not quite forgo the _beata solitudo_ of the monastic life; he founded a new establishment two miles out of Tours across the river, where St. Gatian had had his cell, and where new cells for the brethren were readily hollowed out of the hill-side, like the dwellings that one sees there to-day. In contrast to the first foundation at Ligugé, this was known as the larger monastery—_Maius Monasterium_, whence its modern name of Marmoutier. It was ransacked by the Normans in the ninth century, and restored in the tenth. In the thirteenth century, a splendid Abbey Church was erected, and the whole establishment
protected with a wall. It became rich and prosperous. There is a little couplet that runs:

De quelque côté que le vent vente
Marmoutier a cens et rente.

"What'er the point whence blows the wind,
Marmoutier's purse is warmly lined."

The abbey remained one of the finest specimens of feudal and military as well as ecclesiastical architecture in France, and naturally attracted the attention of the Protestants in 1562, and the Disciples of Reason about 1793. In accordance with the usual procedure, the former ravaged the interior, and the latter pulled down the exterior. Most of the surviving ruins crumbled away in the nineteenth century:

*Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.*

In his function of Bishop, Martin's chief services, as I have indicated, were two,—his successful contest against the surrounding heathen, and the miracle of his own life. He was a man of God, like the prophets of old. His fame filled the land and monarchs did his bidding. Sulpicius Severus, the biographer of Martin, tells a charming story of how the Empress, the wife of Maximus, invited him to the palace, hung with rapt attention on his lips as he discoursed on things present and to come, and served him in solitary state at dinner, herself content with the crumbs that he had left. In the manner of the Gospel, she washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head, thus being a Martha and a Mary in one, ministering like the former and listening like the latter. All this was a bit embarrassing to the Bishop, who was not used to such courtesies. It also gave occasion for his enemies to spread scandal, in which, we need not say, there was no grain of truth.

For Martin was a holy man; he more nearly approached the goal that monasticism hoped to reach than perhaps any of his contemporaries. We must not regard the monastic life as primarily a flight from the world; it was rather a spiritual discipline as practical as military discipline is to-day. Its object was to develop supernatural qualities in minds predisposed to believe that these could be attained. The converse of *laborare est orare* is also true; I mean to say, a monastic *oratory* was likewise a *laboratory*, where a perfectly definite experiment,—a spiritual, not a physical experiment—was tried, and achieved.
The life of St. Martin, says Sulpicius, was a constant prayer. Just as a blacksmith gets a change from his work by striking his anvil, so the Saint, when apparently otherwise engaged, was really praying. The result was a nature that to itself and to others at least appeared to have acquired a special spiritual insight, the power of associating with beings of the other world, of conversing with them, of seeing them face to face. An anchoret who inhabited the wilds of Mt. Sinai sans friends and sans raiment, was asked, by someone who managed to have a brief conversation with him, why he shunned all human society, even that of monks. He replied, "He who is entertained by men, cannot be visited by angels." St. Martin was visited by angels, as he believed, and by Christ himself, and not infrequently by the Devil. For with the establishment of monasticism, Satan had found a new and subtle form of temptation. He would appear in the guise of an angel, or of Christ, to some monk who liked to boast of the number of the angelic visitations vouchsafed him, and thus the sin of superbia would set in and make him an easy prey for the adversary. Martin, of course, was proof against such assaults. When the Devil once appeared to him in an aureole of purple light, clad in a royal robe, crowned with a golden diadem studded with precious stones, Martin reminded him that our Lord would not manifest himself with such a display of tinsel. But ordinarily, Satan came merely for a quiet chat with the Saint. He knew he was beaten, but he just couldn't keep away. On one occasion, Satan argued, on a very high theological plane, that there is no salvation for those who have once fallen into sin. Martin, anticipating Bobby Burns by some centuries, retorted that on the contrary if the Devil himself would repent there might still be a chance for him; in fact he intimated that he would gladly intercede for him. A spirit like this had no room for enmities. Martin was sweetly tolerant of everybody; he would put up with insults even from the lower clergy infimi clericis. He never became angry; he never quite smiled,—but his face was ever suffused with a heavenly light, extra naturam hominis. Fortunatus, who wrote an epic on the saint, caught this quality in a couplet:

O sinceris oculi nulla caligine pressi,  
Mens radiata sopo retinens sine nube serenum,—

"O purest eyes, and thought-illumined mind,  
That piercing shadows, scans th' unclouded blue."
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This is the mind that can see visions, talk with angels, and by what had become a natural power, performed miracles, even to the raising of the dead. And, once more, such a virtue, acquired by spiritual solitude, has a social value. Martin, as Fortunatus has it, is a recluse who serves society:

Per medios populos anachoreta potens.

