

THE BATTLE OF LEPANTO.

(From *The Knights of St. John*, by E.H.T.)

THE sixteenth century was drawing to its close,—a century marked by the ravages of religious revolution, and destined to be for ever honored or deplored according as men may think of it as the age of reformation or of decay. Among the many social changes which arose out of the new order of things, we can scarcely fail to notice the growth of that exclusive nationality which has lasted until our own time. The great tie of religious unity was broken which had given the nations of Europe a common interest even in the midst of the continual warfare in which they were engaged, and which had inspired them with so many generous enterprises in defence of the faith. But when that bond of brotherhood was lost, there was no longer a common cause to fight for: a profound selfishness may therefore be discovered in the whole history of Europe, and the chance alliances of one power with another had no nobler basis than the political interests of the hour.

This change began to be felt immediately after the separation of the northern nations from the unity of the Church, and the circumstance was not unobserved by the great infidel power of the East. The enormous progress of that power was almost coeval with the period of the Reformation; and the distractions and divisions among the Christians that followed that event were so many gains to the Turks, who pushed their victorious arms further and further, till the dreaded Crescent,—which the long struggle of the crusades and of the heroic Christendom had kept at bay,—was displayed under the very walls of Marseilles and the port of Rome by the corsair-fleets which roved at large over the waters of the Mediterranean, and scarcely found an enemy to oppose them in their course. The republic of Venice, indeed, was still master of many of the island fortresses of the Levant and the Archipelago; but as the power of that state was now gradually declining, the eyes of her foe were fastened with a bolder ambition upon the dominions which she seemed helpless to defend. The rich and beautiful island of Cyprus in particular excited the cupidity of Selim II.,* who had succeeded his father, Solymán the Magnificent, in the empire of the East; and the report of a sudden disaster which befell the republic in the explosion and destruction of her arsenal, encouraged him to seize the occasion of breaking, in the face of solemn treaties, a peace which had remained undisturbed between the two states for nearly thirty years.

When the hostile intentions of the Turkish sultan became known, the republic was little prepared to recommence the desperate struggle. Her utmost efforts were spent in the equipment of a fleet which, when assembled, was found wholly inadequate to meet the enemy; and in her distress, crippled as she was by the loss of her vast magazines, and drained of all resources, she implored the assistance of the Roman Pontiff, and, through him, of the other powers of Christendom. Pius V. then filled the chair of St. Peter; and his sagacious eye had long foreseen the danger; nor had he spared any efforts to provide the necessary defences. But the times were against him. A famine was ravaging the fair fields of Italy; the government of France was too busy with the Huguenots to have time or strength to bestow on a quarrel with the Turks; and as to England—to use the expression of a writer of the time—its ruler was Elizabeth, “a greater enemy to Rome than the Turks themselves.” Nevertheless, in spite of all discouragements, the zeal of the Roman Pontiff was manifested by an extraordinary activity. Every court of Europe was visited by his ambassadors, who vainly tried to rouse the spirit of the Christian princes against a foe whose conquests were as rapid as they were blood-stained. One after another they excused themselves on the plea of domestic troubles and exhausted treasuries; and in the month of May, 1570, when Pius had fondly hoped to have seen his noble appeals as nobly responded to by the universal voice of Christendom, he found himself supported by the king of Spain alone out of all the potentates of Europe.

Meanwhile the fall of Cyprus, attended by barbarities which rivalled in cruelty and atrocity the torments inflicted on the early Christian martyrs, signalled the opening of the war, and gave to the Turkish arms the prestige of the first success. A slight notice of that terrible event may give our readers some idea of the sort of adversary by whom Christendom was at this time threatened.

Already the sultan had ordered the seizure of all merchant-vessels that chanced to be at anchor within the ports of the Turkish empire, and the closing of all the avenues by which relief could be afforded to the doomed island; and yet in Venice its counsels were still divided: the doge was just dead, and the senate was occupied with the nomination of his successor. To the last no vigorous measures were taken by the republic to throw a sufficient force into the scale, and the commander of the allied Venetian and Spanish fleets strove in vain to convey the necessary succours. Sickness and famine made fearful ravages among the troops, and many thousands perished. The ships which had on board Count Jerome Martinengo and 3000 men were overtaken by a tremendous storm; an epidemic broke out which carried off more than a third of the number, and among them their renowned commander himself; and they who, from the shores of the island had long watched for the reinforcements, of which they stood in such desperate need, saw at length but a few shattered vessels come into harbor, bearing with them the dead body of the man on whose bravery and skill they had rested all their hopes of deliverance. To add to the general consternation, Nicholas Dandolo, who had but just taken on himself the office of governor, was one in whose capacity and judgment neither soldiers nor people felt they could place any reliance. Lala Mustapha, a renegade already infamous for his foul and treacherous practices, was the commander of the Ottoman forces, numbering

as some historians have computed, 80,000 men; to oppose which vast armament the Christians could not muster more than 500 or 600 horse, a small body of local militia, and 2000 foot-soldiers fit for active service.

