MYRRHA, THE MARTYR

A Tale of the Days of Nero

By T. Beaugeard.

"WATCH and pray, for the time is at hand. Strange signs and have eyes and see not! Stones of fire have fallen from the sky, and it has rained blood on Pozzuoli and Cumae. The heavens have remained aglow for a whole night, and the smoke is growing thicker over the Phlegrean fields. Remember how the Tiber overflowed its banks, how the tornado swept over the province of Campania, and the plague that followed last autumn, killing 2000 people in Rome. Remember the famine and the terrific earthquake that destroyed half Pompeii, the city of luxury and debauch. And again, very lately, we hear how a woman of Suburra gave birth to a monster, a pig with a hawk's head!"

And as the speaker, Timothy, the priest, gesticulated and admonished, he alternately folded and unfolded the red mantle that covered his white woolen tunic. The Christians listened, gazing ardently at him, or closing their eyes to concentrate their attention the more. They were mostly slaves, small tradesmen, artisans and day laborers. The meeting was held in one of those huge catacombs for which poor people gave a small contribution every year, and thus secured in advance a place of burial. The walls of the immense vault were covered with memorial slabs bearing various inscriptions and designs; palms, lambs, fishes and doves. Copper lamps, fixed to the stone ceiling with chains, shed a dim light over the uncovered heads of the men and the veiled foreheads of the women.

The priest went on:

"I am going to tell you of a vision God sent to me. I saw, rising out of the sea, a woman seated on a monster. The woman, clad in purple and covered with gold, pearls and precious stones, held in her hand a cup filled with wine of impurity. The color of the monster was scarlet red; it had the body of a leopard, the foot of a bear and the jaw of a lion. And this monster poured forth a torrent of blasphemies against God. His name, his tabernacle, and all those who are in heaven, and the people said: 'Who is like unto this beast? Who dare oppose it? And they all worshiped the monster, with the exception of those whose names were written from the beginning in the Book of Life of the Slaughter of the Lamb.

"But the Lord will triumph! The vile sorceress will be thrown back into the sea, and the beast hurled into the sulphurous pool which is burning for all eternity! And the Lord will build the New Jerusalem on earth for his chosen ones!"

At this moment a young girl, almost a child, who was seated in the last row among the congregation, and had been listening with breathless attention, asked her neighbor, an old woman, whose wizened features showed through the folds of the linen veil:

"Tell me, if you can, kind Mammaea, who is the sorceress with the cup and who the scarlet beast is?"

"The symbol is easy to understand, little Myrrha; the woman is Rome, the beast is Nero. But we must not say these things too loud."

Myrrha seemed to meditate; her eyebrows knit together, and an expression of great sadness crept into her eyes.

The mass began. Timothy, his hands stretched above the stone altar on which were the bread and wine, recited the prayers according to the Liturgy. Then the faithful pressed forward to partake of the bread, and drink from the cup. Timothy sent away two men and a woman who were awaiting their turn near the holy table.

"Our brothers and sisters now here," he said, pointing his finger at them, "have sinned publicly and therefore must perform public penance. Cornuvinus has been seen in a tavern, in the company of a loose woman. Vulteius has attended a sacrifice in the Temple of Aesculapius. Mertena was present at the game in the circus and Accia has committed the sin of adultery.

"All four of them shall live for a whole month on bread and water only and be excluded from the communion table. I am ashamed and grieved to have to mention such deplorable sins and inflict penance. The nearer we are to the time, the holier it behooves the faithful to be, and sin, among them, is almost unpardonable. Things carnal are abominal to the Lord; theatres and games are the works of the evil one and the Christian who is present once again the sin of Judas. Woe to those who have received the light and yet behaved like Gentiles! The world is doomed; let there be nothing in common between us and the world and let us await, in fear and trembling, the coming of the Judge!"

Corvinus, Vulteius and Meterna bent low their heads. Accia burst into tears. An old man, Bishop Callistus, who was seated under the altar, rose, though his brow was deeply wrinkled and his beard as white as snow, his blue eyes were soft and clear as a child's.

He said to Timothy:

"Let me speak to them."

And turning to Corvinus:

"You, who have given scandal to your brethren, what have you to say?"

Corvinus, a dark skinned youth with a powerful neck, replied:

"I have sinned, I confess. But there are days when the sky is so soft and the sun so beautiful that I unconsciously forgot the mystery of the fall of the redemption, and, in spite of myself, am carried away by the living and the pleasure of the flesh. A woman passing by looked at me and I followed her, almost forgetting that I had a soul, but great sadness followed the sin. Then I spoke to this woman of the revelation of our Lord Jesus, and even as I spoke, she gradually loosened her arms from round my neck and finally begged me to take her, one day, to our meetings."

"What have you to say?" asked the old man of the other sinner.

Vulteius, a middle aged man, simple and kind looking, replied:

"My brother-in-law, who is an idolator, wanted to offer a sacrifice to Aesculapius for the recovery of his wife. He entreated me to accompany him to the temple, and I did so, not daring to let anybody know I am a Christian and also through the fear of being considered an unkind relative. Yet I firmly believe Aesculapius to be a demon. I must say, however, that the patient was cured a few days after the sacrifice had been offered."

