

THE MEMPHIS MARTYRS

Dream not helm and harness
The sign of valor true;
Peace hath higher tests of manhood
Than battle ever knew.

—The Hero, Whittier.

On September the 6th, 1878, the Board of Health of the city of Memphis, Tenn., made public announcement that yellow fever had become epidemic. This news filled the hearts of five and fifty thousand people with unspeakable fear. Yellow fever was no new and empty name to the citizens of the Bluff City. Only five years before, the same disease had ravaged the city and despoiled it of two thousand inhabitants, and the trophies of Yellow Jack were still to be recognized in family albums and revered portraits. Thus the news of his second approach cast a spell of piercing fear on the old inhabitants. A panic seized the city and before the sun had made a double circuit, thirty thousand men, women and children had fled the stricken city. Every depot, every train, every boat, every possible means of flight was in demand. We are told that trains were so crowded that even strong men were crushed so badly that they never recovered from that memorable ride. For hours they rode on with no stop for water, food or anything. The terrible news had preceded them, had carried the shrill cry that a caravan of death was in flight. Guards met the weary trains at every station, and the orders were to shoot to kill, if any man dared step from a car. Within the coaches were scenes such as only the fear of death could have made tolerable. Men and women were withering away under the dull and lazy heat of a Tennessee September, and there was not even so much relief as a drink of fresh water might afford. But such was their terror of yellow fever that anything was bearable, if it only meant escape. Nor was this the only exodus the city was to know in those troubled days. The trains of refugees continued. Before a week had passed, Memphis, the queen city of the South, had dwindled to a mere town of nineteen thousand people.

While this wild army made its mad retreat to the north, west and east, there was one group of Memphians who did not so much as think of depot or wharf. These were the priests and religious of the city. Even doctors fled from their patients in

those fearful days, but not a priest failed even in the matter of one sick call, not one nun or brother turned a deaf ear to the lonesome wail of the orphan or the racking sob of the stricken. When others fled, who were bound by ties of blood, these servants of the Master remained, though held only by the bond of charity. Hour after hour, and day after day, they plied at the unyielding mountain of their tasks. Their work slackened only at the order of his majesty, Yellow Jack.

Priests and nuns are mortal. Death has no more regard for them than for the rest of flesh. It was only to be expected that the fever should take away many of these men and women who were not only wearing themselves out with ceaseless exertion, but were also coming into daily and hourly contact with the sick-room. Each visit was a colloquy with death; each night and day were merely a succession of calls. Death was not to be denied and twenty-one of the priests of Memphis, together with a host of Sisters hearkened to its call. Of the priests five died in '73, twelve in '78, and four in '79. Eight of the victims belonged to the secular clergy, five to the Order of Friars Minor or Franciscans and the remaining eight were sons of St. Dominic. A ninth Dominican, Rev. J. R. Cleary, might be listed if we were permitted to count a martyr of 1855. Though each and every one of these martyrs deserves his branch of palm, our space does not permit us to tell of all of them. Hence we shall confine ourselves to the deeds of our brother Dominicans.

The year of '73 had been characterized by more than the ordinary amount of sickness. The preceding winter had brought with it a scourge of virulent smallpox. Much havoc was wrought by this dreaded disease. As the spring came on, this siege abated, but only to give way to an attack of cholera. Cholera flourishes best during the warm weather, and so we find its fatalities at their height during the hot months of July and August. Thus sounded the low rumblings that announced the trampings of the army of Death. The way was well prepared by the smallpox and the cholera, and when the yellow fever did make its appearance, it came as an army into an unfortified city. Still its arrival cannot be traced to any certain day or person. The decline of the cholera was so imperceptibly blended with the rise of yellow fever, that the latter disease had

gained much headway before the danger became apparent to the public.

When the yellow fever made its appearance in Memphis, there were three Dominican Fathers at Saint Peter's, the city's oldest Catholic church. They were Very Rev. J. A. Kelly (pastor), and Fathers D. A. O'Brien and J. R. Dailey. A fourth, Rev. B. V. Carey, had gone on a visit to his relations in order to get a little rest after his strenuous labors during the epidemics of smallpox and cholera. But on hearing that a third plague had come upon the unhappy town, he hastened back to his post of duty. Day by day the fever grew in virulence. Its victims were in every part of the city; sick calls without number came from every direction, and from all distances. As the fever was making progress, the life of these Dominicans underwent quite a drastic change. Regular services at the church were suspended, for the priests, giving themselves up to works of mercy, were obliged to a continuous round of Memphis. A slate was hung on the front door of the rectory. On this those in search of assistance wrote the names and addresses of the sick and needy. When a father finished his visits to one list of stricken, he returned and supplied himself with another from the slate. Often, however, the priest passed from dwelling to dwelling, and searched the house from cellar to roof, for victims were almost certainly to be found everywhere and in all places.

