

## BOOK II.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### “HIS MOST CATHOLIC MAJESTY.”

THE historians, secular and ecclesiastic, have alike failed to do justice to the vast abilities of Constantine the Great. Those who have questioned his superiority to all other Roman emperors (if, indeed, not to all other men) have united in ascribing to accident, to the mere drifting of events, facts which were really the forecastings of profoundest statesmanship, guided by a political sagacity that pierced through to the very core of the whole social and religious life of the vast empire over which he ruled, almost untroubled by the influences of human passions, fears, and faith. On the other hand, those who have felt constrained to give even the slightest credence to his alleged profession of faith in Christ have attributed to religious zeal, enthusiasm, or fears, the most salient actions of a life that was, from beginning to end, dominated only by the lust for dominion, incapable of any creed but atheism, and absolutely content with the negation of the existence of any Being greater than him-

self. To those who take a more rational view of his magnificent but criminal career, and who, looking behind the mask of reverence for paganism which he cast aside at precisely the politic moment, in order to assume a false pretense of reverence for Christianity, discern the cool, deliberate atheist, who was ready to profess any creed and foster any superstition that might best serve to smooth the road to absolute power, and make mankind his slaves: to them the astute politician, the successful warrior, the consummate ruler of men, assumes such colossal proportions that, compared with him, Alexander, Cæsar, and Napoleon, seem to sink into the lower grade of butchers and stabbers, only half-taught in the science of government, of which Constantine alone was master. For it is no more certain that he despised and pitied paganism while he was solemnly offering sacrifices to Jupiter, and winning the admiration and love of the Roman world for his imperial piety, than it is certain that he pitied and despised the Church of Christ, even while he was manipulating the faith into a sure and reliable support of the empire; in both courses he only played with the world, giving men any religious toy which the greater part might prefer to have, in exchange for the liberty of which he robbed them so plausibly and successfully that they scarcely perceived his theft, and enthusiastically caressed the royal thief.

The Christians of that age died at the stake, or by the sword, or by wild beasts, rather than to cast a pinch of incense into the sacred fires and say, "Proh Jupiter!" The pagans would have plunged into civil war, and would

have endured or inflicted any pain, rather than acknowledge any feeling for Christ except hatred, loathing, and contempt. But Constantine both adopted the cross as a military standard, and also observed the heathen rites with customary ostentation and solemnity; having absolutely no conscientious scruples for or against any religion; regarding both the old and the new faiths as things proper enough for common men, but altogether indifferent to him; and using both alike as mere instruments convenient for the advancement of his own political purposes.

After he had defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, he caused his own statue to be erected at Rome; and, while the general design and execution of the work were unexceptionable to his pagan subjects, the image bore in its hand the symbol of the cross, which, until that day, had been esteemed to be a badge of crime and infamy, as disgraceful to any Roman as the lewd Priapi of the gardens could have been to the Christians; and the thanksgiving which he offered to commemorate his victory was couched in such enigmatical terms that in applying it to Mars or Jupiter, the pagan did no more violence to the text than the Christian would do in ascribing it to Christ and God. So, when, to please the Christians, he decreed the solemn observance of Sunday, he inspired the pagans with confidence and respect, by calling the sacred day *Dies Solis* (the Day of the Sun), a formula of heathendom with which they had been familiar all their lives.

Utterly devoid of faith in anything else except himself

and his own destiny, unyielding in that ambition to exercise dominion which nerved him for the doubtful war against Maxentius, he regarded both mankind and religion with pity and contempt, and sought to rule men for their good and his own glory, by means of any faith which they might prefer; and hence, as Christianity became more known and popular, he identified himself with it more and more, only in order to foster an agency which seemed to be available in the work of consolidating the warring factions of the empire and securing the permanency of his throne. But the gospel of love and peace over which he extended the imperial protection did not deter him from exterminating the whole race of Maxentius after he had defeated him in battle; nor from the deliberate and politic murder of Maximin, who was the father of Fausta his wife, and who had been the benefactor of his father Constantius; nor from the destruction of his wife herself, nor of his sons; nor from the assassination of the Emperor Licinius and his son, the offspring of his sister Constantia—crimes so infamous and unnecessary that the first spark of real animosity against the gods of Rome that ever flashed across the serene and boundless depths of his almost superhuman intelligence gleamed for a moment past his consummate and life-long duplicity when the pagan priests refused all expiation for such crimes; and he turned away more decidedly to a religion which promises pardon for every sin: not that he cared anything for the sacred rites of either church; but because he was the first Roman ruler to attach any definite meaning to the words “public opinion,” and he desired to maintain the confi-