"And you, Mertena, confess your sin."

Mertena, a woman still in her prime, fair and buxom, with bright eyes which told of a happy disposition and belied her present sorrowful attitude, replied:

"Husband, whom I have not yet succeeded in converting, begged me to accompany to the circus. I refused at first, but he grew angry and I had to do his bidding through cowardice and for the sake of peace, and I must confess through curiosity, for it was announced that the emperor himself would drive a six horse chariot that very day."

These words caused Myrrha to raise her head. She hoped Callistus would ask Mertena to give a description of Nero, and of what she felt on seeing him. But the old man turned to Accia and inquired:

"And you, my daughter, how could you——"

Accia, tall and lithe, was still weeping with her face buried in her hands. Her sobs shook the long folds of her veil and she murmured:

"I love him."

Callistus meditated for a while.

"Are your hearts, Vulteius and Mertena, filled with bitterness for your cowardice and your idle curiosity; and you, Corvinus and Accia, for your impurity?"

The four culprits assented, and bent their heads, but Accia choked by her sobs, or, maybe, lingering over some involuntary memory, answered only after the others.

"I enjoin you, then, to pray for a whole week," continued Callistus, "twice as much as you usually do, and to look for every opportunity to help the sick and the poor. Go in peace and sin no more."

Then, as if speaking to himself:

"Yes, that is how he would have spoken. I know it, for I have seen him."

While Callistus was speaking thus in his unbounded charity, Myrrha felt the mysterious pain that swelled her heart gradually disappearing. However, her face still betrayed some trouble, when, the ceremony over, Callistus came to her.

"May the Lord have you in his keeping, Myrrha," said the old man. "But you look rather sad, child; what is the matter?"

"Father, I have something to ask you. You won't scold me, will you?"

"I have never done so yet, little Myrrha."

"Well, I should like to know whether Emperor Nero is as wicked as Timotoy, the priest, seems to believe?"

"Alas, child, I am afraid he is."

"Am I, then, compelled to hate him?"

"You must not hate anybody, Myrrha; you must only hate sin."

"Then, since the emperor was once kind to my father, I am not forbidden to be grateful to him, am I?"

"Of course you are not," replied Callistus.

"But," continued Myrrha, after some hesitation, "would it be a sin to try and see the emperor?"

The calm face of the old priest became suddenly harsh and severe. He angrily replied:

"It would be a great sin, indeed, from this day forth, for in the name of God and by the authority he has given me over you, I forbid you, Myrrha—understand this, once and for all—to try and see him whom you have mentioned."

"I shall obey you," said Myrrha. "But you never spoke so harshly to me."

"I did not mean to hurt you," replied the old man, stroking the child's hair. "I spoke thus because I love you."

"Then, if you really do," said Myrrha, "don't be afraid and lean on me. I am strong."

And the old man and the young girl, like Aedipus and Antigone of old, slowly walked away in the rear of the congregation.

Myrrha was 16 years old. She was the daughter of a woman of Gaul, who died in giving her birth, and of a slave named Styrax, a scullian in the emperor's kitchen. Her childhood had been spent in the back gardens of the palace of the Caesars, where the slaves lived, and in the underground quarters of the imperial residence.

She had grown like a delicate, humble flower at the granite feet of a colossus.

She had never seen Nero. She knew him only through the conversation of other slaves. She heard them speak of his power and talents, of the banquets and entertainments he gave, but never of his crimes for it would not have been safe to mention them; an indiscreet word on the subject might easily reach the emperor's ears. Myrrha imagined him an extraordinary being, mysterious, awe inspiring and beautiful, who lived, far above, a triumphant life, almost divine. He inspired her with wonder and dread, and a kind of latent curiosity which she dared not satisfy.

One day the emperor was so pleased with a dish prepared by Styrax that he had him brought into his presence and gave him freedom on the spot, but on condition that he would still remain in his service.

Myrrha could scarcely believe that the mighty, all-powerful Nero should condescend to perform a deed of kindness. She was filled with the deepest gratitude.

However, Styrax, who was a simple and righteous man, remained sad and fearful. His memory incessantly conjured up the extraordinary scene he once witnessed: Nero, half naked, and looking like a madman, lying on a couch in the center of an immense hall resplendent with a thousand lights; on the floor strewn with roses, men and women were sleeping, overcome by the orgie. He dreaded, therefore, his newly acquired freedom, for Nero was under the influence of the wine-god when he gave it to him.

The old woman, Mammaea, took care of Myrrha, and gave her a home in the small room she occupied in the Suburra quarter. She taught her to embroider dresses for the Roman ladies. They both earned their living in this way.

Callistus lived in the same house. He was 80 years old, and had formerly been employed in Palestine as toll collector of a bridge on the Jordan. It was there he saw Jesus on several occasions with his disciples. As they were poor and looked kind and simple, he used to let them pass without payment. He had hesitated, however, in believing in the "good news." It was only after the crucifixion of Jesus that he had given himself up to him.

He had come to Rome with Peter the apostle, and helped him in the work of announcing the gospel. And from the time Peter and Paul had left for Asia to visit the churches, his authority had greatly increased among the faithful, because he was a very holy man, and also because he was now the only one left among those who had seen Christ.

