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A SKETCH
OF THE
LIFE AND CHARACTER
OF
CONSTANTINE
THE
GREAT

BY

GEO. W. WARVELLE, LL. D.

Knight Grand Cross, Past Grand Sovereign, Etc.

SECOND EDITION

CHICAGO

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To Most Illustrious
SAMUEL H. SMITH
Grand Sovereign of the Order
of the
RED CROSS OF CONSTANTINE
for the United States of America,
this volume is fraternally inscribed by the

AUTHOR

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A SKETCH *of* CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

As the reputed founder of the Imperial, Ecclesiastical and Military Order of the Red Cross, the name and memory of Constantine must ever command a certain degree of veneration from every true and loyal Knight Companion, and every incident connected with his life will always possess for them a peculiar interest. In this brochure the writer has endeavored to bring together a few of the salient features of the career of this remarkable and highly gifted man, believing that anything which tends to shed light upon the real or traditionary history of the Order will be an acceptable addition to the meager literature now accessible to the average Knight. In its compilation free use has been made of such material as the subject affords and to the works of Eusebius, Gibbon, Milman and others, as well as to the writings of Wright and Little of our own Order, the writer is largely indebted for the recitals which follow. It has been the custom of most writers to present only the pleasing side of Constantine's character, to extol his virtues, condone his faults and suppress or gloss over the crimes he committed to encompass his ambitious and not always praiseworthy ends. Without exception, so far as the writer's observation has gone, this is true of all biographies written in the interest of the Red Cross Order and generally so of those which treat of the subject in connection with the Christian church. In this sketch the sober facts of history are given as they appear; the only province of the historian is to present the past as it was.

Caius Flavius Valerius Aurelius Claudius Constantinus,¹ surnamed Magnus (the great), was born at Naissus (now Nissa) in Upper Moesia,² February, A. D. 272. His father, commonly called Constantius Chlorus,³ came from a noble Dalmatian family, but his

¹Thirteen emperors have borne the name of Constantine. Two of these ruled the entire Roman empire, the others only that of the empire of the east.

²It has often been asserted that Constantine was a native of England, but there is no proof to sustain the assertion.

³His proper name was Flavius Valerius Constantius, but the Byzantine historians, with doubtful accuracy, applied to him the epithet Chlorus, or the Pale, and by this name he now generally figures in the history of his times.

mother, Helena, seems to have been a woman of humble extraction and unknown antecedents.⁴ When Constantine was ten years of age Diocletian, by the suffrage of the army, became emperor of the Roman dominions and thereupon associated with him Maximian, each assuming the title of Augustus. Six years later Galerius and Constantius were added to the government with the lesser title of Cæsar, and upon attaining this dignity Constantius was compelled to repudiate his marriage with Helena and espouse the daughter of Maximian.

The portion of the empire assigned to Constantius was the extreme west, including Spain, Gaul and Britain, but Constantine was detained at Rome as a hostage for his father's loyalty. Here he was carefully educated, although always an object of aversion to Maximian, and in due time entered the army, serving with such distinction under Diocletian that he was appointed a tribune of the first rank. His martial bearing and personal courage soon made him a favorite with the army, which excited the jealousy of the naturally suspicious Galerius, who, it is said, repeatedly exposed him to unusual hazards in the hope of having him killed, but the only effect was to strengthen in Constantine a natural wariness and discretion which often operated to his advantage later in life.

In 305 Diocletian abdicated the throne, compelling the unwilling Maximian to follow his example, and thereby Constantius and Galerius succeeded to supreme rank and became the emperors or Augusti. Constantine, by birth and training, was entitled to be advanced to the dignity of Cæsar, but Galerius refused to nominate him and his father did not dare to bestow the office upon him while he remained at what was virtually a hostile court. Hence, Severus and Maximin were chosen. Apprehensive for his own safety, Constantine now endeavored to join his father in the west, but it was only after repeated requests from his colleague that Galerius gave a reluctant consent to such a course. Indeed, there is ground for supposing that the consent was given only to be recalled, but Constantine, acting with the utmost promptitude, at once set out upon his journey and reached his father just as he was embarking at Boulogne to suppress a revolt in Britain. In this he was successful, but died, immediately after achieving victory, at York (Eboricum), England, in the year 306. This event marked the turning

⁴Tradition says that Helena was the daughter of Caylus, a British king, but this is now regarded as a pure invention. The fiction is preserved in the "Historical Oration" of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

point in Constantine's career. By the enthusiastic acclamations of the army he was immediately proclaimed Augustus, a dignity he accepted with feigned reluctance that he might not incur the active enmity of Galerius, to whom he at once directed a letter expressing his regret in being compelled by circumstances to assume the purple before receiving the imperial sanction. Galerius, however, refused to recognize his succession and conferred the office on Severus, allowing Constantine only the title of Cæsar. To this arrangement he apparently consented, but continued to govern the provinces which had been assigned to his father, pursuing the same vigorous policy which his father had inaugurated and demonstrating by repeated victories over the barbarians beyond the frontier his prowess and ability as a military leader. He promoted the internal prosperity of the country by a confirmation of his father's tolerant policy toward religious sects and won the esteem of his subjects by a mild yet wise government.