dence of his people, and also to secure the full benefit of those crimes which he committed to place his own authority beyond the reach of accident.

So thoroughly indifferent to all sense of religion was this greatest of the rulers of mankind that dissimulation was an easy task which involved no conscientious scruples of any kind ; and was so gracefully and perfectly enacted that even Eusebius, the father of ecclesiastical history, himself no ordinary man, was for a long time very thoroughly deceived into believing that the atheistic emperor was God’s vicegerent for the establishment of the Christian Church on earth. “Constantine, therefore, in the very commencement” (says Eusebius), “being proclaimed supreme emperor and Augustus by the soldiers, and much longer before this by the universal sovereign, God—Constantine, the protector of the good, combining his hatred of wickedness with the love of goodness, went forth with his son Crispus, the most benevolent Cæsar, to extend a caring arm to all them that were perishing. Both, therefore, the father and the son, having, as it were, God the Universal King and his Son, our Saviour, as their leader and aid, drawing up the army on all sides against the enemies of God, bore away an easy victory.” “With choirs and hymns,” says Eusebius, “in the cities and villages, at the same time they celebrated and extolled first of all God the Universal King, because they were thus taught ; then they also celebrated the praises of the pious emperor, and with him all his divinely-favored children,” including Crispus Cæsar whom he caused to be murdered afterward.

Only the lone and incorruptible seer of Patmos, John

the Divine, foresaw the mighty pagan in his real character, and depicted him in words of scathing denunciation and rebuke which the prostituted Church then failed to understand when the things were transacted before her eyes—a prophetic and apocalyptic view of Constantine and Constantinople which becomes of easier interpretation as the centuries glide away, revealing more and more clearly what things John foretold, that were to follow upon the subversion of Christianity by the most potent human enemy that Jesus ever had, and locating the seat of Antichrist upon seven hills above the sea to which the commerce of the world resorted—a description inapplicable to any capital on earth except the city of Constantinople.

The tentative effort made by Constantine in 312 and 313, when he had used the influence of the Christians against Maxentius, had proved entirely successful, and the great ruler at once began to make inquiries to ascertain to what extent the same faith might prevail throughout the Empire of the East, and how far he might depend upon its aid in subverting the sovereign power of Licinius, who then reigned over the Eastern Empire. For, upon the death of Diocletian, Constantius and Galerius had parted the empire between themselves in accordance with the emperor's will, dividing both the provinces and the legions, which was the first division of Roman sovereignty. Constantine succeeded his father Constantius, and, by the overthrow of Maxentius, had become master of all of the Western Empire, although north of the Mediterranean Licinius ruled Pannonia, Dalmatia, Dacia, Greece, and Thrace ; and, having overthrown Max-

imian, ruled the East, including Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt.

But it was always Constantine's set purpose to restore the unity of the empire, and to concentrate the whole imperial authority in his own hand—a purpose of which he never for one moment lost sight, and which is the explanation of his whole magnificent career. The present difficulty in the way was the fact that he had permitted, perhaps solicited, Licinius to sign with him the Decree of Milan, which gave peace to the Church; and this celebrated document had been issued in both their names, by their joint authority, and had been so published throughout the empire. In addition to this was the fact that the Christians universally regarded the defeat of Maximian and the triumph of Licinius as providential, for the former had persecuted the Church, and the latter had protected it in conjunction with Constantine. The public actions of Maximian gave countenance to this opinion: for, while he had great faith in the heathen gods and priests, and had resorted to magic in order to conduct the war with Licinius triumphantly, after he had been defeated in battle "he slew many of his priests as jugglers and impostors, and as the destroyers of his own safety, since by their oracles he had been induced to undertake the disastrous war. Moreover, having heard that Constantine and Licinius were both Christians, he supposed that their success was the result of their religion, and himself immediately issued a decree providing safety for the Christians whom less than a year before he had ordered to be persecuted, by decrees engraved on brazen

