

Vigilantius of Gaul.

By Miss M. E. AMES.

THE fact that very inadequate attention has been given to the protests of reformers of the third and fourth centuries may probably arise from the general consensus of opinion, even among Evangelical historians, that their efforts to contend with the errors of their day, however commendable in themselves, constituted merely an abortive attempt, which became so effectually stamped out by the iron foot of ecclesiasticism, that no trace of their protest is to be discovered beyond the commencement of the fifth century.

More recent research, however, has brought to light contrary evidence of a character sufficiently reliable to demand, at least, thoughtful attention. This evidence is associated with the personality and history of the last named in the brief succession of early protestors, Vigilantius of Gaul.

This "true Protestant," as Gibbon styles him, was born, in the latter part of the fourth century, in Calagorris, situate at the foot of the Pyrenees in the modern Comminges. His father was an innkeeper, descended from a band of banditti, whom Pompey, 400 years previously, had driven from Spain, and who, having found an asylum in these wild regions, settled there and transferred to the locality of their adoption the name of their former home, Calagorris. The paternal inn constituted one of those *mansiones* at which, in accordance with the humane Roman code, travellers were compelled to rest or to change their horses, and which consequently formed a kind of rendezvous for wayfarers of distinction, especially among ecclesiastics, for the historian Ammonius informs us that "the highways were covered with troops of Bishops travelling in all directions to the Assemblies they call Synods."¹

It is therefore natural to suppose that the youthful

¹ Ammonius, "History," p. 21.

Vigilantius, while engaged in his daily duty of waiting upon his father's guests, must have found many opportunities for conversing with some of the most illustrious scholars and thinkers of the day. Possibly Jovinian, the monk of Milan—apparently a man of birth and means—might from time to time have rested at the *mansio* of Calagorris, and have sown in the ingenious mind of the youth some seeds of those evangelical truths which, in later years, he was called so manfully to defend.

Vigilantius, however, did not remain long under his father's roof; he appears to have entered the service of Sulpicius Severus while still a boy. The fact that he rose rapidly from the position of simple "domestic" in the great historian's household to that of amanuensis and private secretary furnishes a pleasing testimony to the uprightness and earnestness of the future reformer's character. The opportunities for acquiring knowledge, which such a position offered, were enhanced by the frequent visits, which the wealthy patrician was in the habit of receiving, from distinguished ecclesiastics and literati of the day. Foremost among these was the saintly Paulinus, who, with his gentle wife Thecla, was frequently to be met with in the mansion of Severus. Close and sacred, however, as were the ties which bound the Bishop of Nola to his illustrious host, they hardly exceeded in degree those which the former eventually entertained for the young Gallic scribe, as evidenced by this fact. In the year 393 Vigilantius was sent by his master, with a companion, on a mission to Paulinus; during his sojourn in the nobleman's house both host and guest fell simultaneously sick. Paulinus communicated this circumstance to Sulpicius in terms which the late Canon Gilly, of Durham, has rendered: "He sympathized in my illness by fellow-sufferings, like one who is a member of my body."¹

We venture to draw particular attention to this testimony of the deep affection evinced by Paulinus for his young guest, because if the latter were all that Jerome's cruel invectives

¹ "Memorials of Vigilantius," p. 167.

would make him appear to be, it would have been impossible for one as high-souled and pure-minded as Paulinus to have entertained such high regard for his friend's former servitor.

Upon the death of his father, Vigilantius inherited sufficient wealth to enable him to travel, employ copyists and transcribers, and to purchase books and parchments. The exact date of his ordination as presbyter is not known, but it is evident that this cannot have taken place very long after his visit to Paulinus.

The favourable impression produced upon the mind of Jerome by the young presbyter, upon the occasion of his first visit to him, may be gathered by the following extract from the latter's letter to Paulinus, written with reference to this event :

“ You will learn from the Holy Presbyter, Vigilantius, with what avidity I received him—it is better that you should learn it from his own lips—but I cannot explain why he should have left me so abruptly, lest I should appear to do him an injustice. But I detained him a little while, in spite of his haste, and gave him a proof of my friendship.”¹

It would appear, indeed, that Jerome's quarrel with Vigilantius commenced in consequence of the latter charging him with possessing too great a predilection for Origen. “ You falsely accuse me of Origenism,” was the chief burden of Jerome's first attack upon the Gallic presbyter.²

Vigilantius, after leaving Bethlehem, appears to have rested for some time in the passes of the Cottian Alps. A reason for this protracted sojourn in the locality, which in after-ages became the scene of Rome's attempt to exterminate the Waldensian and Albigensian Churches, may be incidentally gathered from the complaint of Ambrose (the Bishop of the Diocese in which Jovinian had written and laboured but a few years before), “ that in the secluded parts of his diocese there were both priests and deacons who refused to become celibates on the plea of ancient custom,”³ to which fact, no doubt, Jerome referred when

¹ Migne, “ Patrol. Hier.,” Op. 1, Ep. 58 (327).