Whilst other priests like Timothy ruled somewhat harshly over their fold, and were bent on framing the dogmas of the new religion, so as to give more power to the church, Callistus was lenient to sinners, provided they showed neither malice nor cruelty; he preached only the love of God, and men. And whenever he had to decide on some delicate question he would repeat: "Yes, that is what he would have done, and how he would have spoken. I know it, for I have seen him." The first time he met his little neighbor, Myrrha, on the stairs of the house in Suburra, he was struck with her beauty and innocence. He spoke to her and had no need to speak long, the soul of Myrrha was won over to Christ at once. The old man and the young girl understood and loved each other, for both were pure and charitable.

And it was Myrrha who, every week, accompanied Callistus to the meeting of the faithful and took him back home.

Callistus and Myrrha were walking one day along the Via Appia, paved with large stones and lined with white tombs that were seen here and there from between green oak trees, yew trees and oleanders. It was evening time, and in front of them the city with its domes, arches and monuments was silhouetted against the violet sky. They walked toward the city bearing in their humble hearts the new thought which was about to conquer this mistress of the world.

Myrrha was in a melancholy mood. After a while she said:

"What has Emperor Nero done that is so bad?"

"His ill deeds, Myrrha, are such that I should not dare to describe them to you. Your imagination could not even conceive them."

"Still?"

"I shall pass over the manner in which he enjoys himself and the public profanation to which he submits his body. He is not satisfied with being impure, he would like the whole world to be so. His greatest pleasure is to soil—everything he can. I cannot say more to you. Rome has been transformed by him into circus, a tavern, a place of ill fame."

"But," replied Myrrha, "if the emperor indulges in such wickedness, is it not because he can do anything he likes, and truth cannot therefore be revealed to him? Who knows? He may be as bad as you say without being absolutely wicked and cruel."

"He whose only thought consists in satisfying his body is always wicked. Your sweetness, Myrrha, comes from your innocence. But in addition to his other sins, Nero poisoned his brother and caused the death of his wife, a kind and virtuous princess. He killed his tutors. Burrhus and Seneca, both of whom were very good men. Jaul, the apostle, thought highly of Seneca, and had many a talk with him; he hoped to inspire him, one day, with the true faith. Nero has killed many other people through jealousy, cupidity, or hatred of virtue. He wanted to have his own mother drowned, and being unsuccessful in doing, he had her killed by a centurion. He is not only the most infamous among all comedians and mummers, but he is also the most cruel murderer and executioner that ever lived. But what is the matter, Myrrh? On what are you meditating?"

The large wide-open eyes of the young girl seemed to be gazing at some horrible shape which she was trying to conjure up, and yet was frightened to behold—she murmured in a low voice:

"I think there is no man more to be pitied than Emperor Nero."

Myrrha had led until then an almost secluded life, having for only companions old Callistus and Mammaea. She had hitherto avoided speaking in the street with the neighbors or the shopkeepers. Now, however, when she went out either shopping of taking her work to a customer, she would mix with the crowd and listen to the conversation that was going on; when she met people she knew she would also question them concerning the emperor.

Scaevola, the barber, had a glib tongue and readily satisfied her curiosity. His shop was in the corner of the street and formed part of the building in which Myrrha lived. His trade gave him an opportunity for learning the latest news, and his conversation was generally but the echo of popular opinion.

"Yes, that's true. Many things are whispered concerning Emperor Nero. I have heard a lot about the death of Prince Britannicus. The affair looked suspicious. I scarcely know more than what is generally said on the subject. But what I know full well is, that whenever two princes quarrel about supreme power nothing good can result. As matters stand we feel secure, at least, for the present. People speak also of his mother's death; well, on that point I know still less.

"There is not the slightest doubt, however, that she was wicked and did not scruple to serve her husband, Emperor Claudius, with a dish of mushrooms which were—well, not quite fresh. We must not forget, either, that she wished to govern conjointly with her son, and mix into business which did not concern her. Well, how could that have pleased him? Let us be fair! As regards what happened to his first wife, Empress Octavia, that was very unfortunate for her but people hardly knew her; she was never proud and never appeared in public. So the news of her death passed almost unnoticed. After all, the gossip I hear concerns me but little. I do not care for politics. The state cannot exist without an emperor. They say he has killed many people, but these were wealthy and belonged to the aristocracy, that very class that deny us everything. The emperor, on the contrary, has our welfare at heart. He has enacted a law for the reduction of lawyer's fees. He wished also to repeal indirect taxation. But the senate objected, and so he strikes at the nobility, and thus avenges us. He is not a bad emperor for us to have, as you see."

"I owe my freedom to him," Myrrha could not help saying. "He made my father a free man."

"You see! You see!" replied the barber. "Besides, we never had so many fetes, and so beautiful, too! He even condescends to take an active part in the games to please us. Did he not, lately, drive a chariot himself at the Festival of Youth? He won the race.

* * * This was prearranged, still, we cannot be too grateful to him."

"Did you see him?"

"As I see you now."

"Really! What is he like?"