tablets ; he gave them liberty to rebuild their churches, and commanded that all of their property which had been seized and sold under the former decrees should be restored to them. Shortly afterward he miserably died, and Licinius ruled alone."

Licinius was a firm believer in Christianity, and his faith and the decrees of Maximian alike confirmed both himself and his subjects in the opinion that he was under the divine protection.

Constantine was not long in perceiving the greatest political error, perhaps the only one, committed by him, the affixing of the signature of Licinius to the Decree of Milan ; but, at the time it was done, human foresight could hardly have anticipated such a wholesale abandonment of paganism, and such an ardent and enthusiastic adoption of Constantine's new ecclesiasticism, on the part of the people, as did actually occur. To have left the name of Licinius out of the decree would have fostered any ambitious views which that emperor might have entertained, by enabling him to set up himself as the especial guardian of the heathen religion, and so concentrating in his own hands all the resources of the pagan world. Constantine was compelled, therefore, either to divide the influence of the Christians with Licinius, or else to array himself and Christianity on the one side, against Licinius and paganism on the other ; and he was too wise a ruler not to perceive that such a civil and religious war would be disastrous to both rulers, if not the ultimate ruin of the empire ; and, not knowing the vast numerical strength of the Christians, he chose the former alternative. But no



sooner had he succeeded in getting all power in the North and West concentrated firmly in his own hands, than he began to seek for means whereby to undermine the power of his rival, and so carry into effect his life-long purpose—the reuniting of the divided empire, and the concentration of all power in his own hands.

The Christians of the Eastern Empire maintained the primitive religion, and persevered in their original opposition to bearing arms in war, and to slavery, and to private-property rights, and so added nothing to the military power of Licinius, except their constantly increasing communal wealth. Licinius simply left the Church at peace, and was not consummate politician enough to use its vast resources in aid of his government, as Constantine had done, by inducing the Christians to abandon the primitive organization of the Church and become Roman subjects in everything except the mere article of faith. When Ulfilas, the Goth, converted his barbarous countrymen, and transformed the fierce and warlike tribes into peaceful and settled peoples among whom war, slavery, polygamy, and private property, were unknown, and among whom no king was recognized but Christ, Constantine declared war against them, and pursued them with fire and sword until they were forced to adopt Roman laws and customs, and agreed by treaty to supply a permanent force of forty thousand young men to the imperial army; and, after that, he caused Ulfilas himself to be ordained a bishop, and sent him back to his own people to teach the imperial religion instead of Christianity. But this profound and atheistic

policy was too deep for the Emperor Licinius ; and Constantine knew well that, according to the primitive Christianity, a whole Christian province would not furnish a single recruit to his rival's legions, since no Christian would bear arms.

Eusebius of Cæsarea, who had prepared the way for Constantine to become the head of the Church in the Western Empire, was the emperor's chosen friend and constant counselor, and the ruler of Rome never forgot that the bishop had, first of all men, invited his attention to the fact that the despised and persecuted Christians constituted already a body of men so numerous, so virtuous, and so prosperous, as to hold the balance of power between any factions which might divide the Roman people just as soon as the legal disabilities which both concealed their numbers and fettered their influence might be removed by imperial favor.

