

Novel by
EMMANUEL



Hail, Christ!

Francisco Candido Xavier
By the Spirit Emmanuel



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Historic episodes of Christianity in the 3rd century

By the Spirit
Emmanuel

Translated by
Amy Duncan, Darrel W. Kimble and Marcia M. Saiz



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SGAN 603 – Conjunto F – Avenida L2 Norte
70830-106 – Brasília (DF) – Brasil
www.febeditora.com.br
editorialexterior@febnet.org.br
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Hail, Christ!

Today, as in former times, with the social order in decline, Jesus goes forth into the world, restoring hope and fraternity so that the sanctuary of love may be rebuilt on its true foundations.

No matter how raging the storm, Christ calms it.

No matter how deep the darkness, Christ illuminates it.

No matter how badly power is abused, Christ reigns.

The Lord's work, however, needs resources to implement peace; it needs fuel to spread the light; it needs willingness to lead to the good.

The divine idea needs human hands.

Blessings from heaven require recipients on earth.

Spiritism, which is currently reviving the redemptive ministry of the Gospel in its tasks of reconstruction, calls for brave souls to sacrifice themselves in order to spread it victoriously.

The Lord's call has gone out far and wide.

While disorder continues to spread all around, and while collusive ignorance and selfishness continue to erect barriers of misunderstanding and discord, the boundaries of the Beyond are being crossed so that the unforgettable voices of the living from the spirit world may make themselves heard, to console and comfort, and proclaim sovereign immortality and the need for the Divine Sculptor in our hearts so that we may reach our effulgent destination: life eternal.

Therefore, in gathering reminiscences for this book, we do not propose to romanticize or fictionalize, but rather to bring a brief page from the sublime story of the pioneers of our faith to our companions in restored Christianity, in the Spiritist harvest.

May the example of these post-apostolic children of the Gospel inspire in us today the simplicity and toil, the trust and love with which they renounced themselves in service to the Divine Master! May we, as they, transform thorns into flowers and stones into bread in the endeavors that the Most High has placed in our hands!

Today, as in days gone by, Jesus overlooks our rebellious words, our onslaughts of opinion, our sectarian fanaticism and our exhibitionism in deeds that are alluring outwardly but sickly within.

Above all, the Exalted Benefactor expects from our lives our hearts, character, conduct, attitudes, examples and ongoing personal service: the only means that can ensure the effectiveness of our cooperating with him in building the Kingdom of God.

As we entreat him in this way, may the Ideal Renewer support us on the paths of our arduous ascent as, with our venerable teachers from the first centuries of the Good News, we repeat:

“Hail, Christ! Those who aspire to the glory of serving in your name glorify and salute you!”

EMMANUEL
Pedro Leopoldo, Brazil, April 18, 1953.

PART ONE

1

Preparing Pathways

Nearly two hundred years of Christianity had begun to change the landscape of the world.

From Nero to the Antonines, however, the persecutions of Christians were intense. Triumphant seated on the seven hills, Rome continued to dictate the destinies of peoples by force of arms, fueling the war against the principles of the Nazarene. Nevertheless, the Gospel continued to spread throughout the Empire, building the spirit of the New Era.

If in its worldly organization humanity was evolving in intense activity, the work of ideological transformation was reaching a peak in the higher realms.

Presided over by the Divine Master's apostles – all of whom were in the spirit world by then – the work of human elevation was increasing in many areas.

Jesus had returned to the resplendent throne of wisdom and love, from which he rules over all humankind; but like a growing swarm of bees of renewal, the continuers of his ministry among incarnates remained active in preparing the soil of people's hearts for the Kingdom of God.

While hosts of Christians were dying on fiery stakes and crosses, in endless torture or in the jaws of beasts, worship places of hope were springing up in joy beyond the borders of darkness. In them, large groups of spirits that had converted to the Good volunteered for the battle of sweat and blood. Using their physical vestment, they offered their testimonies of faith and goodwill to help spread the Good News for the redemption of the earth.

Thus, in a lovely spirit city adjacent to our planet's surface, we find a large gathering of souls attracted to the Divine Itinerary, listening to the exhortations of an enlightened guide who is speaking to them from his heart:

“Dear brothers and sisters,” he says, enveloped in soft rays of light, “the Gospel is a code of peace and happiness that we need to establish in our lives!

“The sun that pours out its blessings on the world is part of nature, sustaining and renewing its creations. The leaf of the tree, the nourishing fruit, the song from the nest and the wealth of the beehive are gifts from that sublime star, materialized by the principles of Eternal Intelligence.

“Christ is the Spiritual Sun of our destinies.

“Therefore, it is crucial that we willingly participate in his teachings and establish their essence in our daily lives.

“We mustn’t forget, however, that people’s minds are stone-like, fast asleep in false conceptions of the heavenly life.

“The policy of military domination has stifled the old traditions of the early sanctuaries. The Roman cohorts have suppressed the voices of Greek philosophy, just as the barbarian peoples smothered the Egyptian revelation.

“The fog of stagnation and death has become denser.

“The imperial eagles have based their deceitful religion of pride and power on the blind idolatry of Jupiter.

“And while the gods of stone consume the favors of fortune, the poverty and ignorance of the people increases, pleading for Heaven to pass sentence.

“But how can there be divine intervention without human cooperation?

“Without the heroic selflessness of those who are devoted to the progress and evolution of souls, education will be nothing but empty words.

“Thus, it is essential for us to write the living pages of redemptive Christianity with our own examples.

“The Crucified Master is a divine challenge.

“Till now, the world’s conquerors have advanced in their purple victory chariots, killing and destroying, availing themselves of legions of warriors and cruel leaders.

“Jesus, however, triumphed through sacrifice.

“Bound to human vicissitudes, Caesar governs the affairs of the flesh, which is on its way to renewal.

“Christ reigns over the imperishable soul, slowly sublimating it for eternal glory.”

The venerable tribune paused, as if intentionally, because the distant blare of trumpets could be heard overhead, suggesting a call to some battle close at hand.

Within that remarkable sanctuary, whose dome let in the shimmering light of far-off stars, hundreds of spirits pressed against each other, held their breath and looked at one another...

They were all eager for a chance to serve.

Some of their faces wore expressions of longing and pain, as if linked to the earthly battle by wounds of affliction that could be healed only by returning to the troubles of the past.

But the expectation did not last long.

Drowning out the sound of the trumpets echoing in the night, the preacher’s voice rose again:

“Dear brothers and sisters, many of you left commitments of love behind and you yearn to return to the difficult pathway of the flesh, like someone who braves the flames to save his loved ones. Even so, now that you have devoted yourselves to the Divine Truth, you have learned to put the Lord’s plans above your own, personal desires. You are weary of illusions, and so you consult reality and strive to magnify it; and reality has accepted your decision for its implementation in the world.

“But do not forget that collaborators in Christ’s work only help without having expectations and work without attachment to results. Like a candle’s wick, which must be consumed to dissipate the darkness, you will be compelled to undergo suffering and humiliation so that new horizons may be opened up to people’s understanding.

“For a long time to come, the Christian plan will be no different than what the Apostle Paul wrote long ago:

“We are hard pressed, but not quashed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; smitten, but not destroyed. Wherever we go, we bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in our own bodies so that divine life may be manifested in the world. Thus, whoever is reborn into the shadow of dense matter will continuously be handed over to sacrifice for the love of truth so

that the Divine Master's lesson may shine more brightly in the realms of mortal flesh.'"¹

For several more minutes the speaker continued to expound the duties that awaited the legionaries of the Gospel amid the obstacles of the world, and then finally stepped down from the golden rostrum to join in fraternal conversation.

Several friends kissed his hands and spoke enthusiastically about the itineraries they would be following in the future.

They were ending their conversations and pleas for watch-care, when the preacher was approached with loving intimacy by someone.

"Varrus!" he exclaimed, embracing the newcomer while containing his emotions.

It was an old Roman with a penetrating, sad gaze, whose white tunic, when compared with the bright clothing of his friend, looked like a fading patch of fog when it meets the sudden light of dawn.

In their tender embrace, it was good to see two friends meeting once again, momentarily forgetting their authority and afflictions after a long separation.

After they had exchanged memories of old events from the past, Quintus Varrus, the Roman with the kind and sorrowful face, explained to his friend – who had ascended to a higher realm – that he planned to return to the physical plane soon.

The representative from the Higher Sphere listened to him attentively and said with surprise:

"But why? I know about your service record, not only for the cause of order but also for the cause of love. In the patrician world, your last pilgrimage was that of an honest man right up to the ultimate sacrifice, and your first attempts at Christian growth were some of the worthiest I've ever seen. Mightn't continuing your evolution on the unsettling landscapes of the flesh be inadvisable?"

Quintus Varrus made a silent gesture of supplication and said:

"Clodius, my dear friend! I beg you!... I know that you have the power to authorize my return. Yes, of course the appeals from higher spheres have touched my soul!... I long to be reunited, finally, with those who have gone

before me... However,” and his voice nearly faded away with emotion, “of those who stayed behind, I have a beloved son who is lost in darkness. I would like to rescue him.”

“Tacianus?” the other asked, intrigued.

“Exactly.”

And Varrus continued with charming humility:

“I dream about leading him to Christ with my own hands. I have begged the Lord for such a gift with all the fervor of my fatherly love. Tacianus is to me what the rose is to the thorny bush from which it sprang. In my indigence, he is my treasure, and in my ugliness, he is the beauty I have longed for to make me proud. I’d give anything to devote myself to him again... to hold him close to me, to guide his steps to Jesus: that is the Heaven I aspire to.”

