RELIGIOUS INTELLIGENCE.

Rothermel's "Christian Martyrs in the Coliseum."

BY GRAYBEARD.

For some months past Mr. P. F. Rothermel, of this city, has been engaged in painting a large historic picture, entitled "Christian Martyrs in the Coliseum," and on last Wednesday evening, at the Academy of Fine Arts, the public was invited to inspect it. Among the throng of attendants on that occasion, literature, art, and the learned professions were liberally represented. Divines of all denominations, to whom the subject of this picture is more or less constant pulpit topic, were there to scan the artist's idea of what, in ancient times, it cost to be a Christian. Few works of art executed in this country have probably ever been ushered into public notice through such a test of competent criticism. To the honor of Mr. Rothermel, be it said, this new child of his genius bore the ordeal nobly. The subject of the picture, no less than its wonderful execution, seemed to awe the people into silence, their endorsement of its merits having been expressed in mute admiration, more than in audible criticism.

In a word, Rothermel's "Christian Martyrs in the Coliseum" is the work of a master. By all who can appreciate the poetry of art it will be welcomed as one of the grandest tributes to American genius, worthy of being placed beside the celebrated "Martyrdom of Huss," in the Dusseldorf Gallery, or the best works of Benjamin West.

But it is chiefly to the Christian believer, and more especially the student of ecclesiastical history, that the picture has the deepest significance. To such, it demonstrates ocularly what a terrible thing it once was to be a faithful witness to the Truth.

The word "martyr," from the Greek *martus*, it will be borne in mind, in its original sense, signifies simply a *witness*, and is used almost exclusively in this sense in the Sacred Scriptures, although the meaning which is now popularly attached to it, viz: one who by his death bears witness to the truth, does occur in *Acts* xxii, 20; *Rev.* ii, 13, and xvii, 6, and in these passages only.

The artist in this picture has fairly succeeded in materializing in canvas the power of *faith*—that faith which enabled Cranmer to thrust his hand into the curling flames around him, and while it was being consumed, to exclaim that the hand which had signed his recantations should be the first to burn; the faith by which its possessor may remove mountains; the faith which cannot be obliterated nor overcome, for it is the strength of God's own arm; not the faith merely of Daniel, which shut the lions' mouth, that they could not hurt him, but a sublimer confidence in God; such a confidence as inspired the patriarch Job to exclaim, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in him;" such a confidence as is defined in the Apocalyptic injunction to the church in Smyrna, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life;" a confidence which, like the dying Stephen, rises above all physical sufferings in an supreme contemplation of its object; a confidence, with reverence be it said, which brings to mind that hour of the Son of God when, his soul being exceeding sorrowful even unto death, his prayer to the Father was, "*Thy will be done.*"

If paintings can be said to speak, then the "Christian Martyrs in the Coliseum" may be said to breathe out its soul in this sublime prayer of resignation. It is true, there are other emotions portrayed in the faces and attitudes of the various figures; as, for example, the momentary insanity which has seized the woman on the extreme right, who stands with her hands convulsively pressed against her ears, and her distinct eyes fixed in frenzy as the horrid vision of infuriated beasts and lacerated martyrs from within pierce her soul; the wounded feelings of maternal love, as depicted on the face of the aged woman near the figure just described, as she supports the head of her daughter, who is in a deathlike swoon the sweet expression of unconscious innocence as seen in the features of the latter. In this group, also, the grandfather of the little child forms one of the most striking features of the picture. Concern for his own life, with righteous indignation for the murderer of his kindred, is written upon every lineament of his noble head and face. Near the iron bars which separate this gathering of prospective victims from the bestial arena within, where thousands of brutalized spectators are feasting their eyes upon these scenes of cruelty, stands a youth who, having evidently been schooled to similar exhibitions, and forgetful of his own reserved fate, is watching the horrid spectacle with apparent amazement. More or less pain and struggles of "the flesh" are indicated in the looks of most of the figures introduced, illustrating faith in all its phases and various degrees of strength, till we come to the central one on the left, the high light of the picture, in which the artist has embodied, as already intimated, "the faith that overcometh the world"—the possessor of which the Scriptures declare, "shall not be hurt of the second death."

The victim about to be led forth for execution is a beautiful woman. A grim-looking Roman guard (whose province it is to usher these sainted souls into their rest, through blood and torment, but whose appearance would more befit the gate-keeper of hell), has issued the call, and another Roman soldier is executing the order. The latter has left hand of the latter rudely clutches the woman's shoulder, while his right tightly grasps her arm, and thus, with uplifted eyes, and a Godlike heroism that has already come off "more than conqueror" over all that man can do, "through him that loved her," she leads the way to a martyr's death.

Throughout the entire picture the artist has preserved a naturalness, and fidelity to history, that will bear the closest scrutiny. At first sight, one is struck with the high character of the victims. But then, it must be remembered that, however true it is that the first recruits to Christianity were mainly from the lower ranks of the people, these were not usually singled out for execution. Their comparative obscurity in some measure screened them from the fury of persecution. The learned, eloquent, and chiefly the rich, whose confiscated property formed a tempting bait to the rapacious magistracy, were the persons most exposed to the dangers of the times. The mode also adopted in this picture, of presenting the awful spectacle of martyrdom as it was once witnessed in the Coliseum, while it is more effective to the imagination, is less revolting to the sense than it would have been had the horrible scenes in the arena been more prominently delineated. The perspective effect attained by the artist, at that point where the eye passes beyond the archway, to the clearly-defined tiers of spectators within the amphitheatre, is an admirable illusion of art, and in dwelling upon it it is not difficult to realize the enormous proportions of that once mighty structure, covering six acres of ground, 1770 feet in circumference, and capable of holding one hundred thousand spectators. Nor has the deception stop beyond, with its contesting clouds, been portrayed without just regard to the striking contrasts of spiritual calmness with raging passion—of holy resignation with incarnate fury which pervades this wonderful work of art. It is gratifying that Mr. Rothermel, notwithstanding the inducements held out to secure the initial introduction of his picture in a sister city, determined to honor his own city with the preference, and our citizens will, doubtless, appreciate this compliment in a liberal manner.

THE "OLD BRICK CHURCH," KENSINGTON.—The Army Committee will hold its one hundred and fifth meeting, in this time-honored church, on to-morrow evening. George H. Stuart, Esq., and Rev. Mr. Lyford, the eloquent chaplain of Camp Convalescent, will speak. Rev. Dr. Alday will preside. This meeting will be one of great interest to the people of Kensington, and a very large attendance may be anticipated.

THE CONGREGATION WORSHIPPING under the pastoral care of Rev. Mr. Smiley, at Hanulet and Haydn Hall, has recently purchased a very fine lot, in Belfield area within, where thousands of brutalized spectators are feasting their eyes upon these scenes of cruelty, stands a youth who, having evidently been schooled to similar exhibitions, and forgetful of his own reserved fate, is watching the horrid spectacle with apparent amazement. More or less pain and struggles of "the flesh" are indicated in the looks of most of the figures introduced, illustrating faith in all its phases and various degrees of strength, till we come to the central one on the left, the high light of the picture, in which the artist has embodied, as already intimated, "the faith that overcometh the world"—the possessor of which the Scriptures declare, "shall not be hurt of the second death."

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