"Oh, very handsome! I don't say so merely because he is the emperor, but one cannot help being impressed by his presence. Whatever people may say, I think he is made from stuff different from us. In one word, he does just what pleases him, and those who find fault with him—well, they had better go and say so elsewhere than in my shop. I don't mean that for you, Myrrha."

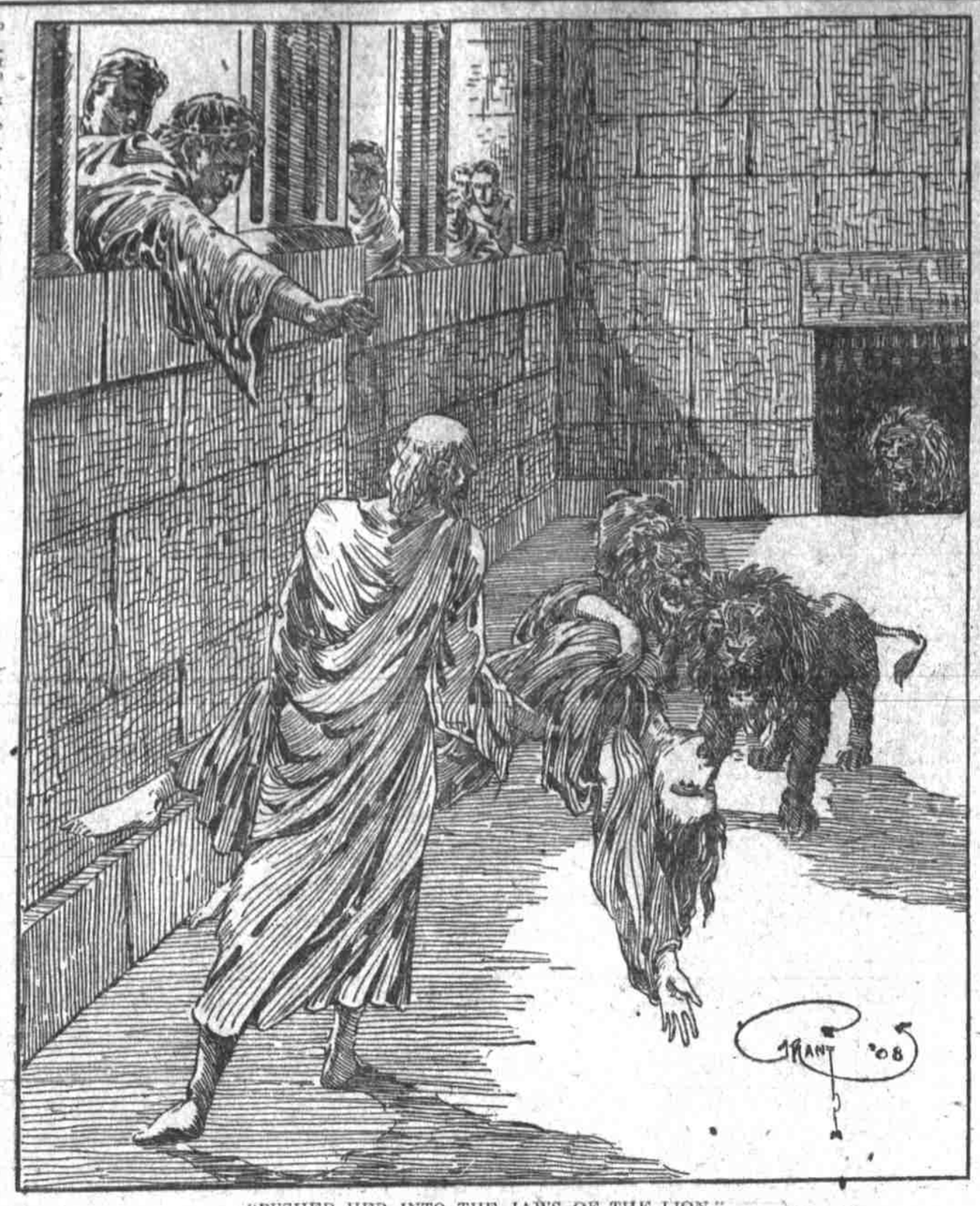
Myrrha grew more and more anxious. She entertained no doubt as regards the truth of what Callistus had told her, and moreover, which had been confirmed, in many respects, by her conversation with the barber. When she tried to conjure up a realistic vision of Nero's crimes she shivered with horror and felt a great pity for his victims. But at the same time she was glad to learn that Nero was not hated by the people.

The fact of her thoughts constantly reverting to the emperor created in her a wish, almost a craving, to see him, were it but only once. Any idea of breaking her promise to Callistus was far from her mind, however; she had resolved not to go out of her way to see him, and was, after all, scarcely conscious of her own curiosity—a feeling of terror being uppermost in her mind. Therefore, in going one morning to see her father's old friend, Menaichus, one of Nero's gardeners, she had no thought of doing wrong. He lived at the corner of a long terrace, in a cottage hidden among trees, which could be entered without going through the imperial gardens. Myrrha took with her a clay doll, dressed as a patrician lady, as a present for the grand-daughter of the old man, but, she had come in truth to speak about Nero.