And as if he wanted to gauge the impression this was having on his friend, he added:

“Might I be wrong in my aspiration?”

The old guide patted him on the shoulder, openly showing his commiseration. He passed his hand over his light-bathed forehead and replied:

“I cannot argue with your sentiments, which I must respect, but... would such self-sacrifice be worth it?”

Then, as if he were pondering his own memories to express himself with assurance, he made a long pause, which he himself interrupted:

“I don’t think Tacianus is ready. I saw him a few days ago in the Temple of Vesta, leading a large legion of the enemies of the light. He didn’t seem at all inclined for any work having to do with the Gospel. He wanders around in the sanctuaries of the Olympic deities, inciting riots against fledgling Christianity. Also, he still revels in the delights of the circus, where he finds stimulation and pleasure in the bloodshed.”

“I too have been observing my son in that unfortunate state of affairs,” agreed Quintus Varrus sadly. “But I’ve noticed recently that he’s grieved and distressed. Who knows? He might be on the verge of a major breakthrough. I understand that he has been recalcitrant in his evil ways and has continued to devote himself to lower sensations that keep him from seeing the higher

horizons of life. But I have concluded that we must do something when we see a need for the rehabilitation of those we love.”

Perhaps because Clodius remained silent and thoughtful, the loving father reiterated:

“Selfless friend, let me go back.”

“But are you aware of the risks? One can save a drowning man without exposing himself to the fury of the waves. To help Tacianus, you will be exposed to all the dangers that he himself is exposed to.”

“I know that,” replied the determined Varrus, continuing in a tone of supplication. “For the sake of our old friendship, help me. I will endeavor to serve the Gospel with all my strength. I’ll accept every sacrifice. I’ll eat the bread of gall soaked in sweat and tears. Still, I beg your permission to let me use every means possible to call my son to the work of Christ... Of course, the path will be strewn with obstacles. Even so, with the Lord’s help and the help of friends, I’m sure to emerge victorious.”

Sincerely moved, as if he did not want to prolong the conversation, the venerable mentor asked:

“How much time do you think you’ll need?”

“I would leave that up to you.”

“Very well then,” concluded his benevolent friend, “I can confidently endorse your decision. I’ll give you twenty lustrums.² I think one century should be enough. We’ll take measures so you’ll be sustained in your new covering of flesh. Your work for the cause of the Gospel will be credited to you in the Higher Realms. As for Tacianus’s merit or demerit as a result of your renunciation, I’ll let that be a private matter of your own responsibility.”

Pressed by friends to settle other problems, Clodius gave him a compassionate look and concluded:

“Remember that we can stay in touch through prayer. Even under the heavy veil of forgetfulness in your physical struggle, we will hear your prayers and support you with our assistance. Go in peace, whenever you wish, and may Jesus bless you.”

Varrus said some moving words of acknowledgement, reaffirmed his promises and left ruminating, not knowing for sure what strange emotions were filling his soul, whether they were rays of joy or barbs of sorrow.

.....

In the splendid twilight, as the sun was setting over Ostia like a brazier, the solitary and pensive spirit of Quintus Varrus came to Cestius Bridge and lingered there, watching the Tiber flow by, as if he were being held by obsessive memories.

Gentle breezes glided along, singing like isolated echoes of melodies hidden in the clear sky.

Rome had been decorated to celebrate the victories of Septimus Severus over his fearsome enemies. After a triple defeat, Pescennius Niger had been captured by the imperial forces and beheaded on the banks of the Euphrates, and Albinus, the chosen one of the British legions, had been defeated in Gaul, taking his own life in despair.

Several days of festivities celebrated the shining glory of the African emperor, but at the request of the Augustans, the end of the ceremonies was scheduled for the following night in the Colosseum, with all the pomp of triumph.

His face expectant and sad-looking, Varrus crossed the small stretch to Tiber Island. As he came to the Temple of Fortuna, he saw a crowd of scattered groups of people starting to fill the plaza in front of the magnificent building.

Surrounded by slaves, the litters of notable dignitaries of the Court made small groups of singers and dancers give way. Bearing young tribunes and patrician women from traditional families, luxurious chariots and decorated carriages cut through the crowd. Sailors and soldiers argued with cold-drink and fruit vendors as the wave of people kept growing.

Well-built, smiling gladiators arrived, wooed by inveterate gamblers of the arena.

And while the sounds of lutes and cymbals mingled with the distant roar of beasts caged for the superb spectacle, the glory of Severus and the torture of Christians were the favorite themes of every conversation.

The spirit traveler looked not only at the pleasure hungry crowd, but also at the quarreling bands of ignorant or evil discarnate entities that dominated the somber celebrations.

Varrus tried to press forward, looking for someone, but the heavy atmosphere forced him to retreat. He bypassed the famous arena, strode down the lanes winding between Caelian Hill and Palatine, crossed Porta Capena and reached the countryside, where he headed for the tombs on Appian Way.

A clear night had fallen on the houses of Rome.

Thousands of voices were singing songs of joy under the silvery light of the full moon. They were discarnate Christians preparing to receive their companions from the sacrifice. These “dead” martyrs would salute those who would die as martyrs that night.

Quintus Varrus joined the large group and prayed fervently, begging for strength from Heaven for the difficult task to which he planned to devote himself.

Prayers and sanctifying talks were heard.

After a few hours, the enormous group of spirits headed for the Colosseum. Hymns of joy rose to the heavens.

It was not only the messengers from Appian Way who reached the arena in harmonious prayer.

Envoys from Vatican Hill and spirit workers from the evangelical preaching groups of Esquiline Hill, Nomentana Way and Salaria Way, along with representatives from other Roman regions, entered the tumultuous enclosure like armies of light.

Herded into the arena for their final sacrifice, Jesus’ followers were also singing.

Here and there, the viscera of dead beasts and the horribly mutilated bodies of vanquished gladiators and bestiaries were hastily removed by the guards.

Some of the disciples of the Gospel, especially the older ones who were tied to the poles of martyrdom, were shot with poisoned arrows and their bodies set on fire to serve as torches for the festive exhibition. Others held hands and surrendered, defenseless, to the attacks of leopards and lions from Numidia.

Almost all those who were put to death disengaged from their bodies in the sublime ecstasy of their faith and were lovingly received by their brothers and sisters, who were waiting for them with songs of victory.

However, Quintus Varrus, amid the intense light with which the legions of spirits had dispersed the darkness, did not seem interested in the exaltation of the heroes.

He ran his gaze over the crowded grandstands until he finally stopped, with obvious signs of anguish, to focus on a loud group of rowdy spirits in frenzied drinking.

Varrus anxiously approached a young man who was laughing boisterously, and embracing him with extreme tenderness, he whispered:

“Tacianus, my son! My son!”

The young man was immersed in the deepest undercurrent of the lower passions, and could not sense the benefactor nestling him against his chest; but suddenly feeling uneasy, he got up and left, overcome by an insuperable sorrow.

He may have been unaware of the venerable friend, but in his embrace, he felt an immense aversion to the hateful festivities.

Longing for solitude, he sprinted through the streets and plazas.

He wanted to be alone while pondering and reconsidering the path he had been traveling.

After a long walk in search of isolation, he reached Porta Pinciana. In the gardens where Aesculapius was reverently remembered, there was a superb statue of Apollo, next to which he sometimes liked to meditate.

The marble body of the Olympic divinity stood, magnificent, holding an exquisite cup upside down with one hand, as if he were fertilizing Mother Earth.

Incense was burning in a container at the foot of the idol, placed there by pious and anonymous hands, perfuming the site with a rich aroma.

Tormented by uncontrollable anguish, Tacianus wept in spite of himself as he recalled his lifetimes.

He knew he was without a physical body, but rather than finding the landscapes portrayed in Virgil’s tales – whose reading had warranted his special attention – he found himself inexplicably attracted to the bacchanals of a decadent society, surprised at finding himself alone after death with his old thirst for sensations. He loved banquets and games and partook of the pleasure of every glass within reach, but he was yielding to boredom and

regret. What is life about, after all? he would ask himself in a dolorous soliloquy. Where were the gods of his old faith? Was it really worthwhile to look for happiness in the temporary satisfaction of the human senses, which was always followed by a large dose of disappointment? How could he find his old affections in this mysterious land of death? Why was he roaming around tied to the domestic realm with no balance or direction? If possible, wouldn't it be better to get a new body and live among ordinary people again? He longed for closer contact with the physical plane, where he could forget himself... Oh! If he could just forget the agonizing riddles of existence and get close to matter to sleep and recuperate!

He knew friends who, after long supplications to heaven, had left to be reborn. He knew that the immortal spirit could use many bodies to live among human beings, but he did not feel the strength he needed to master himself and offer a prayer to the deities that was founded on true moral equilibrium.

Now, however, he felt more distressed than ever before.

An immense and indefinable longing pierced his soul.

After weeping in silence, he looked at the impassive countenance of the statue and pleaded:

“Great Helios! God of my forefathers!... Have mercy on me! Restore to me the sentiment of sincerity and energy that you embody for our kind! If possible, enable me to forget what I have been. Uphold me and grant me the grace to live in accordance with the example of my ancestors!”