The events of the next ensuing few years demonstrated the utter instability of the plan devised by Diocletian for the partition of power among Augusti and Cæsars. While nominally colleagues in a common enterprise, they were, in reality, rival princes plotting and counterplotting for sole supremacy, and this condition of affairs continued until the final concentration of all authority in Constantine.

About 307 Maxentius, son of Maximian, induced his father to emerge from his retirement and again assume the purple, he taking for himself the title of Cæsar, while Maximian, to secure the friendship of Constantine, gave to him in marriage his daughter Fausta and caused him to be proclaimed Augustus. In the meantime, Severus having been murdered, Galerius made his friend Licinus emperor, and thus six rulers struggled for supremacy in the Roman empire.⁵

While prudence, no less than family ties, should have dictated to Maxentius the policy of preserving friendly relations with Constantine, yet his ambition mastered his judgment and intoxicated with power he proclaimed himself emperor of all the west. Being supported by the prætorian guards he forced his father to leave Rome and ultimately to seek refuge at the court of his son-in-law, where for the second time he resigned the purple and affected to have no further desire for power. But during the absence of his

⁵Galerius, Licinus and Maximin in the east and Maximian, Maxentius and Constantine in the west.

protector he again attempted to resume imperial dignity and to incite a mutiny in his own favor. Upon learning of this, Constantine, with his usual promptitude and decision, assembled his army and pursuing Maximian overtook him at Marseilles, where he was permitted to avoid the humiliation of a public execution by taking his own life.⁶

The death of Maximian was used by Maxentius as a pretext for hostile measures which Constantine, unwilling to engage in war, ignored as long as safety would permit, but when Maxentius prepared to invade Gaul he anticipated him by rapidly crossing the Alps and entering Italy at the head of a well disciplined army. Defeating the forces of Maxentius at Susa, Turin and Verona he hastened toward Rome and in fifty-eight days after the capture of Verona found himself at Saxa Rubra, on the Cremera, a small stream about nine miles from Rome, where Maxentius lay entrenched in great force. It is said that Maxentius had with difficulty been roused to a sense of his danger and would not have taken the field in person had it not been for the clamor of the populace, and that, superstitious as he was cowardly, before he would attempt the fortunes of war he first consulted the Sibylline books, receiving, however, from their custodians a vague reply which, like the utterances of the oracle, could be interpreted to suit the event, whatever it might be.⁷ On October 28, A. D. 312, he met the forces of Constantine in a decisive engagement; his army, though superior in numbers, was utterly routed with great carnage, while Maxentius himself, in attempting to make his escape over the Milvian bridge, was pressed by the throng into the river and drowned.

It was just prior to this victory that the celebrated incident is said to have occurred which resulted in the conversion of Constantine to the Christian faith and the establishment of the Imperial Order of the Red Cross. The story is told with many variations in detail by a number of writers, but in substance it is that on the afternoon before the battle Constantine saw in the sky, just beneath the sun, a pillar of light in the form of a cross, or, as

⁶Some of the Roman writers assert that Maximian was pardoned for this offence, but afterward entered into a plot to assassinate Constantine while he slept. Gibbon and other modern historians discredit the story, however.

⁷The answer was, "Illo die hostem Romanorum esse periturum," or, "In that day the enemy of the Romans shall perish"; the defeated party would, of course, be declared the enemy of Rome.

related by some, the combined *Chi* and *Rho* forming the sacred monogram, and that in the night a heavenly messenger appeared to him in a vision commanding him to take that sign for his standard and promising him that *by that sign he should conquer*.⁸ The story has been accepted with implicit faith by many as it has also been doubted and denied by others, and will ever remain the most interesting as well as the most disputed incident in the life of this illustrious man.⁹

By the victory of the Milvian bridge Constantine became the sole emperor of the west. He entered Rome a conqueror; a pliant senate rendered him homage and assigned him the first rank among the three remaining Augusti, while to complete his imperial dignity he assumed the ancient title of Pontifex Maximus. Although he remained at Rome but a few weeks, he seems to have introduced a number of needed reforms, and among other things disbanded the prætorian guards and destroyed their camp. To secure the fruits of victory and effectually discourage insurrection, he slew the two sons and more intimate favorites of his fallen rival Maxentius, but this, we are told, was but in keeping with the rude spirit of the times, while his conduct, as described by one of his biographers, was "marked on the whole by wisdom and moderation."