The city of Nicosia, the first object of attack, was taken by storm, on the 9th of September, 1570, after an heroic resistance of seven weeks, during which the inhabitants had again and again repulsed the assaults of the Turks with a valour which struck such terror into the besiegers, that more than once they all but abandoned their attempts on the town. The ammunition had failed, the fortifications were demolished, most of the distinguished leaders had been slain; the devoted bishop, who had given up all he possessed for the support of the soldiery and people, had himself fallen in a *melee*; the Count de Rochas, who ranked next in command to the governor, was killed in defending one of the ruined bastions, and the Turks after grossly outraging his body, thrust it into a mortar and launched it into the town. Dandolo retreated into his palace as soon as the enemy penetrated into the town, and the wretched inhabitants were given up a prey to their infuriated assailants. In vain they threw themselves on their knees before their vanquishers; they were massacred without pity: for seven hours the horrible carnage proceeded. The palace still held out. The pasha offered the garrison their lives on condition of their laying down their arms: they did so, and every soul was put to the sword. The Bishop of Caffo, who, in the estimation of his countrymen, was as capable of commanding an army as of governing a diocese, was butchered among the rest. The unhappy Dandolo, after suffering frightful tortures at the hands of the infidels, was decapitated, and his head sent to the governor of Cerino, the third principal town of the island, as a token of what he might himself expect if he did not instantly surrender the place. The atrocities committed by the Turks defy description. Mustapha, it is related, ordered the children and old men, and all whom it was not worth the victor's while to preserve, to be piled one upon another in the great square of the town and burnt alive; at the same time, to show his hatred of the Christian name, he directed numerous carcasses of swine,—for which the followers of Mahomet entertain a religious abhorrence,—to be heaped upon his victims, and consumed together with them. For three days the town was given up to pillage, and every barbarity which an infernal malice could suggest was perpetrated upon its despairing population. Women threw themselves from the house-tops to escape from their pursuers; mothers slew their daughters with their own hands rather than that they should fall into the power of the brutal foe. More than 20,000 human beings were slaughtered on the day of the assault; in the first paroxysm of their rage the infidels spared neither sex nor age; 2000 alone were reserved for a slavery more terrible than death. One fearful act of vengeance marked the close of this memorable siege. The Turks had collected in a single galleon the most beautiful youths and maidens of the place, together with the most precious portion of the booty, with the intention of conveying them as presents to the sultan, his eldest son, and the grand vizier. One of the captives, a lady of noble family, knowing but too well the wretched fate that awaited herself and her companions, set fire to the powder-magazine, and blew the vessel high into the air. Two others loaded with the spoils of the town were involved in its destruction; great numbers of the enemy perished, and among them many Christians of distinction, and the flower of the youth of either sex.

Mustapha now led his troops, flushed with victory and outnumbering by thousands their Christian opponents, under the walls of Famagosta. For eleven months the brave Bragadino, with a scanty garrison and a few thousands of armed citizens, withstood the Moslem hosts.† In vain had they sought relief from Spain and their own republic. The Spanish admiral weakly held aloof; the Venetians succeeded only in throwing a handful of men into the place. The besieged fought with all the strength of despair: women not only labored in supplying arms and ammunition to the soldiers, but combated by their side upon the walls, throwing down stones and boiling-water on the assailants, or precipitating themselves with deadly effect into the masses of the foe, and causing many a Moslem warrior to bite the dust. The bishop of the place, a Dominican by profession, contributed not a little in reanimating the spirits of the garrison, whose ranks were being every day rapidly thinned by famine and the sword: his exhortations, say the chroniclers, elicited prodigies of valour. In the very heat of the assault he might be seen for hours upon the ramparts, surrounded by his clergy, holding aloft the crucifix, and calling on the people to resist unto death fighting for the faith.‡ All in vain: on the first of August, 1571, the walls were nearly levelled to the ground; the defences consisted only of bags of earth and bales of cotton; the Italian and Greek auxiliaries, whose prowess had done such execution on the Turks, were all annihilated; there were left but seven barrels of powder, and of food there was none remaining; the combatants, emaciated by want and incessant toil, could scarcely hold their weapons in their hands. Further resistance was impossible, and Bragadino, yielding at length to the piteous entreaties of the townspeople, consented to sue for terms. But as the atrepid governor bade the white flag be unfurled, he exclaimed, “Officers and men, I call Heaven to witness that it is not I who surrender this town to the infidels, but the senate of Venice, who, by abandoning us to our fate, have given us up into the hands of these barbarians.” A capitulation was concluded, by which the inhabitants were to remain in possession of their goods, and to have the free exercise of their religion; all who chose might quit the town, and sell or carry off their effects; the garrison were to march out with their arms and with all the honors of war, and to be transported in Turkish vessels to Crete.

* For a short but spirited account of this heroic defence and its fatal catastrophe the reader is referred to “The Four Martyrs,” by M. Rio.

† On one of the last days of the siege he was struck by a ball and killed, while praying in the garden of his palace.

(To be continued)

* Known in history as “Selim the Sot.” It is said he was instigated to the conquest of the island by a Jew, his boon companion, who represented to him how easily he could make himself master of the soil on which grew the grapes which produced his favorite wine.