With the inexpressible memories of his old home, Tacianus knelt on the ground and wailed bitterly. But when he wiped away the tears that were clouding his vision and looked at the god's image again, he no longer saw the exquisite idol, but the spirit of Quintus Varrus surrounded in bright light and looking at him tenderly and sadly.

The young man was overcome with astonishment and wanted to flee, but indefinable emotions subdued his entire being.

As if bent over by mysterious forces, he knelt before the unexpected visitor.

He wanted to speak but could not because of a strange constriction in his vocal cords.

The tears flowed even more from his eyes.

He recognized his father, and overwhelmed by inexpressible emotion, he saw that Varrus was walking toward him with a loving look crowning his sad smile.

The loving spirit stroked Tacianus's troubled brow and said:

“Tacianus, my son!... May the Supreme Lord bless our path of redemption. Let your tears wash through all the secret corners of your soul! Like a miraculous elixir, tears cleanse our wounds of pride and illusion.

“Do not believe that you have been forsaken!

“Even when our prayers reach out ardently to these soulless idols, the venerable heart of the Lord gathers them into the mysterious chamber of his infinite love, rushing help for our needs.

“Be calm and trusting, my son! We are going to return to the experience of the flesh to redeem and relearn.”

Magnetized by his father's gaze, Tacianus tried to stand up to embrace him or to throw himself on the ground to kiss his feet; however, as if immobilized by invisible bonds, he could not move at all.

“Listen to me!” Varrus continued compassionately. “Weary of yourself, you have asked to return to the earthly arena, and you shall. We will be reunited in the corporeal cell of the physical world – the blessed school of our regeneration for the life eternal – but no longer in the exaltation of pride and power.

“Our stone gods are dead.

“Jupiter and his triumphal chariot are gone forever. The Master of the Cross, the divine sculptor of imperishable spiritual perfection, has appeared in his stead. He has taken us as happy wards of his heart.

“We used to believe that the Roman purple over the blood of the vanquished was the symbol of our racial fortune, and we believed that the celestial genii should be subject to our capricious impulses. Today, however, Christ guides our steps on our many pathways. Humankind is our family and the world is our Greater Home, where we are all brothers and sisters. In Heaven there are no slaves or masters, but individuals bound together by the same divine origin.

“Christians, whom you do not yet understand, are the foundations of future glory. Humiliated and scorned, vilified and slaughtered in sacrifice,

they represent the promise of peace and sublimation for the world.

“Someday, no one will remember the pomp of our delusional celebrations. The wind that blows in from the icy hills will scatter the ashes of our miserable grandeur, turned into lamentation and dust, over the dark ground. But the renunciation of men and women who allow themselves to be sacrificed today for a better life will be increasingly more sanctified and more alive in the fraternity that will reign supreme!”

Perhaps noticing the utter astonishment of the young man, who was listening, trembling and downhearted, Quintus Varrus said:

“Prepare yourself to be a valiant soldier of the good. We will soon return to the school of the flesh. You will be my morning star, showing me the arrival of the sun each day. Of course, cruel suffering will smite us, as happens to the servants of truth on this night of anguishing flagellation. Of course, pain will stalk us, because pain is the seal of moral improvement in the world... We will experience separation and misfortune, gall and martyrdom, but the bread of heavenly grace among humankind will for many centuries to come be kneaded in the sweat and afflictions of the servants of light! I will follow your footsteps like a faithful dog, and I hope that, united with my heart, you will be able to repeat later on:

‘Hail, Christ! Those who are about to live forever glorify and salute you!’”

The messenger made a long pause, while nocturnal birds chirped dolefully in the deep, dark grove.

Rome was asleep in heavy stillness.

Quintus Varrus leaned over and lovingly pressed his son to his breast, kissing his forehead.

Just then, however, perhaps because of the conflicting feelings boiling around inside, Tacianus closed his eyes to stop the flow of copious tears. When he opened them again, he saw that his father had vanished.

The scenery had not changed.

The statue of Apollo shone, reflecting the dim moonlight.

Trembling in dismay, Tacianus reached his arms out to the night that now seemed desolate and empty, crying out in despair:

“Father! My father!”

And because his cries vanished without an echo in the immensity of space, he lay down on the ground, tired, heartbroken and sobbing...

Years passed after these events...

¹ 2 Cor. 4: 8-11. – Emmanuel

² A lustrum was a period of five years. – Tr.

2

Souls in Contention

In his rose-adorned villa at the foot of Aventine Hill on the Tiber side, Quintus Varrus, a young Roman patrician, was thinking things over.

He had returned home for a brief rest after a long stretch in Opilius Veturius's commercial fleet, where he enjoyed the distinction of being commander. After tenderly kissing his wife and little son, who were having fun playing in the triclinium, he was resting now, reading a few phrases by Emilius Papinianus in the flowered arbor of his garden.

In the year 217, Rome was weighted down by a heavy atmosphere of crime and disturbances during the final days of the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Bassianus, surnamed Caracalla.³

Ever since the death of Papinian, cruelly murdered at Caesar's orders, the Empire had been disillusioned with the new ruler.

Instead of respecting the paternal traditions in the governmental arena, Basianus had gone too far with a vast conspiracy of tyranny against the law, fueling the persecution not only of the most humble Nazarene groups but also against all honest citizens who dared to disapprove of what he was doing.

Captivated by the wise concepts of the celebrated jurist, Papinian, Varrus was comparing them with the teachings of Jesus that he had memorized. He thought about how easy it might be to convert Roman culture to the principles of Christianity if goodwill could only penetrate the minds of his compatriots.

Despite his lack of assets, Varrus was the descendant of a prominent family whose roots dated back to the Republic. He was a passionate cultivator of the ideals of freedom that were invading the world.

The ignorance and poverty in which the privileged classes kept the masses tortured his soul, and he lost himself in deep cogitations to find an end

to the millennial imbalances in his homeland's society.

He realized that he was incapable of any bringing any sort of effective message to the administrative powers. He had no wealth or soldiers with which he could impose the views that were boiling around in his mind; still, he could see that a new world was being formed on top of the ruins of the old.

Thousands of men and women were changing their way of thinking under the inspiration of the spirit of renewal. The autocracy of the patricians was fighting desperately against religious reform, but the thought of Christ seemed to be hovering over the earth, exhorting souls to pursue a new path to spiritual progress, even at the cost of their sweat and blood.

Steeped in reflection, he was brought back to reality by his wife, Cynthia Julia. She was holding their baby Tacianus, who was only a year old and was smiling sweetly and tenderly like an angel being carried off to its heavenly cradle.

Cynthia had the flame of feminine vivacity in her dark eyes, and she immediately revealed the web of the passions that were overflowing in her restless soul. A loose peplos⁴ of snow-white linen highlighted her Madonna-like, girlish form, suggesting the profile of a mischievous, lovely nymph that had been suddenly transformed into a woman. It was a real contrast with the stern expression of her husband, whose psychic affinities seemed infinitely distant from his wife's.

Even though he was still quite young, Quintus Varrus bore the look of a philosopher and was used to being continually immersed in an ocean of ideas.

As content as a happy lark, Cynthia began telling him about Ulpia Sabina's party, which she had attended the night before with Veturius, her watchful escort.

She enthusiastically described at length the dances choreographed by the hostess, who had made the most of her young female slaves' talents. She tried to repeat some excerpts from the music for her husband in her melodious voice.

Varrus smiled condescendingly, as if he were a stern but kindly father listening to his naive daughter, uttering a brief word or two of understanding and encouragement from time to time.

At one point, he looked at his wife as if he wished to touch on a more serious subject, and remarked:

“Dear, did you know that tonight we could hear one of the most authoritative voices regarding our activities in Gaul?”

And perhaps because his wife grew silent and pensive, he went on:

“I’m referring to Appius Corvinus, an old preacher from Lyon.⁵ He is going to bid farewell to the Christians of Rome. In his youth he was a contemporary of Attalus of Pergamum, an admirable hero among the Gallic martyrs. Corvinus is over seventy years old, but according to general impressions, he has a youthful spirit.”

The young woman made a broad gesture of boredom and replied:

“Why should we concern ourselves with these men? Frankly, the one time I went with you to the catacombs, I came back troubled and depressed. Is there any practical sense in such ramblings? Why expose ourselves to the dangers of an illegal cult just to support the ravings of the imagination?”

Sarcastic and aggressive towards her saddened husband, she went on:

“Do you really think I could conform myself to the crazy self-denial of women like Sofronia and Cornelia, who descended from their patrician splendor to the squalor of the prisons to rub elbows with slaves and washerwomen?”

She laughed loudly and added:

“A few days ago, when you were still traveling around Aquitaine, Opilius and I were talking in private, when Popeia Cilene dropped by asking for alms for families victimized in the latest persecutions. When she saw my jars of cosmetics, she urged me to stop using them. We had a good laugh at that suggestion. To comply with the principles of a man who died on an evildoers’ cross nearly two hundred years ago, do we have to embrace poverty and wander around the world like wraiths? Our gods haven’t reserved a paradise of argumentative beggars for us. Our priests keep their dignity and composure.”

After a brief pause, in which she looked at her husband sarcastically, she added:

“Besides, I should tell you that I have made a sacrifice to Aesculapius for you. I fear for your health. Veturius is of the opinion that Christians are demented. Haven’t you noticed how much your behavior toward me has changed since you began these new practices? And whenever you have to be

away from your family for any length of time, you don't come back as the loving husband you were before. Instead of conversing affectionately, you keep your thoughts and words focused on the events of that abominable cult. For some time now, Sabina has been saying that the dangerous mysticism of Jerusalem is weakening the bonds of love that the home numens have bequeathed to us, and that perhaps this Christ is controlling you within, taking you away from me."