² “ Ad. Vig.,” Ep. 36 alias 75.

³ “ De Offi. Min.,” lib. i., c. 50.

he spoke of Vigilantius "having Bishops, the accomplices of his crimes, who ordain no deacons unless they are married."¹

Space forbids us to enter fully into the controversy between Jerome and Vigilantius, concerning which we are alone indebted to the invectives of the former. "I would give up," writes Dr. Milner, "all the invectives of Jerome and Rufinus for one page of Jovinian or Vigilantius," but although this exclamation of the historian has been, no doubt, re-echoed by a countless number of his readers, there exists at the same time an element of compensation in the painful reflection that the vanity and acrimony which so sadly marred the reputation of the great master of Western learning, led him to state his opponent's utterances with all possible clearness, in order that he might the more effectually manifest his skill in demolishing them; the result being that we possess an undeniable knowledge of many of the errors against which Vigilantius protested, and which a modern writer, hardly less unfair and hostile than Jerome, has thus summed up :

"He taught that those who revered relics were idolatrous; that celibacy was wrong as leading to the worst scandals; that lighting candles in churches during the day, in honour of the martyrs, is wrong, as being a heathen rite; that apostles and martyrs had no presence at their tombs; that it was useless to pray for the dead; that it was better to keep wealth and practise habitual charity than to strip oneself of property, once for all; and that it was wrong to retire into the desert."²

In consideration of the fact, however, that the entire correspondence, tracts and book of Vigilantius have been lost (more probably destroyed), and that the quotations given by Jerome alone remain, of all his opponents ever said or wrote, it is difficult to imagine a more striking example of literary injustice than that conveyed in the passage with which the author of the "Church of the Fathers" thus comments upon his epitome of the protestations of Vigilantius: "We know what Vigilantius protested against, but not what he protested for. Did he know anything of the apprehensive power of faith, or of man's proneness to consider his imperfect services done in and by grace

¹ "Ad. Vig.":

² "Church of the Fathers," p. 288.

as inadequate to purchase eternal life? *There is no proof that he did.*"¹ Such a statement as inconclusive, in the light of the actual circumstances, as it is ungenerous, may possibly somewhat lessen our regret at the subsequent secession of the writer from our Church to one where such judgment would meet with a more responsive environment. How entirely the gifted author of the "Apologia" was prepared to assimilate such an environment may be gathered from the following :

"A word or two about St. Jerome," he writes in the "Church of the Fathers" (pp. 263, 264). "I do not scruple, then, to say that were he not a saint, there are things in his views and in his writings from which I should shrink . . . but I shrink rather from putting myself in opposition to the Catholic world. . . . I cannot force myself to approve or like, against my feelings, but I can receive things in faith both against one and the other."

Before leaving this portion of our subject, we ask the reader's attention to the following passage, as offering a fair example of the protests of Vigilantius and the mode in which the "Saint" of Bethlehem endeavoured to suppress them. The latter writes in 406: "The holy Presbyters Reparatus and Desiderius . . . write to me that their parishes are contaminated by the vicinity of this person . . . and have sent me the books this snorer has disgorged. . . . Verily it is quite in keeping with his pedigree, that he, the offspring of a rabble rout of robbers . . . should thus pillage the Church of God . . . who should lie bound with the chain of Hippocrates. Among other blasphemous utterances, he gives utterance to such as these: 'What need is there for you, with so much respect, not only to honour, but even to adore, that—I know not what to call it—which you worship as you carry it in a little vessel?' And again, he says in the same book: 'Why do you in your adoration kiss dust folded up in a little cloth?' And afterwards: 'Under the pretext of religion we see a custom introduced into the Churches which approximates to the rites of the Gentiles—

¹ "Church of the Fathers," p. 288.

namely, the lighting of a multitude of tapers, while the sun is yet shining, and everywhere men kiss in their adoration a small quantity of dust folded up in a little cloth and deposited in a little vessel. Men of this stamp, forsooth, give great honour to the most blessed martyrs, thinking with a few insignificant wax tapers to glorify those whom the Lamb "who is in the midst of the Throne," enlightens with all the brightness of His Majesty. . . . He is distressed that the relics of the martyrs are not huddled up in rags and canvas, or thrown upon the dunghill, that Vigilantius, tipsy and nodding, might be alone adored."