A virtue went out from him as he passed in the crowd. Once when he had spent the night at a certain monastery, the holy virgins of an adjoining convent rushed into the cell that he had occupied, licked with their tongues the places that his sacred body had touched, and divided the straw on which he had reposed. One of them hung a bit of the straw about the neck of a man possessed of the Devil. Straightway the devil left him and his soul was cleansed. Verily, these were the ages of faith.

There was no place for enmity, I have said, in St. Martin’s heart, but enemies he had. A life so pure, so single, so unpractical, was a target for a certain sort of envy and ridicule. One day, when he was beginning his morning with his customary meditation in his solitary cell, a poor man appeared shivering with the cold and begging for some clothes. Martin reported his case to the archdeacon, who promised to tend to it. But the archdeacon was a busy man, and let the matter slide. A few hours later, the beggar came to Martin again and told him that nothing had been done. The archdeacon likewise appeared to remind his superior that it was time to meet the people who were gathering in the church. Martin replied that he could not until the poor man’s needs had been attended to. The archdeacon became exceedingly irate, he went out and returned with a very cheap and rough specimen of a tunic, which he flung at the bishop’s feet. The latter took off his own garment, handed it to the man, and himself put on the other without a word. He then went to the service. While he was officiating at the altar, a globe of light played about his head and its rays streamed over his shoulders. All this makes a pretty story of a very holy man, especially when it is turned into graceful verse by Fortunatus. But one can see how a busy and practical person like the archdeacon might well get irritated with the Saint. The thing might have been differently done, with a little less of the heroic and a little more of common sense and regard for discipline.
We gather from Sulpicius that Martin's associates were not all *extra naturam hominis*. While he was at prayer, they had leisure for *salutations*—for passing the time of day. They probably sat down in *cathedrae* once in a while, whereas Martin, whenever he was so uncestial as to sit, used nothing but a three-legged stool. It is obvious that the strict Egyptian habit in the matter of food and drink did not find favour in Gaul and that men and women, though loyal to the monastic life, did not quite forgo the pleasures of society. *Galli sumus*, says Sulpicius by way of apology. "We're French." "It is inhuman," says a Gallic monk, "to expect us Gauls to live on angel-food." Sulpicius quite expects, from his sharp contrasting of Martin's mode of living with that of the religious in general, to draw down on his head the wrath, as he puts it, of both women and monks. There is an air of defence, not to say defiance in his biography.

I must tell just one more anecdote which Sulpicius narrates to refute a slanderer, who had inquired why Martin, after miraculously quenching fires and raising the dead, had been nearly burned to death himself. It was on one of his episcopal visitations in mid-winter, when the brethren gave him a chamber the pavement of which was cracked. Underneath, it is of some interest to note, there was steam-heating, a *hypocaust*, in the old Roman way; this is a luxury which would not be allowed in all monasteries to-day, at least not in Italy, and to which Martin certainly was not accustomed. A comfortable bed of straw had been prepared for him in a corner. Martin was horrified at the sight, and coming as near to getting mad as I suppose he ever came he threw the litter aside and lay down on the bare floor in his usual way. But the straw, unluckily, had fallen over some of the cracks in the floor and in the course of the night the heat from the radiator ignited it. Martin woke in alarm, and as he confessed later to Sulpicius, yielded to the temptation of the Devil, who caught him before he was fairly awake, and hence the saint sought to put the fire out rather than to have recourse to prayer. While he was struggling with a refractory bolt on the door, the flames spread and caught his robe. But now he came to his better senses. He knelt *in the midst* of the fire, which at once died down. Just then the brethren rushed in, put out the remnants of the blaze, and perhaps concluded that they had rescued the Saint from burning. He was too modest to explain the truth till Sulpicius got it from him. But again, there is a chance
for another version, and for some feeling on the part of the hosts who had almost been burned out of house and home in return for their efforts to make the bishop comfortable on a cold night.

Towards the end of his life, Martin found himself at odds with most of his fellow bishops. I think we must commend him for his dissent. It arose over the case of Priscillian, the Spanish heretic. The nature of Priscillian's heresy—formerly a matter of much debate, became less obscure by the finding, not many years ago, of one of his writings. Priscillian was rightly enough condemned, and most unwisely condemned to death by an ecclesiastical court at which the Emperor Maximus presided. It is the first case in history when a man was killed by order of the Church for wrong opinions. Martin was not infected with the heresy of the accused, but he rightly objected to the severity of the punishment. He courageously took the emperor to task and warned him that he was simply preparing the halo of martyrdom for Priscillian, as indeed proved to be the case. Martin's remonstrances were of no avail, and Priscillian with some of his faithful followers was put to death. This was in 385 A.D. From that moment to the end of his life, Martin attended no meeting of the bishops of Gaul. It should be noted that St. Ambrose held exactly the same attitude in this matter. Sulpicius, naturally, has it in for the bishops. "If any one of these enemies," he remarks, "should read these lines, let him blush. If he gets mad at what he reads, he will confess the indictment, even if I happened to have meant somebody else."

