

How the Gospel Came to Britain

III.—*Persecuted Yet Triumphant*

By W. L. EMMERSON

BRITAIN, of all the countries of western Europe, was least affected by the fierce persecution of the second and third centuries. While Christianity elsewhere in the empire was passing through the fires of affliction, in this country comparative peace reigned, and the church was able to multiply unhindered, until it had become almost a national institution.

The last wave of persecution, however, at the beginning of the fourth century, did break with some intensity upon British shores.

During the early years of Diocletian Christianity had been tolerated and even honoured, and it looked as if the victory over paganism was at last complete. But Galerius, his son-in-law and emperor of the East, retained a bitter hatred of the Christians, and in the nineteenth year of Diocletian's reign, when the monarch was becoming old and enfeebled, the younger man prevailed upon him to issue an edict ordering the destruction of all Christian churches and the burning of all their religious books, as well as depriving professors of Christianity of all their rights and privileges as citizens of the empire. A second edict quickly following enjoining the immediate imprisonment of all pastors and officers of the Christian churches.

In Syria under Galerius the



The Arch of Constantine the Great in Rome. Constantine was born and educated in Christian Britain.

decrees were carried out with savage ferocity, as also by Maximin in Italy and Consular Africa. In the areas under the direct influence of Diocletian the persecution was comparatively mild, while in the West, Constantius, with his capital at York in Britain, was favourably disposed to the Christian faith, and probably would never himself have ordered the persecution to be carried out. Some of his prefects, however, went ahead without permission and many Christians suffered martyrdom at their hands.

The First of the Martyrs

The first and perhaps best known of British martyrs was Alban, who later became known as Saint Alban, and gave his name to the city where he died. It appears that a Christian pastor, flying for safety, was given shelter by this Alban, then a young heathen soldier of Verulam. Under the influence of the good man Alban embraced the faith, and, changing clothes with

the pastor, made it possible for him to escape. Alban himself was arrested and brought before a military tribunal, before whom he nobly witnessed of his faith. He was sentenced to death and beheaded upon the slopes of the hill where now the cathedral of St. Albans stands.

After the persecution had been in

progress for two years Diocletian abdicated and Constantius was able to restrain the persecutors in Britain and Gaul, but elsewhere it continued for eight more years.

Though in this country the period of persecution was so short, British records state that over ten thousand believers were put to death. Prominent among these martyrs were Amphibalus, bishop of Llandaff, Aaron and Julius, presbyters of Caerleon, Socrates, archbishop of York, Stephen, archbishop of London, and the bishops of Carlisle and Glasgow. These names serve to indicate how widespread and well established the British church was at this time.

The persecution under Diocletian served only to inspire the Christians of Britain to nobler activity, and as soon as freedom was again conferred upon the church order was quickly restored throughout the land. Gildas records that:

"In less than ten years of the above persecution, and when the

bloody decrees began to fail in consequence of the death of their authors, all Christ's young disciples, after so long and wintry a night, began to see the general light of heaven. They rebuilt the churches which had been levelled with the ground, they founded, erected, and finished churches to the holy martyrs, and everywhere shewed their ensigns as tokens of their victory. Festivals were celebrated and saints received with clean hearts and lips, and all the sons of the church rejoiced, as it were, in the fostering bosom of a mother."—*"Ecclesiastical History" 1, 8.*

Constantine and the British Church

It is not generally realized that Constantine the Great, who established Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, was the son of Constantius, the tolerant emperor of the West, and that he spent most of his early years in this country, under the influence of the British church.

Sozomen, the historian, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, states: "It is well known that the Great Constantine received his Christian education in Britain." *Book 1, c. 5.* And Melancthon, the companion of Luther, declares that his mother, Helen, "was unquestionably a British princess."—*"Epistles," page 187.*

On the death of his father, Constantine was proclaimed em-

peror of the West at York. Leaving Britain he proceeded to Italy, where he defeated the persecutor Maximin, and, in collaboration with the new emperor of the East, Licinus, issued the celebrated Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. This decree gave full toleration to the Christian faith and ordered the immediate restoration of all churches confiscated or destroyed during the persecutions.

Licinus never became a Christian and on his return to the East began to persecute again. Constantine, therefore, advanced against him, and finally became sole emperor and chief patron of Christianity throughout the world in A.D. 323.

One of his earliest decrees read as follows: "We call God to witness, the Saviour of all men, that in assuming the government we are influenced solely by these two considerations—the unity of the empire in one faith, and the restoration of peace to a world rent to pieces by the insanity of religious persecution."

Unfortunately, as with so many others in later times, his zeal for building up the Christian religion led him to pursue the same methods as the pagans had used in their opposition to Christianity, for it was he who

enacted the first regulation concerning compulsory Sunday observance.

The earliest councils of the church were convened by Constantine to deal with the heresies which were arising in the church, and it was no doubt at his instigation that representatives of the British church, so familiar to him, were invited.

Early Organization

During the Roman period the church in Britain seems to have been divided into three sections, co-ordinating with the Roman civil provinces, each being under the oversight of a territorial bishop or archbishop. Within these areas were local bishops or "chorepiscopi," who supervised the churches among the different tribes.

The duties of a bishop are thus described by the *Leabhar Brecc*:

"A bishop for every chief tribe for the ordination of clerics, for consecrating of churches, for spiritual direction of princes and superiors and the ordained, for hallowing and blessing children after their baptism, for regulating the work of every church, and for encouraging boys and girls to cultivate reading and piety."

And these bishops evidently did their work well, judging by the moral stamina of the church in later times when it came into conflict with the ambassadors of the papal See.

Dotted over the country there were schools and colleges to which the youth came for education, and from which went out leaders and teachers of the church and missionaries into unoccupied areas. These schools are often described as "monasteries," but the term is unfortunate as they bore no resemblance to the later mediæval institutions of that name. Of these schools we shall have more to say later.

The picture we have of the



St. Albans Cathedral, built upon the site of the martyrdom of the first English martyr.

Photo by W. L. E.

British church in the fifth century of the Christian era is thus summarized by Gildas:

"The church is spread over the nation, organized, endowed, having sacred edifices and altars, the three orders of the ministry, monastic institutions embracing people of all ranks and classes. . . . It

had its own version of the Bible and its own ritual."

In the days of peace before the empire was overwhelmed by the western barbarians the native British church, as we have seen, was in constant touch with the rest of the church, but it was not

subject to any foreign jurisdiction. It did not consult Rome or any other church as to its rites, discipline, or government, nor did it seek for the consecration of its archbishops and bishops by any outside dignitary. It acknowledged no superior but God.

(Next Time : "Into Regions Beyond.")