As the empire of the west was now in the dominion of one monarch, so a like condition came to prevail in the east. Galerius had died in 311 and a war ensued between his survivors, Maximin and Licinius, which finally resulted in the death of the former. Licinius then ruled in the east as Constantine did in the west and in order to cement the friendship of the two monarchs Licinius espoused Constantine's sister, Constantia, the marriage being celebrated with great pomp at Milan in March, 313. But even this was not sufficiently potent to preserve peace, for in a little more than a year thereafter, for some cause not now known, or possibly for no cause, the two emperors were engaged in a war which was

⁸Or, as the Latin version reads, "In hoc signo vinces." Some accounts state that Constantine saw the words as well as the cross in the sky, and in some instances the words are rendered in Greek. The accounts of the vision vary in many particulars according as the different historians seem to have been swayed by their prejudices in favor of the eastern or western church.

⁹Modern scholars are of the opinion that the vision and dream are inventions of a later time, but are agreed that the sacred monogram was in fact employed by Constantine on the shields of his soldiers as a sort of magic to secure the help of the mighty God of the Christians.

concluded only by the dismemberment of part of Licinius' territory. For nine years succeeding there was a truce, during which the power of Constantine augmented in the same ratio as that of his rival declined, and then came the inevitable struggle for supremacy. In 323 the emperors were again engaged in conflict, but the origin of the war, like that of the previous one in 314, is obscure or unknown. Indeed, it is thought probable that Constantine, having determined to make himself master of the world, did not wait for provocation but made a *casus belli* for himself. At all events, the war was conducted with all of Constantine's old time vigor and promptitude and in a series of brilliant engagements Licinius was totally defeated. His wife, sister of Constantine, now interceded with the latter for her husband's life, which the conqueror promised to spare; but the promise was not kept, for the year following Licinius was put to death by the orders of Constantine at Thessalonica, the place to which he had been exiled. The panegyrists of Constantine have sought many excuses for this apparently cold blooded and deliberate murder, but the verdict of history seems to make it an ineffaceable blot upon his memory.

And now the ambitious dreams of Constantine were fulfilled, for with the conquest of Licinius the whole imperial power of the Roman dominions devolved upon him and thenceforth he ruled both the east and the west. His wise statesmanship and keen insight enabled him to hold the possessions thus acquired in comparative security and the remainder of his reign was free from internal commotion or external violence.

The balance of his life was devoted to plans for the perpetuation of his empire as well as his own fame. He established christianity as the state religion; called several church councils, including the celebrated convocation at Nicæa (A. D. 325); founded a new capital for the empire on the site of Byzantium (A. D. 328) to which he gave his own name, though it would seem that the intention of the founder was to designate it as "New Rome," and by this latter name it is still officially known in the orthodox eastern church. In the year 326 he visited Rome for the purpose of formally celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his succession to the purple, and here again the historian discovers a foul stain upon his character. It seems that during the festivities his eldest son, Crispus, was accused of some offence, the precise character of which is not fully apparent from the confused and contradictory

accounts which have been transmitted to us.¹⁰ The accusation was made by Fausta, the second wife of Constantine, and resulted in the banishment of Crispus to Pola, where he was put to death. Included in the charge were Licinius, the emperor's nephew, and a number of courtiers, all of whom suffered the same fate. It is further related that Constantine, discovering too late that the charge was false, then wreaked his vengeance on the unfortunate Fausta by causing her to be suffocated in her bath.¹¹ These multiple tragedies filled the minds of the people with consternation and forebodings. The emperor became very unpopular and soon after left Rome, never to return.

His closing years were passed at the new Rome which he had erected on the Bosphorus, and on May 22, A. D. 337, being then about sixty-four years of age, after a brief illness, he expired at Nicomedia, receiving on his death bed a christian baptism at the hands of the Arian bishop, Eusebius.

* * *

It is difficult to arrive at a just estimate of the character of this celebrated man. Fancy and fable have been freely employed by many of his biographers and he has been extolled as the devout and pious protector of the infant church. That he did protect the church is an historical fact; that he was either devout or pious is greatly to be doubted. Aside from the fact that on his conquest of Maxentius he permitted freedom of religion,¹² and at a later period virtually recognized christianity as the state religion, there is no evidence that he was a convert himself, and the circumstance that he received baptism only when on his death bed indicates that he had made no prior avowal of faith. It is true that a number of Roman Catholic writers assert that he received baptism at Rome in the year 326 from Pope Sylvester, and at the same time endowed that pontiff with temporal dominion, but the assertions are wholly without historical foundation. Indeed, it would seem that Constantine remained during the greater portion of his life strongly tinctured with the old heathen faiths and superstitions and that his recognition of christianity was induced by political rather than personal motives.