Under the advice of Eusebius, the emperor, in his own name, sent to Anulinus, Proconsul of Africa, a decree most favorable to the Christians throughout that region ; he also made presents of large sums of money to the bishops of Africa, Numidia, and Mauritania, who had been plundered in the persecutions of Maximian ; he also sent a decree ordaining that all church prelates be freed from obligation to discharge any public, military, or political duties and offices ; also, he made a decree commanding a certain council to be held concerning the affairs of Cæcilianus, Bishop of Carthage, and sent to Miltiades, Bishop of Rome, copies of the charges against Cæcilianus ; also, a decree addressed to Chrestus, Bishop of Syracuse, commanding that

a council of many bishops, both of Africa and of Gaul, should assemble at the city of Arles, in order to consider and determine certain questions which were disputed among the faithful.

In short, counseled by Eusebius, who never doubted the ultimate overthrow of idolatry, and the ultimate triumph of whatever ecclesiastical system might be established in place of the Christian communities, Constantine zealously strove in every way to identify himself and his government with the new religion, and to hold himself out as the head of the Church, as well as of the state. At the same time he steadily pursued a secret policy of winning to himself the affection and confidence of the Christian subjects of the Emperor Licinius, by the use of agents whom he kept in his own service, in the household of every bishop of the Eastern Church. This zeal in the service of the established ecclesiasticism soon met with the great reward which Eusebius had promised to the emperor; for, throughout the length and breadth of the churches it began to be commonly declared that “Constantine was the divinely-appointed protector of the Christians”; that “God was the friend and vigilant protector of Constantine”; and that “no man could be his equal, and no man could stand against him.” Licinius soon perceived the influence of these machinations, and saw that, even in his own dominions, the Christians, and especially the prelates, offered up more prayers for Constantine than for himself — “so that he did not suppose,” saith Eusebius, “that they offered prayers for him at all, but persuaded himself that they

did all things, and propitiated the Deity, only for the divinely-favored Emperor Constantine.”

This treasonable sentiment, of course, aroused the resentment of the jealous Licinius, and more and more developed that estrangement between him and the Christians for which Constantine secretly but zealously labored ; and Licinius sought revenge by fomenting every disaffection which manifested itself against the rule of Constantine in Africa. But the bishops were as perfect a police force as modern times have ever succeeded in organizing, and kept Rome fully advised of every movement inaugurated by the enemies of the “most Christian emperor.” And Eusebius saith, concerning Licinius, that “when he saw that his secret preparations by no means succeeded according to his wish, *as God detected every artifice and villainy to his favorite prince*, no longer able to conceal himself, Licinius commenced an open war. And in thus determining war against Constantine, he now *proceeded to array himself against the Supreme God whom he knew Constantine to worship*. Afterward he began imperceptibly to assail those pious subjects under him who had never at any time troubled his government. This too, he did, violently urged on by the innate propensity of his malice, that overclouded and darkened his understanding. He did not, therefore, bear in mind *those that had persecuted the Christians before him*, nor those *whose destroyer and punisher he himself had been appointed*, for their wickedness. But, departing from sound reason, and, as one might say, seized with insanity, he had determined *to wage war against God himself*, the protector and aid



of Constantine, *in place of the one whom He assisted.* And first, indeed, he *drove away all the Christians from his house*, the wretch thus divesting himself of those prayers to God for his safety which they were taught to offer up for all men. After this he ordered the soldiers in the cities to be cashiered and stripped of military honors unless they chose to sacrifice to demons."

Constantine having craftily succeeded in embroiling Licinius with the Church, watched with secret joy, until the enemy whom he wished to destroy followed up this lustration of his army and navy, which was designed to drive out the Christian spies of Constantine, with more strenuous measures; and, in the language of Eusebius, "at last proceeded to such an extent of madness *as to attack the bishops*, now indeed regarding them as the servants of the Supreme God, *but hostile to his measures.*" And as the angry tyrant adopted extreme remedies for this ecclesiastical treason, "razing the churches to the ground"; "subjecting the bishops to the same punishment as the worst criminals"; "cutting the bodies of some into small pieces and feeding them out to fishes in the sea"; and "destroying others by various modes of torture and death"—"the whole Christian world regarded him with horror and detestation, and looked to Constantine for deliverance."