She was not long, therefore, in relating to Menaichus what Callistus had told her, and inquired:

"Is it true? You ought to know, for you have been a long time and must have heard the slaves of the palace talk."

Menaichus started and took Myrrha to the other end of the room. He looked carefully around him and then whispered in her ear:



"PUSHED HER INTO THE JAWS OF THE LION."

He did not notice how the young girl had suddenly turned pale, and added:

"I never speak a word, for I wish to die in peace."

Then he changed the subject.

"Would you like to go for a walk round here. This is the end of the garden, the farthest from the palace, and the emperor never comes here—at any rate, not at this time of day."

Myrrha accepted the invitation. Menaichus went out with her and then left her, for he had some work to finish.

A vast avenue bordered with giant trees led from the palace down to the terrace, where a high portico overlooked the entire city. In the center of the avenue was a large, circular lake with fountains ornamented with mythological figures in bronze. Marble statues of gods and goddesses, satyrs and nymphs, were placed at regular intervals on each side of the walk.

Myrrah modestly lowered her eyes before the heathen deities—hose beauty she half dreaded to admire. And although she was all alone, she could not help feeling timid and somewhat out of place amid such majesty and splendor.

A sound of voices suddenly broke upon her ear, and almost at the same time she saw a group of people, magnificently attired, coming toward her.

She quickly hid herself behind a cluster of trees.

They soon walked past. First of all Emperor Nero leaning on the shoulder of a handsome, olive skinned youth with sloe-black eyes and scarlet lips; then, a few steps behind, followed his favorites, Otho, Senicio, Tegillinus, their features pale and delicate, their gait languid and graceful.

Myrrha saw only Nero. She recognized him from his effigy on the coinage and above all by the expression of his features and his regal air.

The low forehead, polished like marble, was framed by a short lace fringe. The heavy dary brows over shadowed the deep set green eyes which were charged with languor of dreams. The jaw was massive, the chin projected. The lower lip was heavy and protruding. It was a face at once bestial and godlike.

The gold embroidery shimmered discreetly among the folds of his white silk toga as he moved. The great rubies of his necklace gleamed on his breast like drops of blood and fire, and the fleshy white hand that rested on the shoulder of the lovely dark skinned child, sparkled and flashed at every step, so charged was it with brilliants and priceless gems.

Myrrha, ignorant child though she was, felt that this man was far removed from her, not only by his worldly condition—he the master of the world and she so poor, so obscure—but above all by the mysteries of his mind. And she was struck with the great sadness of the mighty ruler. She was overcome by strange feelings.

Tremblingly, from her humble sphere, she pitied him; but it seemed to her that to reach him her pity must traverse the infinity of space. As he passed the bushes that concealed her Nero spoke. He spoke as if to himself, without turning to his companions. This is what Myrrha heard: "I am weary. My power is too limited. I am satiated with the pleasures I can enjoy, and those dream of I cannot realize—I, Nero I! I am richer than the ancient kings of Persia, but whatever I may do I cannot hold in my hands all the treasures of the world. I reach, sometimes, by dint of artifice, the supremest degree of voluptuousness, but the same standard of pleasure cannot be maintained for any length of time. I have walked many men, but I cannot destroy all my enemies, for I do not know them all. I am the greatest of poets, but I am obliged to choose my words with efforts to count and measure syllables. * * * I am the most harmonious of singers, but in order to conserve my lovely voice I am obliged to abstain from wine and deprive myself of my favorite dishes. All this is absurd and annoying. I am very miserable."

It would insult the gods if the gods existed. To be the greatest of men, and by only that! * * * How monotonous, how petty this garden is; I would have vast gardens full of forests, rivers, mountains, and lakes, where all the noblest and most lovely aspects of earth would be found, all the more beautiful for being artificial—the outcome of the all powerful will of one man!"

He had now reached the terrace under the marble portico and leaning over the balustrade he contemplated the sea of houses whose roofs stretched far and wide at his feet—till they were lost in the horizon.

"How ugly this town is!" he exclaimed, then added, "I will burn it!"

The next day Myrrha sought Callistus' humble room, and kneeling down said:

"Father, I have sinned deeply."

"That I cannot believe, my child."

"Alas, it is only too true! I have broken the promise I gave you; I have seen Nero."

The old priest trembled with surprise and dread.

"Did he see you, too?"

"No, for I was in a safe hiding place."

Callistus looked reassured at this.

"Let us thank God," he exclaimed. He asked the young girl how and when she saw Nero. She then gave him the particulars of her meeting.

"When you went to Menaichus' cottage, did you think you would see the emperor?

"I think I did, but I hoped I should see him only by chance."

"Why?"

"I can not say."

"And when you went for a walk in the garden, did you know that you would see him?"

"How could I know?"

"At any rate, you were hoping you would?"

"I don't know."

"Why, then, do you think you have sinned deeply?"

"Because I have lost my peace of mind, and I feel as if I had done something very wrong."

"Oh, Myrrha, how true it is, indeed, that we all carry in our hearts thoughts and feelings of which we are not even conscious! The purest soul may be wrapped in darkness! Let us pray to God that he may grant us the grace to know ourselves and to cast away anything in us that might displease him! But tell me, what did you feel when you saw the arch-enemy of God?"