Cynthia looked troubled and nervously wiped away her tears while her little son smiled innocently on her lap.

"Don't be silly!" said her husband, worried. "How could you possibly believe that I'd neglect you? Where is love if not in the sanctuary of the heart? I love you as much as I ever have. You're everything in my life."

"But... what about the state of dependency we live in?" cried Cynthia, disheartened. "Poverty is frightful. You're employed by Opilius and we live in a house he lets us use as a favor... Why don't you be like my cousin and take a risk in the business world so we too can have ships and slaves, palaces and villas? Aren't you ashamed of our lowly status?"

Quintus Varrus could not hide the bitterness on his calm face. He stroked his wife's beautiful hair and objected uneasily:

"Why are you so upset? Don't you appreciate our wealth of character? Would you prefer the favor of wealth over the misery of so many? Keeping slaves, when we are trying to free them? Would you have me get involved in unspeakable transactions and lose our righteous conscience?"

His wife began weeping, which made Varrus uncomfortable. He tried to change the subject:

"Let's forget such nonsense. Come on! How about if we go hear what Corvinus has to say? A carriage will take us there this evening."

"And come back home afterward, dead tired?" replied his wife, shedding copious tears. "No! I won't go! I'm tired of all this! What can the barbaric Gauls teach us? After all, their soothsayers read fortunes in the still-warm entrails of dead soldiers."

There was an impregnable sadness in her young husband's eyes as he said:

“The Gauls are cruel? What about us? After so many centuries of culture, we still drown defenseless women in the ferocious currents of the Tiber. We still murder children, crucify the young and disrespect the old, condemning venerable elders to be food for wild beasts simply because they are devoted to the ideals of fraternity and work to dignify everyone’s lives. Jesus...”

Varrus was going to quote the Gospel, recalling the words of the divine Master; but Cynthia raised her voice, which had become even shriller:

“It’s always Christ... Christ this and Christ that!... Remember that our social position is wretched... Avoid punishment by the gods and render homage to Caesar so Fortune will bless us! I’m sick and worn out... I have no calling to the cross! I detest the Nazarenes, who wait for Heaven amid arguments and lice!”

The young patrician looked at his spouse with compassion, inwardly deploring the foolishness of what she was saying. He noticed that the little one was crying, so he reached out and tried to comfort him, saying:

“Why do you keep talking about poverty? Isn’t our little son a treasure in himself?”

But Cynthia snatched the boy from his fatherly tenderness, took a step back, and exclaimed:

“Tacianus will never be a Christian. He’s my son and I have consecrated him to Cybele! The mother of the gods will defend him against such sorcery and superstition.”

Then she rushed off to another part of the house, seized by incomprehensible moral torment.

Quintus Varrus did not return to his reading.

Lost in deep thought, he leaned on the wall that separated the garden from the street and stood watching a large group of boys playing a children’s game, skipping stones on the water. And with his thought centered on little Tacianus, without knowing how to describe the dark foreboding enveloping his chest, he felt a strange sorrow take possession of his heart.

In the early twilight, unable to rejoin his wife, who had hid herself with the baby in the couple’s bedroom, he took the carriage of a friend who drove him to the humble home of the venerable Lisipus of Alexandria, a renowned

Greek who was deeply devoted to the Gospel, and who lived in an uncomfortable, broken-down shack on the road to Ostia.

A small group of followers had gathered in a plain room.

Varrus was surprised at being told that the farewells of the great Gallic Christian would not take place that night but on the following.

Consequently, Corvinus was at the disposal of his friends for an intimate get-together.

There was no subject more fascinating for the group than reminiscing about the persecutions of 177.

The torments of the Lyon Christians were narrated in detail by the noble visitor.

As the enraptured group listened, the old Gaul recalled the smallest events with his prodigious memory. He repeated the interrogations that had been conducted, including the martyrs' inspired responses. He told of the ardent prayers of brothers and sisters from Asia and Phrygia who had mercifully helped the communities of Lyon and Vienna.⁶ He spoke enthusiastically about the tremendous charity of Vetius Epagatus, the selfless nobleman who had resigned his position to become an advocate for humble Christians. His eyes blazed as he commented on the unearthly courage of Santus, Deacon of Vienna, and the heroism of the feeble slave Blandina, whose faith had confounded the minds of the torturers. He described the joy of Potinus, the head of the Lyon church, who had been cruelly insulted and beaten in the street at the age of ninety, without uttering a word of rebelliousness.

Finally, bathed in tears, he displayed a mysterious joy as he told of the adventures and tribulations of Attalus of Pergamum, who had introduced him to the faith.

He painted every detail of the tortures that his venerable friend had undergone. He recalled the increasing of the persecution because of the propraetor's advice to Marcus Aurelius, and he lingered on describing the final suffering of the great Christian, who had been beaten, whipped, tied to a red-hot iron chair and finally beheaded along with Alexander, the dedicated Phrygian physician who had offered a remarkable testimony of faith to the Lord in Lyon.

The assembly listened, enrapt by his stories. But because the preacher had a lot of work to do the following night, Lisipus ordered some bowls of milk and slices of fresh bread to be served. Then the conversation ended.

With his mind edified by the old Gaul's narratives, Varrus returned home.

A single thought occupied his mind: to appease his wife's restless soul and offer her peace and joy by reaffirming his love and devotion.

He approached slowly so that he could lovingly surprise her.

He crossed the small atrium and stepped through the partially closed door; but he stopped in front of his bedroom, puzzled.

He could hear voices talking ardently.

Opilius Veturius was in his bedroom.

He tried to understand the moral tumult that was crumbling his destiny.

He had never dreamed that the man he worked for was capable of seducing his wife into such a situation.

Opilius was Cynthia's cousin and had always been welcome as a brother. He was ten years older than Varrus and had been widowed for some time. Heliodora, his deceased wife, had been like a second mother to Cynthia. She had left two small children behind, Helen and Galba, unfortunate twins whose birth had occasioned their mother's death. They lived with their father, surrounded by highly devoted slaves in a magnificent palace bearing the family's standard.

Varrus worked for Veturius in the area of shipping and lived in one of his villas. Ever since his marriage Varrus had felt woefully bound to him because of heavy debts, which he meant to pay off honestly through his respectable personal service.

Feeling that his mind had become a volcano of questions, Varrus thought:

Why would his wife yield herself like this to such a shameful affair? Wasn't he a loyal companion, extremely devoted to his family's happiness? He was away from Rome a lot, but he held them in his heart. If base temptations besieged his mind during his voyages, Cynthia and Tacianus were his unwavering defense... How could he give in to the suggestions of evil when he believed himself to be the sole support for his wife and the little

angel who filled his soul with sanctified aspirations? And why was Veturius defiling his home like this? Didn't Veturius know that he, Varrus, was a friend who had become his devoted servant? How many times in distant ports had he been tempted with easy gain but had turned down any economic advantage of dubious origin because he was aware of the responsibilities that connected him to his wife's cousin?! On how many occasions, constrained by gratitude, had he been obliged to forget strong possibilities of improving his lot just because he saw in Opilius Veturius not only the patron of his material bread, but a friend, deserving of his greatest acknowledgement!

Anguished and smitten, he thought to himself in that dire moment: If Cynthia loved Veturius, why did she marry me instead? If we both received a blessing from heaven with the arrival of Tacianus, how am I to break our marital bonds if the little one is my highest hope as an honest man?

Half mad, he began to argue with himself. What if he was jumping to conclusions? What if Opilius Veturius was there on a mission of help at Cynthia's own request? He needed to calm his restless thoughts and listen with an open mind.

He placed his right hand over his heavy heart and listened:

"You'll never get used to Varrus's ramblings," said Veturius self-confidently. "It's useless to try."

"Who knows?" ventured his cousin. "I'm hoping he'll leave the abhorrent company of those Christians someday."

"That'll never happen!" exclaimed Veturius, laughing outright. "I've never heard of anyone coming to their senses after becoming acclimated to that plague. Even when they seem to betray their vows in front of our gods for fear of the authorities, they go right back to that sorcery. I have followed several cases of trying to cure those crazy people. You could say that they have a terrible obsession with suffering. Beatings, ropes, beasts, crosses, fires and beheadings aren't enough to diminish the pleasure they have in surrendering to pain."

"Well, I've had enough of it," sighed the young woman, lowering her voice.

Showing the strength of the bonds of affection that held him to the lady of the house, Opilius said with conviction:

“Even if Varrus did change his opinions, he wouldn’t be able to alter our situation. We belong to each other. You’ve been mine for six months, so what difference would it make?”

He remarked sarcastically:

“Is your husband fighting to keep his wife? No, he’s too interested in the kingdom of the angels... I honestly don’t think he’s up to your expectations. By Jupiter! All my acquaintances who have given in to the Nazarene mystification have given up on life. Instead of talking with you about our games, Varrus will tell you about the paradise of the Jews, full of unclean patriarchs; and I can assure you that if you want to go on a happy outing – something quite natural to your female taste – he will, no doubt, take you to some isolated cemetery and ask you to rejoice over rotting bones.”