Sulpicius devotes an entire letter to the death of Martin, or rather his passing from this life to immortality. The Devil put in an appearance at the last moment; he seemed a bit sorry to have the good man go. "Avaunt, thou bloody beast!" said the saint. "Thou shalt find no prey in me." Martin's face shone with a cheerful light. No spot or stain was on his body. Purer than crystal, whiter than milk, it seemed as though already transformed into that spiritual body promised to the faithful after the resurrection. The whole city, and many from other cities flocked to the funeral. Among them came a band of holy virgins, ashamed to cry their hearts out, as they should have liked to do, and concealing their grief in a sacred joy.

The judicial Gibbon sums up the career of St. Martin in a pithy sentence. "In the West, Martin of Tours, a soldier, a hermit, a
bishop, and a saint, established the monasteries of Gaul; and his eloquent historian challenges the deserts of Thebais to produce, in a more favourable climate, a champion of equal virtue." Even Gibbon, like Satan, can speak no ill of St. Martin. After his death, his fame was bound to shine the brighter, and the little idiosyncrasies to disappear.

_Ergo postque magisque viri nunc gloria claret._

Sulpicius Severus, who knew Martin intimately, wrote the first memorial, in the shape of a _Vita_, three letters, and a book of dialogues on monasticism. The _Vita Sancti Martini_ immediately became one of the best selling books of the age. It was known all over Italy and Illyria and of course Gaul. One of the speakers in the _Dialogues_ declares that he found it everywhere in his travels through Egypt far up the Nile. Poets followed in the train of Sulpicius, particularly our friend the troubadour, Fortunatus, who wrote his epic on the Saint at the request of Gregory of Tours.

Not only poetry but architecture enshrined the memory of St. Martin. Gregory of Tours mentions monasteries and basilicas erected in his honour in France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal; some of these are celebrated by Fortunatus in special poems. Nor was Great Britain backward in reverencing him. Churches of St. Martin abounded in England, and St. Ninian erected to him the first stone church in Scotland, _Candida Casa_, in Galloway. Scotland recognized the celebrity of the saint by making the anniversary of his death one of the quarter-days (four days in the year) when rents are paid—Scotland could perhaps give no greater compliment to anybody. November 11 is also a great day for the Tourangeaux. The goose makes fine eating at that time, and hence the goose became the emblem of St. Martin. And as snow may fall as early as that day, snow is still called in France St. Martin’s mantle; he is still casting off the cloak of his charity as before.

St. Martin, the apostle of the poor, was reverenced, even in his own lifetime, by lords and kings. The honorary canons of his abbey at Tours came to include the archbishop of Cologne, the earls of Douglas, the counts of Flanders, Dunois, and Angoulême, and since the time of Hugh Capet (987), the Kings of France were likewise Abbots of Tours. From their fear of the miraculous power of St.
Martin, certain of the Merovingian kings refrained from imposing a tribute on Tours, and from Clovis to Philippe Auguste (1179), the city had the right of coinage. King Chilperic, in spite of his advanced views on theology, was very much in awe of the Saint. During his controversy with his brother Guntram, the King of Burgundy, he addressed a letter to St. Martin in some anxiety to find whether it would be too much of a sacrilege to extract Guntram from the basilica in case the latter took refuge there. Baudigilus the Deacon, placed the letter, with a blank sheet for an answer, on the tomb of the Saint, but Martin very properly refused to notice such correspondence as that. I might multiply indefinitely these tokens of the immortal influence of a sainted man. The matter may be summed in the words of Odo of Cluny in the tenth century. "Even now," he says, "when love has grown cold, crowds of pilgrims go to that sacred place in Tours, so that it may rightly be said of that same Martin, that all the world longs to look upon his face" (cuius vultum desiderat universa terra).

As we reflect on the royal history of the city of Tours, its adsorption of wealth and beauty, and then go back to the simple purity and poverty of St. Martin's life, we may regard this fair city as a fulfilment of the precept of the Gospel, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you." Its history is symbolized by one of its churches, which, built in the twelfth century on the site of a church dating from St. Gatian, received the name of Notre-Dame-la-Pauvre; but when the humble structure was transformed during the Renaissance into something more worthy of the Blessed Virgin, it received a new name, Notre-Dame-la-Riche. And if, as I have endeavoured to show, Tours has always basked in an atmosphere of beauty, this may be due in no small degree to the refinement and simplicity of taste that would spring from constant meditation on the beauty of a holy life, on the character, real and idealized, of the blessed Martin.