"I dare not confess it, father! I was at first dazzled by his beauty and the richness of his dress. Then he began to speak, and though the meaning of many of his words escaped me, I could realize, however, that he was truly guilty of the crimes and impurities they say he committed. But I also realized that he felt very miserable."

"It is only just that he should feel so!"

"I thought when I saw him—but no, I dare not tell you."

"Nay, speak frankly, child."

"Well, I fancy it must be that he committed so many crimes because he is an emperor and considers the whole world beneath him. He would then be no worse, in committing these crimes, than other men who are less guilty."

"If that be so, Myrrha, and had you been born an empress, you would have been the most wicked of women."

"Oh, father, how can you say so?"

"Ah, you see you will not admit that!"

"But the emperor has not heard the glad tidings. Perchance he would listen if they were made known to him. Do you not think so?"

"No, Myrrha, I do not. He has put so much deep and diabolical malice into all his actions that he has cut himself from all hope of God's grace."

"Yet he said one thing that would have pleased you, father. He said he did not believe in idols."

"Alas! I fear, child, he would be nearer to the true God did he believe in the others."

"But they say he pities the poor and he wanted to reduce the taxes."

"Out of vanity and desire for the applause of the multitude in the circus. His pity was a sacrilegious comedy, and he could not relieve the poor of some without taxing the provinces more heavily."

Myrrha was lost in thought for a moment. She remembered Nero's words: "I shall burn Rome," but she did not tell Callistus, and continued as if following the thread of her thoughts:

"I see he is the greatest of criminals—the only one, perhaps, whose damnation is certain. If he is, as you say irrevocably and remorselessly wicked, is it not heart rending to think of? And if God knew he would be so wicked why did he place him on earth?"

"This, Myrrha, is a great mystery. God sent him here, no doubt, to try the virtue of his servants. I know nothing more."

"But," murmured the girl under her breath, half fearful of the audacity of her thought, "it may be that Nero has no soul, and when he dies he will go to nothing. He would, in that case, be like a scourge, like a tempest or an earthquake. It cannot be that to try the endurance of his servants God should condemn the unhappy instrument of his will to eternal torture."

Callistus was so surprised that he could not answer.

"However," continued Myrrha, "I do not quite understand these things. Yet, there are men and women who love him. He gave my father his freedom himself. He is handsome, and, they say, very clever. Is it a sin to believe that all men, whatever their crime, can be saved?

"No, certainly not," replied Callistus. "And would it be a sin to pray for the Emperor Nero, and do penance for his sins?"

"That is no sin, either, but it would be to no purpose, I fear."

"And if someone were to offer up his life to God for the salvation of the emperor, would that be wrong?"

"Banish all these thoughts from your mind, child, I implore you. Be careful for I fear there is a great deal of pride and vain curiosity intermingled. Be content to remain a modest child piously fulfilling the duties of your station in life as you have done hitherto. And promise me again, and more seriously than before, never more to seek the emperor Nero. Only under this condition can I give you absolution."

"I will do as you bid, father; but since I have seen him, I cannot help thinking of him."

One day Myrrha went to take some embroidery to a lady whose house was in the outskirts of Rome.

On her return in the evening she saw a red light in the sky, and as she neared the city the red patch grew larger. Soon the whole sky appeared ablaze. The trees that lined her way were full of light, and her shadow fell on the pathway as distinct and clear cut as in broad sunshine. Turning a corner, she saw Rome in flames.

The fire had started in that part of the grand arena adjacent to Mount Palatine and Mount Coelius, devastating the whole quarter with its maze of streets, its houses so closely joined that they resembled one long pipe through which the flames sped fierce as in a Cyclopaean forge. They now surrounded Mount Palatine, which stood like an island in a sea of fire; then darting away, they attacked successively the Valabrium, the Carinae. At last they reached the hill on which stood the Imperial palace, and then leaping forth in mighty fury seemed to strike the stars. Rivers of fire flowed down the hill to Suburra, and Rome was like a gigantic furnace in which the coals and cinders took the domes, of facades, of porticoes, and walls pierced with holes.

As Myrrha passed the wall of a high terrace from which rose a square tower, she heard the voice of a singer accompanying himself on a harp.

It was a slow, sad strain in a language which she did not know—an elegy of Simonides on the burning of Troy. The harmonious voice, though subdued, rose and fell in piteous wails. Myrrha paused to listen. But she soon perceived that this sorrow was feigned, and that the singer was lost in admiration at the beauty of his own voice. And the song pained her.

When she reached the Capena gate she found a crowd of despairing poor encamped among the remnants of the possessions they had succeeded in saving from the fire.

Many wept for the loss of parent or child who had been devoured by the flames.

One man said:

"I am sure there are 300 at least, left behind in the Esquiline quarter alone."

"But," said another, "we must try and extinguish the flames or, at least pull down the houses that are left and save the rest of the town."

Some one answered:

"We have tried, but there are men who prevent anyone from rendering assistance. They say they are obeying orders."