We have in this brief selection from Jerome's refutation of the "Book of Vigilantius, the Presbyter," placed before us in strong relief, the contrast which every contest between truth and error exhibits. The quiet tone of conviction that pervades the remonstrance of Vigilantius, the common sense of his reasoning which shows up so clearly the puerile and foolish superstition and idolatry of the customs he is attacking, all appear to have stung his opponent into wild and ungovernable anger, and the weapons he at once seizes are those of vituperation and personal abuse.

The unwarranted assertion of Romish historians in declaring that the holy monk's reply effectually silenced Vigilantius is quietly, although probably unintentionally, nullified by the statement of the Roman Catholic Vaisette, to the effect that before Sinsinnius returned from the East, bearing Jerome's reply to Vigilantius, the latter had left Gaul¹ in consequence of having been appointed to the charge of a parish in Barcelona. It is, indeed, highly probable that not one of these last and culminating epithets of Jerome ever reached the man against whom they were hurled, for the general and more reliable opinion is, that shortly after this "refutation" was issued, and very possibly before it could have arrived at Barcelona, Vigilantius was slain in the Vandal incursion.

But while, with this last record concerning him, the name

¹ "His. Gen. de Languedoc," l. 3, pp. 152, 153.

of Vigilantius disappears from the page of history, there exist numerous evidences of the survival of his influence and teaching, which constitute a solid ground for accepting the combined statements of such writers as Gilly, Faber, Warburton, Maitland, Monita, and many others, that from the close of the second century onwards there have always existed in the Cottian Alpine regions an unbroken succession of evangelical believers. Some writers, indeed, on highly probable ground, identify these early Alpine Christians with the Cathari, or followers of Novatian (third century), who are supposed to have retired to these mountain fastnesses in order that they might live separately from the worldliness and errors that were beginning to creep into the professing Church.¹

The saintly Alcuin (sixth century) also remonstrated with his clergy on account "of certain customs which belonged to their regions: it was said that the laity refused to confess to priests."² A chronicle found in the Abbey of Covey, supposed to belong to the twelfth century, speaks to the same effect in alluding to certain inhabitants of the Alps who adhered to antiquity, who learnt passages of Scripture by heart, who rejected many rites of the Church, which they called novelties, and refused to worship images or pay respect to relics. And in the same century Peter of Cluny, in a letter to his clergy, told them that the doctrines against image-worship and a material Presence in the Eucharist, which had taken root in the villages and remote places of the diocese, which were indigenous to the cold Alps, were spreading over the whole of the South of France—a statement which receives confirmation from the protest of Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles, against the images in the sixth century,³ and also from the fact that Claude of Turin, "the Protestant of the ninth century," contended on the same spot against similar, although more developed, errors which Vigilantius had combated in the dawn of the fifth century.

¹ See the author's article under "Novatian and Novatianists," *Protestant Dictionary*.

² Ep. 26, ad. Goth.

³ See "Homily on Idolatry," Part ii.

Numerous other evidences might be given to the same effect did space permit and were it necessary to produce them, but those which have been selected, from the abundance of material at hand, are sufficient to prove the accuracy of our contention that the Protestantism which sprang into existence in the Alpine valleys, so far from being strangled in its infancy, was, on the contrary, fostered and cradled in the region of its birth, and developed slowly but surely, and unperceived by its foes, into the fair proportions of the Waldensian and Moravian brotherhoods. Indeed, it may have even penetrated, as many suppose, into England before the days of Wycliffe, with the result that to-day ancient history is not only repeating itself in the conflicts around us, but that we are actually engaged in the same battle, armed with the same spiritual weapons, which our forefathers waged and wielded sixteen centuries ago. Possibly our brief consideration may have led some to the further conclusion that, amidst the entire galaxy of illustrious names which adorn the annals of the evangelical Church of Christ, whether ancient or modern, none shines with a clearer radiance than that of him who has come down to us loaded with the invectives of Jerome and branded with the hall-mark of heresy—Vigilantius of Gaul.



Free and Universal Access to God.

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IN tracing the stages by which the primitive Church fulfilled the Great Commission of Acts i. 8—a text which is universally taken as the key to the whole book—it is usual to observe that its members were led to a fuller obedience by the persecution which scattered them after Stephen's death (viii. 1-4). This was indeed the turning-point, at which they were led to strike out from the centre till ultimately "the uttermost part" of the circumference should be reached. But the