He finished with an ironic laugh, but probably noticing an unexpected gesture from his cousin, he went on:

“Besides, you need to realize that your husband is nothing more than my client.⁷ He has everything and nothing at the same time. But, by Serapis, I see no qualities in him to warrant showering him with my favors. You know I love you, Cynthia! You know good and well that I have loved you silently from the first moment that I saw you, so young and beautiful. I would never have chosen Heliodora if serving Caesar hadn’t kept me in Achaia for so long! When I met you, when you were being courted by Varrus, my heart was in torment. I did everything for your happiness. I inclined my wife’s sympathies to your favor, surrounded you with gifts, and offered you a home worthy of a dowry so you would never be mistaken for one of those poor women that deprivation causes to age early. And for you, I have even put up with the husband who may be with you but can’t understand you! What are you going to do about me now, widowed and unhappy as I am? After meeting you again, I never gave Heliodora anything but the respectful honor that was due her because of her irreproachable virtue. Our slaves know that I’m yours. Mecenius, my old attendant, informed me that the servants even think I poisoned Heliodora so you could take her place! And really, what more honorable and loving mother could I find for my children? So, make up your mind. Your word will be enough.”

“But what about my husband?” asked Cynthia, with inexpressible consternation in her voice.

There was an expressive silence, during which Veturius seemed to be purposely meditating. Then he said:

“I plan to offer your husband the discharge of all his debts. In addition, I can support him in other areas of imperial life. Far from us, he could give expansion to his ideals. I fear for him. The authorities are not forgiving. Of those whose close friendship we used to enjoy, several have been arrested, punished or killed. Aulus Macrinus and his two sons are in prison. Claudia Sextina, despite all her venerable titles, was found murdered in her country home. Sophronius Calvus had his property confiscated and was stoned in the forum. Your husband can give vent to his sentiments wherever he wants, but not here.”

“But what would happen to Tacianus if we arrive at a favorable solution?”

“Well,” suggested Veturius like a man unused to considering obstacles, “my children are the same age as he is. He would grow up with Helen and Galba in the best environment. We also mustn’t forget that my estate in Lyon needs someone. Alesius and Pontimiana, my managers, are constantly asking for at least one of our family members to reside there. In a few years, little Tacianus could move to Gaul and assume a responsible position on our property. He could come to Rome whenever he wants to and develop his character in a diverse environment without any connection to his father’s influence.”

Varrus could bear it no longer.

Feeling that an explosion of anguish was bursting his chest, he dragged himself down a nearby hallway, heading toward the room where his little son was resting with Cirila, Cynthia’s young slave.

He knelt down before the adorned cradle, and listening to the boy’s soft breathing, he gave vent to his emotions.

Like a man thrown into a deep abyss with no warning, and unable to grasp anything to save himself, he was unable to collect his thoughts for a few minutes.

He turned to prayer to calm down, and then began to reflect...

He looked at the child’s peaceful face through a dense veil of tears and asked himself: Where will I go? How can I solve the sensitive problem that my wife has created?

He was fully aware of how cruel Opilius could be. He knew he had the attentions of Caesar, who, according to the popular version, had used his cooperation in the murder of Geta, for which he had received an enormous amount of land in far-off Gaul. And at that moment, he had no doubt that, incited by his passion for Cynthia, Opilius had facilitated the death of the selfless Heliodora.

He considered the vexing situation into which he had been thrown, and he thought of plotting his revenge.

However, the unforgettable figure of Christ loomed in his overexcited imagination...

How could he harmonize vengeance with the teachings of the Good News, which he himself was spreading in his travels? How could he stress the rule of forgiving others if he didn't forgive his neighbor's wrongs? The Master, whose guidance he had sought, had forgiven the blows of all his offenders and had even accepted the cross... He had seen many friends arrested and persecuted in the name of the Heavenly Benefactor. They all showed courage, serenity, trust... He knew Hostilius Fulvius, the devoted preacher of the Gospel on Via Salaria, whose two little children had been trampled under the hooves of two horses that were intentionally rode over them by a drunken tribune. He himself, Varrus, had helped collect the remains of the two little innocents and had seen their father, kneeling, praying and weeping, thanking the Lord for the suffering that was harshly trying him and his family.

Was not the affliction of that hour the hand of God demanding a show of faith from him? But would it not be better to die in the arena or see Tacianus devoured by wild animals than to condemn both of them to the shame of a moral death?

And he asked, sobbing silently: What would Jesus have done if he had been a father? Would he hand over a defenseless child to a terrible wolf from the social forest, without fighting back?"

As for himself, he did not see that he had the right to make any demands. He knew his status was that of an ordinary man, and therefore a sinner, with the undeniable need to become virtuous.

He could not demand devotion from his wife, although losing her would cause him immense pain.

But what about the little one? Would it be fair to leave him at the mercy of the crime?

“O God!” he sobbed inwardly. “How can I fight a powerful man like Opilius Veturius, who is able to change the mind of Caesar himself? That the woman he loved would follow Opilius was a wound that the passage of time was sure to absorb within his soul, but how could he abandon his little son, his reason for living?”

He stood up mechanically, took the sleeping boy from the woolen blankets and considered the temptation to flee.

But would it not be inexcusably rash to expose the child to adversity? And what position would it put his wife in as far as her social life was concerned?

Cynthia was not thinking of him, a loving, kindly father, but could he, a disciple of Jesus’ teachings, subject her to self-contempt or public disrespect?

As if supported by a strange invisible force, he put the little one back in his crib, and after kissing him tenderly, he knelt over him and wept humbly, shedding copious tears, as if he were pouring the warm dew of his heart over the precious flower of his life.

He checked to see if the dialogue in the bedroom was still going on, and then went back out to the street in search of fresh air for his weakened body.

He stopped on the banks of the Tiber and invoked the memory of the suffering of all the victims of those mysterious and tranquil waters, which must have been hiding the groans of countless persons who had been treated unjustly. Did the silence of the old river not represent an inspiration to the troubled state of his soul?

The few pedestrians and the late-night carriages did not notice his presence.

Dividing his gaze between the twinkling sky and the tranquil waters, he delved into profound questions that no one could fathom...

At dawn he went back home, listless and disoriented, and shutting himself in a small room, fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep. When the sun was already high, he was awakened by the shouts of slaves carrying materials to nearby work sites.

Quintus Varrus performed his morning ablutions, and then Cirila and the baby came looking for him. He held his son gravely but lovingly, and received a message from his wife saying that she had gone out with her friends to a religious celebration on Palatine Hill.

He felt overwhelmed, so he left the house and headed for the road to Ostia. He wanted to talk with someone who could soothe his inner grief. He recalled the noble figure of Corvinus and decided to make him the confidant of all the sorrows of his heart.

He was received by Lisipus, who kindly informed him that the old man was not in. He was caring for various sick people, but would be on Via Ardeatina that evening.

Lisipus noticed that his unexpected visitor was quite pale and invited him to sit down and have some soothing broth.

Varrus accepted, and felt great spiritual improvement. The peace of that simple place calmed his disoriented mind.

Guessing his moral torment, the old man read several comforting pages to him, containing information about the heroism of martyrs, as if he wished to heal his invisible wounds.

The young man listened attentively to long passages of the descriptions and then, saying that he was physically exhausted, agreed to stay with Lisipus until later, when they would both go to the tombs in the carriage of their old friend.

They arrived late at night.

They went through a gate that one of the friends was carefully guarding, and walked along the galleries with numerous brothers and sisters bearing torches and having conversations filled with hope.

The Christian cemeteries in Rome were places of great joy. Troubled and discouraged in their social life, and having great difficulties in communicating with one another, it is said that there, in the home of the dead, to whom patrician traditions habitually paid their respects, the followers of Christ found a unique atmosphere that was conducive to those who were thirsting for togetherness. They embraced one another there with unutterable fraternal love; they sang joyfully; they prayed fervently.

Christianity at the time was not confined to priestly rites. It was a river of light and faith, bathing souls, gathering hearts for the divine journey of the higher ideal. Tears did not fall like drops of burning gall, but like pearls of love and gratitude in their references to the plight of their sacrificed friends.

Here and there, pink and white gravestones bore loving inscriptions that held no reminders of any dark idea of death. Only God's goodness and eternal life deserved praise.

Varrus eagerly reread the words that were familiar to him, seeking moral support for the inner endurance he knew he needed.

Not far off, someone in loving friendship had written the greeting: "Festus, may Jesus bless you." Farther along, a devoted father had written: "Glaucia, dear child, we are together." Over there shone the inscription, "Crescencius lives" and farther on blazed another, "Popeia is glorified."

Never had Varrus felt such peace among the tombs. Having realized he was in the position of a man thrown out of his own home, he now felt surrounded by his own family in the anonymous crowd of friends. He lingered, looking at the unknown faces with more sympathy and interest, and thought to himself that in that rank of individuals eagerly seeking the Lord's teachings, perhaps there were dramas more painful than his and deeper wounds bleeding in their hearts. He supported Lisipus on his sturdy arm, as if he had rediscovered the joy of being useful to someone. From the happy looks exchanged between them, they both seemed to be thanking the influence of Jesus, who was giving the dear old man the grace to lean on a son and to the unhappy young man the chance to find a father he could serve.

In a large lighted room, hymns of joy preceded the words of the preacher, who, taking the podium, spoke with indescribable beauty about the Kingdom of God, stressing the need for patience and hope.

When his heartwarming oration ended, Lisipus and Varrus met up to take him home. A carriage was waiting for them beyond the tombs.