Then Myrrha remembered the words of Nero, and knew that he had fulfilled his threat. Surely, she thought, this crime surpasses all the others, this crime the enormity of which she herself had witnessed. And thinking thus, her heart swelled with compassion for the victims, and she prayed:

"O Lord, Thou wilt open the gates of heaven to all these unhappy victims, and their sufferings will pass like a nightmare. But he! O Lord! If there is yet time, I will offer thee my life, if only thou will but take pity on him and send him a ray of light!" She reached Suburra by a circuitous route, in anxious suspense over the fate of Callistus and Mammaea. She found them both safe and sound, but their house had been burned to the ground. Callistus was consoling the little group of Christians wandering homeless and disconsolate in the street:

"Let us praise God!" he said, "who has taken from us our few worldly possessions, to which, alas! we attach too much importance. Our mutual distress gives us the chance of comforting and aiding our brethren and showing how much we love one another."

The emperor ordered the temples and markets still standing to be thrown open to the homeless multitude. He also opened a part of his gardens to them. He had wooden barracks constructed to shelter them and food distributed.

But this did not prevent the people from saying that it was Nero who had set fire to the town, and even that he had been heard singing whilst contemplating the conflagration from the top of a tower.

These rumors took Myrrha's thoughts back to the singer she had heard on her way. But to those who so accused the emperor she replied, trying even to deceive herself: "If he had set fire to Rome, would he so jealously succor the victims?" And she did not perceive how weak was the argument.

The Christians, not wishing to seek shelter in the temples of the false gods or the barracks erected by impious hands, took refuge in the catacombs.

Myrrha and Mammaea continued to embroider for the Roman ladies, which enabled them to live and even to help their brethren.

And in spite of their great distress, many of the Christians rejoiced at the destruction of the unclean city.

The sullen exaltation of Timothy, the priest, was apparent in his discourses to his flock.

"The hand that set fire to the city," he exclaimed, "may be abominable, but it was the instrument of the will of God. For, behold, the most ancient of the temples of the false gods have been swept from the face of the earth. Burned to ashes is the temple of the moon built by Servius Tullius! Burned is the temple to Hercules by King Evander! Burned is the temple of Jupiter Stator erected by Romulus! Burned is the palace of Numa Pompilus and the temple of Vesta! This more than anything proves that we have reached the end of the world. For it is written that the world shall be destroyed by fire. And the end will be for us but the beginning—the dawn of a new life.

"Brother," replied Callistus, "you are perhaps right, but wherefore rejoice over a misfortune that falls more heavily on the poor and humble, whom Jesus loved so much?"

At this moment some soldiers, led by a centurion, broke in upon the assembled Christians.

"We arrest you by order of the emperor!" said the centurion.

"Why?" asked Callistus.

"Because it is you Christians who have burned Rome."

And pointing to Timothy:

"Do not the words of this scoundrel prove it?"

Myrrha had thought that Nero's last crime could not surpass itself, but now he had aggravated it by another that was even greater.

Therefore she murmured with renewed ardor:

"For him, for his salvation, O, Lord, I offer thee not only my life, but I will suffer any torture it pleases thee to inflict on me."

The soldiers then seized the Christians and threw them into the subterranean dungeons of Mamertine. And Myrrha felt a vague joy at the thought that she was imprisoned by Nero's orders, for it was the first time that the will of the mighty Caesar had a direct influence on her humble destiny. The melancholy, yet awful countenance of the emperor rose before her mind more beautiful than ever and she hoped she would be called to his presence to be interrogated.

Often in the prison, Timothy, the priest, in the intervals of prayer, poured forth a torrent of imprecations against Nero, whom he never alluded to otherwise than as the "Beast," or the "Monster." And though she knew Timothy was right, yet Myrrha suffered cruelly.

But one of the prisoners suggested that Nero, acted at the instigation of the Empress Poppoea, who, having embraced the Jewish religion, hated the disciples of Jesus. He related how madly the emperor loved Poppoea and how he would refuse her nothing. He went on to tell that Nero killed his first wife for her and had made her a present of 3000 sue asses for her milk bath.

And through the influence of Poppoea would lessen the crime of Nero, yet Myrrha suffered even more that day.

"Oh, that horrible Jewess!" she murmured.

The prisoners were taken before a pro consul, who simply asked them if they were Christians, then ordered them to be thrown to the lions in the arena.

"Will the emperor be there?" Myrrha asked one of the jailers.

"The emperor never misses a sight of that description," replied the man.

A great joy lit up the young girl's transparent features; the dark, ardent eyes, with their purple shadows, seemed too large for the pale diaphanous face, and the light breath of half uttered prayer. Her ideas now became confused. The thought that she was going to die for such a criminal and thus fulfill her vow, was sweet to her, but the knowledge that it was he who sent her to her death was hard to bear. But she thought, "Does not this add to my sufferings and make my sacrifice all the more acceptable to God?"

Then there were—moments when the poor child trembled, when she realized that in spite of all she could not hate the emperor. She went about as if in a dream, oblivious to all around her.

The venerable Callistus watched her anxiously, for though she had not again spoken of Nero to him, yet he well knew she had no other thought. He asked himself if this abstraction was not after all but the outcome of a sublime charity. He refrained however, from questioning her, fearing to disturb the tranquillity of a soul so sensitive.