So that the error which the emperor had committed, in soliciting Licinius to affix his signature to the Decree of Milan, was not only fully compensated by his consummate skill and artifice, but the Church prayed earth and Heaven for the destruction of Licinius. Licinius, irritated

more and more by the wide-spread disaffection of his subjects, espoused the cause of Bassianus, who had married Anastasia, the sister of Constantine, and urged him into rebellion in order to gain larger power; and, Bassianus having been defeated and dethroned, Licinius refused to deliver up the partisans of the fallen Cæsar who had taken refuge in his dominions; and upon this pretext Constantine declared war against him; and in two battles, one at Cibalis in Pannonia, and the other upon the plains of Mardia in Thrace, he defeated Licinius, and so crippled him that he was compelled to make peace, with the loss of Pannonia, Dalmatia, Dacia, Macedonia, and Greece, which provinces were added to the dominions of Constantine, and extended his empire to the extremity of Peloponnesus, leaving Licinius Emperor of Thrace, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt.

This war happened in the year 315, and the ambition of Constantine was temporarily sated, so that he then refrained from pushing to extremities the defeated but still powerful Licinius until he might have time and opportunity to alienate the affection and confidence of his subjects in Asia as thoroughly as he had done in Europe. And, besides this, he wanted time in order to subjugate the Goths whom Ulfilas had converted, subvert the Christian communities organized among them on the primitive foundation, and force them to adopt the ecclesiastical system which he had established at Rome, in order to make the Gothic nation an available factor in any future war in which he might engage. But in a few years afterward, having successfully waged war against the Goths,

and having seen the influence of Licinius greatly impaired by the persecutions of the Church in Syria and Egypt which he had encouraged and, perhaps, instigated, as well as by that secret diplomacy of which Constantine was master, the Roman emperor deemed that the time had come to destroy Licinius, and restore the unity of the empire, and consolidate all power in his own hands, especially as the great age and unpopular vices of Licinius seemed to presage an easy victory. He accordingly (and without any pretext whatever on this occasion) declared war against the Illyrian emperor; and in the great battle of Adrianople, and in the siege of Byzantium, and in the decisive action of Chrysopolis, in all of which he engaged Licinius with inferior numbers, his vast military genius asserted itself, so that by continuous defeats he reduced the Emperor of the East to the necessity of making an unconditional surrender. Constantia, the wife of Licinius, was the sister of Constantine, and, at her request and entreaties, the conqueror temporarily spared the life of his fallen rival, and banished him to Thessalonica, where he was soon afterward assassinated in some mysterious manner, it being to this day uncertain whether he perished by the order of the senate, by a tumult of the soldiers, or by the machinations of Constantine. But it is certain that the “first Christian emperor” regarded the fact that a man might stand in the way of his ambition, or possibly compromise his safety, as a sufficient reason for putting him to death, even if the unlucky person happened to be his own son.

“Thus the mighty and victorious Constantine,” saith

Eusebius, “adorned with every virtue of religion, with his most pious son, Crispus Cæsar, resembling in all things his father, recovered the East as his own, and thus restored the Roman Empire to its ancient state of one united body ; extending their peaceful sway around the world, from the rising sun to the opposite regions, to the north and the south, even to the borders of the declining day.”

But this greatest statesman, politician, and ruler—this absolute, untroubled, and self-confident atheist—had only “the godliness that is profitable for the life that now is” ; for this “Christian” had never been baptized (knowing that an emperor can not be a Christian) ; and he afterward murdered in cold blood, without provocation, “his most pious son, Crispus Cæsar, resembling in all things his father” ; his own wife Fausta, and the youthful Licinius, son of his sister Constantia ; just as he systematically assassinated every one whom his calm, merciless, wise policy thought to be possibly inimical to his own safety. But he realized the life-long ambition of his soul, the restoration of the unity of the Roman Empire under his own authority ; and did it by the aid of the Christian Church, which he bribed, corrupted, and secularized, until it acknowledged him to be king instead of Jesus Christ.

These historical details, however, anticipate our narrative of Arius the Libyan, to which we must now return.