And in the privacy of Lisipus's home, in front of the two amazed old men, the young patrician, punctuating his narrative with tears, explained what he was going through in the loneliness of his home life and beseeched Corvinus for a balm for the wounds that were burdening his heart.

The elderly Gaul had him sit down, and stroking his head as he would an upset boy's, he asked:

“Varrus, did you accept the Gospel so that Jesus would become your servant or so that you would become his?”

“Oh! Without a doubt,” sighed the young man, “if there’s anything I aspire to in the world, it’s to join the ranks of the Lord’s slaves.”

“So, my son, let’s think about Christ’s plan and forget our own desires.”

And looking at the sky through the humble window, suggesting that he was seeking inspiration from on high, he added:

“First of all, don’t condemn your wife. Who are we to probe the hearts of others? Could we, for instance, twist another soul’s sentiments by using wickedness and violence? Who among us is blameless enough to dole out punishment?”

“But how can we wipe out evil if we’re not willing to fight it?” asked Varrus gravely.

The old man smiled and said:

“Do you think we can overcome evil with the force of well-spoken words? Do you think that the Master came down from Heaven just to talk?”

“Jesus practiced what he preached and battled darkness with the light that radiated from him until his final sacrifice. We find ourselves in a world enveloped in darkness and have no other torches to light it but our souls, which we need to ignite with true love. The Gospel is not just an announcement of liberating ideas. More than anything, it is the building of a new world by means of the moral edification of the new man and woman. So far civilization has kept woman, our mother and our sister, at the level of ordinary merchandise. For millennia, we have made her our slave, selling her, exploiting her, stoning or killing her, and the laws have not considered us subject to judgment. But, is she not also a human being? Is she not hampered by weaknesses just like ours? If we received the blessing of life from her, why do we treat her worse than the way we treat our horses? At every stage of his divine ministry, Jesus dignified her, sanctifying her sublime mission. In recalling his teaching, let me repeat: Which one of us, in good conscience, can cast the first stone?”

And giving both his listeners a meaningful look, he said:

“To redeem individuals, Christianity needs a vanguard of spirits determined to carry out its plan of action.”

“But,” pondered the young Roman somewhat timidly, “can we deny that Cynthia is wrong?”

“My son, whoever sets fire to the field of one’s own life will certainly end up in the flames of that fire. Have mercy on the misguided! Are they not unhappy enough already?”

“But what about my son?” asked Varrus in a voice choked with sobs.

“I understand your grief.”

And gazing lucidly around the small room, Corvinus seemed to be revealing a fragment of his own heart as he added:

“In another time, I drank from the same cup. To have to leave my little children was the visitation of a terrible nightmare. I wandered, torn to pieces like a leaf in a whirlwind, but I finally realized that children belong to God before being placed gently in our hands. I understand your misfortune. To die a thousand times under any kind of torture means less suffering than the separation of a living flower we would like to affix to the stem of our destiny.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to defend the innocent one and reclaim my right to protect and educate him?”

“Who is going to listen to you, when a minor imperial order could suffocate your cries? And besides, if we are interested in serving Christ, how can we impose on others the gall that the struggle compels us to swallow? Your wife may not have been benevolent toward your heart, but she will probably be a selfless mother to the little boy. Would it not be more advisable, then, to await the decisions of the Most High with the gift of time?”

Corvinus continued to watch the painful expression on the poor father’s face, and he commented after a long pause:

“Do not give in to the chill of disappointment, nullifying your own resources. Pain can be compared to the voluminous flow of a river. It can either carry us to happiness on firm ground or drown us if we don’t know how to swim in it. Listen to me: the Gospel is not just a chariot ride to heavenly joy after death. It is a light for our existence right here in this world, which we must transform into the Kingdom of God. Don’t you remember Nicodemus’s visit to the divine Master, when the Lord convincingly assured him: ‘You must be born again?’”

Quintus Varrus nodded and the old man continued:

“I too suffered a great deal when I was still young and decided to work in the faith. I was repudiated by everyone and forced to leave Gaul, where I was born, and I lived for ten years in Alexandria, where I renewed my knowledge. The church there remains open to the broadest considerations relating to destiny and being. The ideas of Pythagoras are kept there in a large study center to real advantage, and after listening attentively to distinguished priests and the most enlightened followers, I was convinced that we are reborn many times on earth and that the body is the fleeting garment of our imperishable soul. The tomb is the resurrection. We will return to the flesh as many times as necessary, until we have gotten rid of all our inner impurities, like the noble metal which tolerates the purifying crucible until it casts off the dross that disfigures it.”

Corvinus paused momentarily, as if offering his listeners a chance for reflection, and then went on:

“Jesus did not just speak to the human being who passes away, but rather to the imperishable spirit. In one step of his sublime teachings, he warns, ‘It is better to enter life maimed than, having two hands, to go into the lower regions.’⁸ Christ is referring to the world as a school where we seek our own improvement. We come to earth with the problems we need. Trials are a salutary remedy. Difficulties are steps upward on the great ascent. Our ancestors, the Druids, taught that we find ourselves in a world of travels or in a field of repeated experiences so that later on we can reach the stars of divine light to be one with God, our Father. We create suffering by defying the universal laws, and we endure it so we can return to harmonious communion with them. Justice is perfect. Nobody weeps unnecessarily. The stone bears the pressure of the tool that polishes it so that it can shine supremely. The beast is led to confinement to be tamed. Humankind suffers and struggles to learn and relearn in order to grow more and more. Earth is not the only theater of life. Did not the Lord himself — whom we aspire to serve — say ‘There are many dwellings in my Father’s house?’ Toil is the ladder of light to other spheres, where we will meet again like birds, which, after losing each other in winter’s gusts, regroup again in the blessed spring sunshine.” Running his hand through his white hair, the old man remarked:

“My head has been touched by the snow of disenchantment... Agony has visited my dream-filled soul many times... Around my feet, the cold ground has asked for my broken body, but inside my heart, hope is a sun that sets me

on fire, showing the glorious path of the future in its resplendent rays... We are eternal, Varrus! Tomorrow we will happily reunite in the home of eternity, without the weeping of separation or death.”

Hearing those words so full of conviction and tenderness, the young patrician’s troubled mind quieted down.

A few more minutes of lively conversation passed by swiftly, and feeling somewhat recovered, he was ready to leave. A light chariot was waiting for him nearby.

Having dropped him off at the door of his domestic sanctuary, the galloping horses melded into the great silence. The young man, more peaceful now, noticed that a few stars still twinkled dimly, while the sky was tinged with red.

Morning was dawning.

Contemplating the beautiful Roman sky and asking Jesus to conserve the faith he had drawn from the old Gallic Christian’s words on Via Ostia, Varrus felt he had found the symbol of a new day that now marked his destiny on that morning of amazing beauty.

³ Caracalla’s rule, although somewhat benign for Christians who held favorable positions in public life, allowed the methodical persecution of slaves and plebeians dedicated to the Gospel. They were considered enemies of the political and social order. – Emmanuel

⁴ An over garment worn by Grecian and Roman women. (www.webster-dictionary.net) – Tr.

⁵ At the time of Roman rule in Gaul, the city of Lyon was called Lugdunum. – Emmanuel

⁶ A city in France, close to Lyon. — Emmanuel

⁷ Among the ancient Romans, a poor person who gains the favor of a wealthy friend. – Emmanuel

⁸ Mk. 9:43. – Emmanuel.

3

The Heart's Commitment

Two uneventful days passed for Quintus Varrus who, feeling listless and melancholy, listened to his wife's endless complaining as she lashed his principles with the whip of her insidious, sharp criticism.

Although sorrow weighed on his soul, he did not betray any sign of disapproval of Cynthia's conduct. She continued go on outings and engagements with Opilius Veturius.

However, when he received orders to leave for a port in Achaia, he could not repress his yearning for something new.

He went personally to Opilius, and after being welcomed with a great show of courtesy, he explained what he wanted. He felt the need for a new life. He planned to leave shipping and devote himself to different endeavors in Rome.

However, he confessed with disappointment the debts that were keeping him bound to serving on the fleet.

He owed such a large sum to Opilius that he did not know how to begin to change directions.

Opilius was greatly surprised and tried to hide the actual thoughts that were budding in his mind. Cheerful and friendly, he told his visitor that he had never considered him an employee, but rather a coworker, and that Varrus owed him nothing. He said he understood his fatigue and approved of his plan to become resettled in Roman life.

Flushed with shame, Varrus received the full discharge of all his debts. Opilius not only made that concession but also placed himself at Varrus's disposal for any new venture.

He inquired politely about his plans for the future, but astonished at Opilius's pretense, Varrus could barely reply and muttered monosyllables that betrayed his insecurity.

They parted cordially, and Opilius promised with fraternal affection to follow Varrus's trajectory.

Quintus Varrus was feeling profoundly disoriented as he went to the Forum hoping to find someone who could provide him with honest work. However, the society of the time seemed divided between powerful masters and miserable slaves. There was no place for those who wanted to make a living with ennobling work. Even freed slaves had to leave the city for the distant regions of Lazio in search of renewal and independence.

He made several inquiries without success.

No one wanted a pair of honest hands for a decent salary. They said that times were hard, and pointed to a recession with the likely fall of Basianus, which could happen at any time. Governmental insanities had reached their peak and the supporters of Macrinus, the praetorian prefect, were promising a revolt. Rome was living under a reign of terror. Thousands of people had been killed in just over five years by free-lance assassins who enjoyed sizeable rewards.