On the eve of the last day, after the evening prayer, which the condemned recited aloud together, Myrrha said:

"Let us now pray for the Emperor Nero!"

The Christians hesitated a moment and the venerable Callistus thought within himself:

"I was wrong. Myrrha is more saintly than us all."

And he recited aloud the prayer for the Emperor Nero which the other Christians repeated after him.

And one of the jailers, who was standing near the door—a young Gaul, very tall and very fair—wept, and begged Myrrha to unfold to him the religion of Christ.

The next day the prisoners were led to a prison lying low under the amphitheatre of the arena. Through the iron bars Myrrha caught a glimpse of the circus, blazing with light, and the amphitheatre, where senators, nights, soldiers, plebeians, vestals and courtesans were seated arrayed in woolen hoods, fawn colored tunics or silk manipuli. She saw the purple shadows cast by the vast awning overhead glint and shimmer on the garments and faces of the eager crowd. She saw just in front of her the fringed ends of the heavy drapery that hung from the imperial box. On one side, also behind iron bars, the lions were pacing to and fro.

The other prisoners were scattered in little groups, some prostrate in prayer, others taking affectionate leave of each other, while some, overcome by the approach of death, though still unshaken, sobbed and moaned aloud.

Timothy and Callistus exhorted and comforted them. Timothy said to them:

"Is it not joy beyond compare to seal our faith with our blood by braving the impotent anger of the impious one? Our blood will rise up against him. Again I say to ye—the time is at hand. What is an instant of suffering compared to eternal happiness? Coward and fool is he who hesitates."

And Callistus' gentle voice was heard:

"Oh, my brethren. God have ye in his keeping! What, after all, is it that awaits you but the death of a hunter overtaken in the wood? We go forth to death, so strongly bound by our common love that we shall feel neither the claw nor the teeth of the old beast. And God, my brethren, will, with our blood, do such great things! Your death will be the foundation of the peace and happiness of the future generations of mankind!"

Myrrha, alone and silent, stood near the iron bars, heedless of all around her.

The bestiarii now simultaneously opened the cage of the lions and the prisons of the Christians.

A hush fell on the assembly.

Myrrha entered the arena first.

She saw Nero in the imperial box and slowly and steadily she walked towards him. She murmured within herself:

"He must see me. I must die near him, for I have offered my life to save his soul."

Callistus followed the young girl as quickly as his tottering limbs allowed.

All the lions now left their cage and blinded with the light stood still or glided aimlessly with long silent strides, their muzzles turned earthwards.

Myrrha pursued her way, her eyes fixed on Nero. The emperor conversing with one of his companions, felt the ardent gaze and turned towards her. He thought the young girl come to beg for mercy and he smiled cruelly.

But she had now reached the foot of the dias and still and speechless without even raising her clasped hands, she continued to contemplate the emperor.

Her hair, unbound, fell down her back and a rent in her tunic exposed the delicate contour of her shoulder.

The emperor bent forward and a quick flame leapt into the dull eyes of the godlike beast. He rose and beckoning to the chief of the bestarii gave the sign of pardon.

One of the lions catching sight of Myrrha, crept stealthily towards her.

Then old Callistus, who saw and understood the emperor's gesture, seized Myrrha in his lean arms and with all his might pushed her into the jaws of the lion.

At the Mourners' Bench.

From the New York Times.

Mrs. S. of New Orleans has for many years been faithfully served by two negro women who, although bound by the tie of a common devotion to their mistress, yet detest each other cordially, so that the kitchen is the scene of continuous battle.

Martha, the cook, is a leading light in the church. At revival meetings she was always the first to occupy the mourners' bench, the first to shout "Hallelujah," and to fall into those contortions of body and stiffening of limbs that, to the African mean "getting religion." Eliza, the maid of all work, on the other hand, had always been an unregenerate heathen, scoffing at religion, jeering at Martha and declaring no power on earth could induce her to go inside a church. Great, therefore, was Mrs. S.'s surprise on the occasion of the last revival to find that it was Eliza and not Martha who was attending the meetings.

"Why, Martha," she exclaimed, "aren't you going to church?"

"No'm," answered Martha sullenly.

"Why?"

"'Cause dat 'Liza, she goes now."

"But isn't there room for both of you?"

"No' ma'am, they ain't."

All Martha's pentup indignation emphasized the answer.

"'Cause, Miss Mary, dat 'Liza, she jes goes ter spite me. No sooner I gets up to go to de mo'ners' bench dan 'Liza she follers me and sets down clost beside me, and befo' I has a chanst ter git 'ligion, 'Liza she begins ter girate around and shout 'glory hallelujah,' and she ont wid her fists and hits me 'bim' in de jaw, and she ont wid her footses and kicks me 'spang' in de shin. But I tell you, 'taint 'ligion 'Liza's got, Miss Mary, hit's debilitry."

Lucy's New Beau.

From the Kansas City Star.

"Silver Moon," the Florence Bulletin's able correspondent at Springdale, writes: "We understand that Miss Lucy Robinson's new beau is a drummer. He may be, but by all the earmarks he looks like a 'piker' to Silver Moon."

Researches in Germany show that a given quantity of red hot coke will absorb four times the amount of water that will be absorbed by the same amount of coke if cold.