¹⁰From the best accounts the charge would seem to have been treason.

¹¹Gibbon is of opinion, which he sustains by well-authenticated facts, that this additional crime is highly improbable.

¹²The celebrated "Edict of Milan," granting toleration to the Christians, is now regarded by many of the scholars as a myth. The Emperor Galerius in the year 311 issued an edict of complete toleration, and so, they say, no new edict was necessary.

It is contended, however, that the fact of deferring baptism until the approach of death was due not to a disbelief of christianity but, in view of the then prevalent doctrine that baptism washed away all prior sins, was simply postponed until the last hour in order that the purifying act might wipe out all the sins of a lifetime. It is certain, however, that his coins, in many instances, bore the name of Apollo as well as the emblem of Christ, and that on important occasions he would order the soothsayers (haruspices) to be consulted with respect to the omens. From the time of the council of Nicæa (A. D. 325) his interest in christianity becomes more marked, but it is thought that he was at best only half christian, half heathen, and combined the worship of Christ with that of Apollo.

It has been said, that Constantine stands, as it were, on the dividing line of two worlds, the ancient and the modern—the pagan and the christian; that he was born and educated within the former; that he acted and died within the latter. Hence, it is contended, it is not possible to judge him wholly from the standpoint of either. While his mind may have understood the exalted truths of christianity, and while he may have accurately measured the benefits which they promised to humanity, his heart remained pagan and never cast off the impressions, traditions and customs of the old religion.

* * *

It has been further said, that Constantine was entitled to be called “great” in virtue rather of what he did than of what he was, and that, tested by character, he stands among the lowest of all those to whom the epithet has been applied, either in ancient or modern times. His biographers all unite in ascribing to him personal courage of a high order, promptitude and decision in the execution of his plans, and a political sagacity that has seldom been excelled. His religious tolerance, which he exhibited throughout his life, was certainly a praiseworthy trait of character, particularly in view of the times, but we look in vain for those generous sentiments which distinguish the truly great. There are, indeed, some traces of this during early life, but as he advanced in power these disappear, and while we might have pardoned the execution of the aged Maximian as a military measure, we turn with loathing from the murders of the son and intimates of the fallen Maxentius, the treacherous treatment of the captive Licinius, the atrocities attending the execution of his son, Crispus, and

his nephew, Licinius, and the other bloody tragedies which stain the record of his later years.

But if we regard only his achievements; his campaigns and conquests as a military leader, his administration as a statesman, and the results which have flowed from them, then we may truly say that he stands among the first of those who have ever won or worn the title of "great." The political system which he inaugurated preserved the eastern empire for a thousand years after his death, and has left its impress upon all civilized nations even to the present day, while the system of religion which he rescued from the condition of a proscribed heresy, by the impulse which he imparted, became the dominating thought of the world.

* * *

Among the traditions which attend the memory and cluster around the name of Constantine, is that which ascribes to him the institution of the Order of the Red Cross. The accepted legend is that immediately after his vision he caused to be constructed a standard resembling the "sign" which he had seen upon the sky and to which was given the name "Labarum." This standard, it is said, was entrusted to the care of fifty picked men of known valor and fidelity, whose station was marked with honors and emoluments. This detail of guards was then permanently established as an order and from this circumstance is traced our present organization. The fact of Constantine's assumption of the cross as an heraldic ensign is further cited as a striking illustration of the reality of his conversion to the Christian faith.

Unfortunately, however, there is no evidence to support the statement that Constantine, either at or immediately after the time of his engagement with Maxentius, adopted the cross as his distinguishing symbol, while such historical data as we have quite conclusively indicates that the Labarum did not come into use as a standard until about twenty years later.¹³ It is by no means improbable that a special guard was detailed to carry and protect the standard when it finally became an ensign to be borne at the head of the legions, and that it possessed a religious significance would be an additional reason for some sort of organization of this guard. But this is as far as legitimate conjecture may go. It is certain that the guard was not an order, in the sense in which that term is now understood, and it is idle to look for any

¹³Gibbon says it was first employed about the year 323.

of the special features of chivalric orders prior to the twelfth century.

The Constantinian legend bears about the same relation to the Order of the Red Cross that the Arthurian legends do to the Order of the Garter. Neither is susceptible of demonstration and they are now regarded by scholars and critics simply as pleasing myths. Nor is it at all essential to the value or effectiveness of the Order as a social, moral and intellectual force, that it should, in fact, have a direct connection either with Constantine or his time. There is but little that is edifying to be gathered from that age of turbulence, violence and oppression, and if we regard the Constantinian legend not as an historical fact, but simply as a symbol, we shall relieve the subject from whatever difficulty or embarrassment may now seem to attend it.

GEO. W. WARVELLE.

Chicago, Jan. 23, 1915.



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