The young patrician was feeling rather dejected as he watched the crowd coming and going in the public square, indifferent to the problems troubling his soul, when Flavius Subrius, an old soldier of dubious reputation, appeared and offered his open arms in welcome.

A mature man, but shrewd and cunning, Subrius had been wounded serving the State by helping to maintain order in Gaul, which was why, since he now had a limp, he was used by several noblemen for secret operations.

Far from suspecting that Subrius was tied to the interests of his family's persecutor, Varrus responded warmly to his fraternal gesture.

In fact, that flattering expression of affability was a valuable incentive to him in his uncertain situation. The sudden appearance of the old soldier just might be the start of some fortunate enterprise.

The conversation got off to a good start.

After greeting Varrus, the former legionary got right to the point:

“Son of Jupiter! How can I thank the gods for the luck of running into you? Serapis must have taken pity on my bad leg and brought me here. I’d made up my mind to find you, but times are hard and carriages are the privilege of senators; fortunately, I didn’t have to grind my bones on a difficult walk.”

The young patrician was intrigued and smiled, and before he could ask any questions, Subrius looked around shrewdly, as if he were scrutinizing his surroundings, and said in a low voice:

“My dear Varrus, I know you are doing all you can for our persecuted compatriots, the Christians. Frankly, I could never give up my domestic numens, and I’ll always prefer a party in honor of Apollo to any meeting in a cemetery; even so, I’m sure there are many good people in the labyrinth of the catacombs. I don’t know if you actually frequent that despised cult, but I do know that you are sympathetic towards it. To be honest, I just can’t fathom this epidemic of willing suffering that we’ve been witnessing for so many years.”

He feigned a false expression of sadness on his masklike face and continued:

“Despite my indifference to Christianity, I have learned from our ancestors that we must do the good. I think I heard about the time when you provided distinguished service to that despised cause. I don’t understand the Nazarene faith, which is responsible for so much flogging and death, but I do feel sorry for the victims. So, dear son of Jupiter, don’t waste the opportunity that the circumstances are offering you.”

Noting the mute eagerness of his listener, he added:

“Praetor Galus has received a warning from Macrinus and he needs someone to help him with a bit of work in Carthage. I think that if you accept, you could be a valuable means of warning for the Christians of Africa.”

Varrus was more interested in getting settled in a decent job than of setting himself up as a savior of the African community, but he asked about the work.

Displaying well-studied enthusiasm, Subrius explained that the high-level dignitary was calling him to his palace to entrust him with the sensitive operation.

The young man did not hesitate.

He went with the veteran soldier to see Galus at his private residence because of the confidential nature that Subrius had lent the conversation.

The old praetor, molded according to the most ingrained patrician customs, welcomed him, and putting strict etiquette aside after the usual greetings, got straight to the point.

“Varrus,” he began solemnly, “I know you are always loyal to the commitments you assume, so I’m hoping you’ll accept this important undertaking. Our legions will proclaim the new emperor in a few days and we can’t do without irreproachable patriots to help us with the work of social readjustment.”

The shrewd politician bit his withered lips, trying to hide his true intentions, and went on:

“But I don’t know if you have the time for it, since I know that you are obligated to Opilius Veturius’s fleet.”

The young man hastened to tell him about his resignation and that he was really hoping for new responsibilities.

The praetor smiled triumphantly, and continued:

“If I could get away from Rome, I would do this myself; however...”

Before he could finish, Quintus Varrus asked in what way he could be useful, to which the magistrate replied:

“Carthage had to be reduced to ashes, according to the wise counsel of old Cato. But after Emilianus’s brilliant job of razing that nest of snakes, Gracus committed the insanity of rebuilding it. I doubt there is any other province that could cause us more trouble. It may be possible to fight the plague of the Galileans here, but the problem is much more complicated there. High-level officials, patrician women, authorities and intelligent men are devoting themselves to Christianity with such laxity for our principles that they even hold public meetings to strengthen their rampant proselytizing. We cannot turn a blind eye. Our measures cannot fail.”

Searching the questioning eyes of the young man, as if to probe his innermost sentiments, he asked:

“Are you prepared to deliver a certain message to the Proconsul?”

“Absolutely,” said Varro, determined.

“I have a list of five hundred people that we must get rid of in the city. In spite of Basianus’s edict, stating that all inhabitants of the provinces are Roman citizens, and that they now enjoy, undeservedly, rights equal to ours, we have agreed to the summary elimination of all followers of the Nazarene deception. However, the defendants must respond to the accusations before being sentenced to death or prison. According to the class they belong to, women will be spared after a fair warning. Plebeians will be confined to serving on the imperial galleys.”

The young patrician tried to disguise the pain this all made him feel by nodding his head affirmatively. He finally grasped the meaning of Flavius Subrius’s insinuations.

By accepting the invitation, he could save many of his fellow Christians. He could enter Carthage in time to warn them. It would not be difficult. He would have the names of all those involved. Before speaking to the Proconsul, he would communicate with the African church.

A world of constructive possibilities surfaced in his imagination.

Perhaps Corvinus himself could guide him in carrying out the plan he had in mind.

“Well, can you leave two days from now?” thundered the voice of Galus, irritated by the young man’s silence.

“Honorable praetor, I’ll be ready.”

Making a show of dismissing him with his characteristic gesture of boredom, the magistrate concluded:

“You’ll take Maximus Pratense’s merchant galley under Helcius Lucius’s command. Tomorrow night, I’ll give you the message right here and you can discuss any details about the trip with Flavius Subrius. He will be traveling on the same ship as the captain’s advisor regarding some jobs of a political nature with the prefect’s friends living in Numidia.”

The agreement was concluded.

In the middle of a public thoroughfare, Varrus gratefully thanked the former legionary and arranged to meet him at the Forum the following day.

Although there were bitter forebodings in his heart regarding his son, the young man was satisfied. He had gotten – so he thought – the job he wanted. He no longer felt useless. When he returned from Carthage, other

opportunities would surely be waiting. The trip would give him the means to assist his brothers and sisters in the faith, and would also represent the first step in taking on larger responsibilities.

After a brief stay at home, he headed for the Via Ostia, eager to commune with his old friends.

He told Corvinus and Lisipus about his decision to leave.

The old Gaul was commenting on the obstacles he had run up against in trying to leave Rome, and when Varrus asked him which port he was trying to get to, he explained that he needed to visit the Christian community in Carthage before returning to Lyon.

The young man's face lit up.

Why couldn't they go together?

Their destination was identical.

Corvinus glowed with joy.

The young patrician explained in a few words his plan to tell Flavius Subrius about his new travel companion, but he saved the real purpose of his African mission for a later conversation with Appius Corvinus when they would be alone at sea.

The next day, he presented the matter to the lame old soldier. Subrius welcomed the idea with a cryptic smile, and said in good humor:

“Of course. You have the right to take him along as a relative.”

Varrus prepared for the voyage according to plan.

He told his wife about his resolution to change the course of his destiny, something that Cynthia listened to with special attention. And after a private interview with the praetor, he said goodbye to her and Tacianus, with his thoughts immersed in painful emotions.

With documentation in hand, he embarked at Ostia with his soul absorbed in distressing expectations.

Corvinus gratefully joined him. With the support of the young patrician and Flavius Subrius – who oddly outdid himself in getting him settled in – he was prepared to share the cramped cabin reserved for Quintus Varrus next to the captain's accommodations in the stern. He stopped on the platform that separated the room from the rowers' benches, appearing to admire the superb

trireme in which they would be traveling. However, as he gazed up at the magnificent masts pointed out to him by Varrus, who was pleased to have a chance to offer him the wonderful spectacle, the old man replied:

“Yes, I can see the breadth of the sky and the sun-beaten sea; I can feel the gust of the free wind that seems to sing the divine glory of nature; but I’m thinking of the slaves, calloused from the oars.”

The preacher was about to continue, but Subrius, who was keeping an inexplicable eye on him, sensed the evangelical meaning of his remark. Showing the greatest concern on his surly face, he turned to Quintus Varrus and said:

“Let’s get your guest settled in.”

The young patrician, annoyed with the interference, expressed his desire to introduce Corvinus to Helcius Lucius, but the commander’s advisor quickly objected:

“No, not now. Helcius is busy. Let’s wait for a better time.”

Corvinus was settled into his bunk with his small amount of baggage, which consisted of a threadbare tunic, a goatskin and a bag containing his documents.

To disguise the disagreeable impression Subrius had left by abruptly cutting off his words, Varrus decided to linger on with the old man for a while. He chose that moment to discuss the true meaning of his trip.

Corvinus listened to him, visibly astonished.

He knew the Carthaginian patriarchs and the most prominent supporters of the African Church.

Varrus showed him the names of the people on the praetor’s list, and the valiant missionary was able to identify most of them.

They exchanged views on the dangerous time they were going through, and like old friends, they settled on measures for the darkest days to come if the political storms did not abate.

The old man from Gaul spoke at length about the church of Lyon.

He planned to consolidate the vast social assistance movement in the name of Christ there.

The converts would not accept a dead faith.

In their opinion, the church was to be enriched by practical works through an ongoing source of redemptive services.

They were often visited by fellow believers from Asia and Phrygia, from whom they received direct instructions for materializing their evangelical ideals. They had accepted the Good News not only as a path of hope to heaven but also as an active work plan for making the world a better place.