After about a month and a half of this strenuous work in the epidemic Father J. R. Dailey took the fever and died. Nature seemed to have repented its splendid gift, and though this young priest was only in his twenty-seventh year, the beckoning hand of death summoned him away. Two weeks later he was joined by another of his Order when Father B. V. Carey passed away. The latter had attended a call and promised to return on the morrow with Viaticum. The fever hailed him in the meantime and it was the last call he ever answered. Not two days went by until another Dominican had finished his earthly pilgrimage. Father D. A. O'Brien was the third victim. Thus within the short space of less than a month the community of Dominicans was reduced to one member. At this point, Father J. D. Sheehy came to offer his zeal and his life, if need be, to the service of the distracted city. He was a fine young man of only twenty-nine years, but coming from the cooler climate of New

England he was poorly prepared to resist the Southern fever. One day while Father Kelly was out on his duties, his young assistant was attacked by the fever. He lay for some hours before his plight was discovered and an effort was made to have him received by the nuns of his Order. They, however, were unable to respond this time as their own ranks had been thinned by illness and the healthy hardly sufficed to attend to the ill. Thus this young Christian knight, whose charity had inspired him to place the necessities of his neighbor before his own comfort, now found himself overwhelmed with sickness, sinking towards death, and not a drop of medicine, not a crumb of food, not even a companion to cheer and support him. A kind lady of the neighborhood took pity on him and volunteered to care for him; but attentive as were her services, the young priest had been left too long without care, and death's grip could not be shaken. This marked the fourth death that fell on the Dominicans of Memphis in that dreary fall of '73.

The gluttony of Death was not satisfied by its carnival of carnage in '73. Like a brutal and cruel tyrant, conscious of its own power, it let this rapidly growing city expand through a space of five years. Then the merciless appetite of this gourmand of Death appeared again. As if its appetite had been sharpened by long fasting, the fury of its new feast completely overshadowed the horrors of '73. Death was more skilled and sudden in its approach, more universal in its sphere, more terrifying in its effects. After the great flight of over two-thirds of the population, Memphis seemed to be inhabited by only the dead and the dying. One could walk for miles in the streets of this lately prosperous city and meet with no man nor vehicle save a lonely carriage trailing a sad hearse. Abandoned cattle and homeless dogs set up such a pitiful wailing that the day of judgment seemed at hand. Humanity had fled; the streets were deserted to the foul tyranny of lime, carbolic acid and the burning clothing of the dead. The condition of Memphis could have been paraphrased in Josephus' account of the destruction of Jerusalem: "A deep silence and a kind of deadly night seized upon the city."

Through this sad and dreary grove of death the Dominicans were still to be seen. New faces had come to take the places of the old, and were carrying on the service to souls in the same

undaunted fashion. But their work, too, was subject to the sceptre of death. Three more sons of Dominic drew the assignments of death. Father J. A. Bokel and Father J. R. McGarvey passed away on the same day, August 29th. When word reached the Provincial that two more priests had died, he ordered the Prior of the Louisville convent to forward some one to fill the vacancy. The saintly apostle of the Holy Name, Very Rev. C. H. McKenna, was prior at that time. Like the model superior he was, he chose the place of danger for himself. While he was making preparations to leave, Father P. J. Scannell, the youngest priest in the house, heard of his purpose. As a saint of the past, falling on his knees he begged for the chance of martyrdom and glory. Valiantly, tenderly and respectfully he contested his point. The snow white hair of his prior was, he said, a testimony of much labor here and a pledge of much merit hereafter, while he was yet to earn his pittance. Why be greedy in a work of charity? The ardor of youth had vanquished. Father Scannell was given leave, and without so much delay as a farewell visit to his nearby home, this young priest of thirty years was on his way to toil and death. Only one week was assigned to him by Providence to labor in Memphis. The following week was marked as his last.

Finally the long desired frost put in its tardy appearance. By degrees the scourge abated and Memphis welcomed back her wandering children. Improvements were being zealously prosecuted to handle the drainage of the city and place Memphis outside any further danger of another visitation of the fever. Though the workers were zealous in their activity one more blow was yet to fall. This was the dying spasm that marked the passing of a horrible artisan of death. Not so vicious as its predecessors, the fever of '79 managed to sweep away 800 souls. One Dominican was among that number, Father D. E. Reville. He was the acknowledged peer of the pulpit orators of Memphis and his death was a loss to the Order and the city. The day the fever made its last appearance in Memphis, Father Reville opened a retreat for the Dominican Sisters stationed at St. Agnes. This retreat was never to be completed. The nuns were disbanded and the retreat-master went forth to preach the practical doctrine of example, sacrifice and death.

Thus closed the last chapter of the tragedy of the yellow fever in Memphis. In the short space of six years it had almost depopulated a fair and promising city, destroyed the profits of many decades of toil, and retarded the city as no other force could have done. Hardly a family could recall those trying days without a sigh for some friend or relative. The Dominican family also had its dead to remember and pray for. Upon the heights of Chapel Hill in Calvary cemetery at Memphis there rest eight of that spiritual family. A monument spreads protecting and angelic wings over all the priests of Memphis who died in the yellow fever. Among them, as sharers of their toil and partakers of their glory lies the small colony of Dominican martyrs. Two modest marble slabs erected in the transept of St. Peter's Church at Memphis preserve to each rising generation the story and the names of those generous souls who loved the fathers of Memphis and the common religion of the ages better than life itself.

—Bro. Martin Shea, O. P.

A REVERIE AT TWILIGHT

Softly—o'er my spirit stealing, comes the spell of Memory—
Softly—like the moonlight gleaming—o'er the slumbers of
the sea;
Softly—like calm billows laving—on the dim and distant shore—
When the waves have ceased their heaving and the tempest
ceased its roar.

Like soft music sweetly blending—sadness with its strains of
light;
Like the pensive stars now lending—lustre to the gloom of night;
Like the dreamy twilight flinging—shadows o'er the flow'ry lea—
Saddened as the night-birds singing—are the charms of Memory.

—Bro. Maurice O'Moore, O. P.