And so, from thought to thought, and from observation to observation, the two were absorbed and happy, planning projects and reviving the rose-colored flame of their dreams.

When the ship began to move, Appius Corvinus smiled at his companion like a child going to a party.

At first they heard only the rhythmic pounding of the hammers that regulated the rhythmic movements of the rowers, but then the wind began to whistle loudly.

Varrus left, promising to return and introduce him to the captain, but Corvinus asked him if the visit could be postponed till the next day since he wanted to pray and rest.

The young man went to the bow of the ship and began conversing with some sailors. He tried to meet with the commander, but Helcius Lucius was with Flavius Subrius and two other countrymen, exchanging ideas with them at a distant table, chatting animatedly.

Night had fallen.

Fearing the obligation to take strong drink, Varrus had withdrawn within himself.

He went back to his cabin to offer some food to his old companion, but Corvinus seemed to be peacefully asleep.

Seeing from a distance that Helcius Lucius and his friends were still drinking and gambling noisily, the young patrician climbed to the bow and looked for a solitary corner where he could let his thoughts take flight.

He was eager for meditation and prayer, and longed for a few minutes of silence in which, all alone, he could recall the events of recent days.

He looked at the waters that the singing wind was forming into waves and let the refreshing gusts caress his loose hair, thinking that nature's fluidic balm would assuage the uneasiness in his tormented mind.

Fascinated by the nocturnal calm, he gazed at the crescent moon rising in the sky and let his glance roam the twinkling constellations.

What a mysterious power controls people's lives! he said to himself in his sad soliloquy.

Just a few days ago, he could not have imagined the adventure of such a trip. He believed in the safe route of domestic happiness, supported by the broadest social respect. But now he could see that his destiny was undergoing an unequivocal transformation... Where were Cynthia and Tacianus at the moment? For what reason had his wife's behavior altered his life like this?... Without the idea of Christ in his soul, he would not have found it so hard to solve the problems that personally plagued him; but he had become familiar with the Gospel and was aware of the declarations of faith he would have to effect. If he could just override Opilius's influence... However, it would not be right to entertain any such illusion. He had wealthy relatives in Rome who would take responsibility for supporting his child until he could face the whims of fate with better finances. As a follower of Christianity, it would be unfair to impose his mental punishment on Cynthia.

As he lingered on the magnificent view of the night, he prayed fervently and begged Jesus to soothe his broken spirit.

He remembered his friends who had been arrested and persecuted for the sake of the sublime faith they had devoted themselves to, and he anchored himself in the examples of humility of which they were a living standard, praying that the Heavenly Benefactor not allow him to fall into useless despair.

How long had he been there by himself in his solitude?

Varrus did not think about it until someone tapped him on the shoulder, pulling him away from the whistling accompaniment of the wind.

It was Subrius, who seemed to be holding his breath and was speaking to him awkwardly:

“Chosen of the gods, I believe the time has come for us to speak frankly.”

There was something strange in those words. Varrus searched their meaning in vain.

His heart was jumping around in his chest. His usually cynical friend's pale face betrayed some painful incident, but he did not have the courage to ask about it.

"Many years ago," the soldier continued, "your father did me a favor that I'll never forget. He saved my life in Illyria but I was never able to repay him. Even so, I promised my sullied conscience that I would repay the debt somehow, and I believe that now I can finally fulfill the commitment that time has been unable to erase."

Sinking his cat-like eyes into the young man's tormented face, he continued:

"Do you honestly believe that the magistrate asked for your collaboration because he thought you were so mature? Do you think that Helcius Lucius would offer you a place next to his own lodgings simply because he thinks you're a nice guy? Son of Jupiter, be forewarned: Opilius Veturius has plotted your death with him. Your social standing did not allow him the opportunity for such an unlawful act in Rome, where, by the way, he expects to take your wife from you. It grieves me to see you surrounded by such powerful enemies at such a young age. Helcius has instructions to throw your body overboard before the night is over. Someone was chosen to steal your life from you. To Roman society, you are to disappear tonight, forever."

Quintus Varrus went pale.

He believed he was facing his final moments in the world.

He wanted to speak but was unable to. Intense emotion constricted his throat.

Observing Subrius's cryptic expression, he assumed he had come to murder him.

Because the pause was so long, he gathered all the strength he had left and asked:

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to save you," replied the soldier ironically.

And after making sure there were no other listeners in the darkness, he added:

"But I also need to save myself. I must help you, without overlooking myself."

Almost whispering, he said:

“One life sometimes requires another. I know the old man who is with you. He is an elderly Gaul who is tired of living. I know that he gave long speeches in the catacombs and begged for alms from the foolish. Of course he cast magic spells on you so he could win the prize of a trip to Carthage. His journey, however, will be a longer one. I let him embark with us on purpose. It was the only solution to my problem. How can I protect your head without compromising my own? Appius Corvinus...”

The young patrician listened to this secret, trembling with fear; but the second he heard his friend’s name, he made a supreme effort and inquired:

“What are you daring to insinuate?”

Flavius Subrius, however, was too cold to feel any compassion. Although saddened by the moral distress he was causing his listener, he smiled sarcastically and explained:

“Appius Corvinus shall die in your stead.”

“No! Not that!” Varrus cried, too weak to wipe the sweat from his brow.

He was about to rush to the stern, but Subrius stopped him and muttered:

“It’s too late. Someone has already used the dagger.”

Varrus, as if he had been mortally wounded, felt that he was falling.

Nonetheless, he gathered whatever energies he had left and followed an impulse to rush into his cabin. Subrius stopped him with a warning:

“Watch out! Helcius will see you. The old man is probably dead by now, but if you expect to hear any goodbyes from him, proceed with caution... I’ll distract the commander and his friends for a while longer, and then look for you in your room before I take Lucius there.”

He left Varrus to his pain and withdrew.

The young man, holding back the sobs wracking his chest, dragged himself, maddened with anguish, to the room where he found Corvinus gagged, with a large bloodstain on the white linen covers.

The old man’s eyes seemed clearer. He rested them on his friend with the tenderness of a father saying goodbye to a beloved son before the long journey of death.

“Who was the wretch who dared do this?” Quintus Varrus asked, freeing Corvinus’s mouth from the gag.

Clutching his chest with his wrinkled hand, the old man forced himself to say:

“My son, why is your heart in a rage when we need peace? Can you possibly believe that anyone could harm us without God’s permission? Calm down. We have a few moments to talk.”

“But you’re all that I have now! You’re my benefactor, my friend, my father!” cried the young man, sobbing on his knees, as if he wanted to soak up the old man’s still-unwavering words.

“I know how you feel, Varrus. I immediately recognized in your devotion the spiritual son that the world had denied me... Do not weep. Who told you that death means the end? I have already seen many of our comrades wear the crown of glorious martyrdom. All of them left for the heavenly kingdom, praising the Master of the Cross, and while the years were destroying my body, I often asked why I myself was being spared... I was afraid that I didn’t deserve from Heaven the grace of dying in its service; but now I am at peace. I have the happiness of bearing witness, and for my greatest joy I have someone who is listening to me on the threshold of a new life.”

The old man took a long pause to recover his strength. Quintus Varrus, caressing him and weeping copious tears, added:

“How can I resign myself to this injustice? You’re dying in my stead!”

“How can you believe that, my son? The divine law consists of eternal balances. Do not rebel or blaspheme. God orders; we must obey.”

After a brief pause he went on:

“I was a little older than you when Attalus departed... It broke my heart to see him going to his death. But we spoke in the prison before he entered the arena... He promised to accompany my steps after his death, and he did come back to guide me. In the most afflictive times of my ministry and in the grey days of sadness and indecision, I saw him and heard him speak to me. Who says the tomb is the mark of separation forever? We mustn’t forget that the Master himself rose from the grave to strengthen his disciples.”

Varrus embraced him with the greatest tenderness and said:

“You have faith and virtues that I am far from possessing. I’m going to feel alone, all alone from now on.”

“Where is your trust in God? You’re young. The days will mature your experience. Heed the Master’s teachings and a new light will shine in your soul. In Lyon, many of our brothers and sisters communicate with the dead, who are simply those living in eternity. They communicate with us and support us every day in our duties... In many instances of martyrdom, I have seen companions who preceded us receiving those who were put to death... Consequently, I know that you and I will continue to be together. The church, for me, is nothing but the Spirit of Christ in communion with men and women...”

Corvinus gasped in pain. He looked more insistently at his friend, with calm eyes, and went on:

“I know you see yourself being relegated to loneliness, with no family, no home... But don’t forget the immense human family. For many centuries to come, the servants of Jesus will be disconnected souls on the earth... Our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, are scattered far and wide... As long as there is a groan of pain in the world or a patch of darkness in people’s minds, our job will not be finished... For now, we are despised and mocked on the path of the heavenly Shepherd who bequeathed death to us as a blessed deliverance. Perhaps tomorrow legions of men and women will fall because of the Master’s principles, which, being so simple in their fundamentals, provoke the rage and reaction of the darkness that still governs nations... We will die and be reborn in the flesh many times... until we are able to comprehend the triumph of fraternity and true peace... However, it is essential to love much so that we can conquer ourselves first. Never hate, my son! Always bless the hands that have harmed you. Forgive others’ mistakes with sincerity and complete forgetfulness of all evil. Love and help always, even those who seem hard and ungrateful... Our loved ones will not disappear. Those who put their understanding of the Gospel into practice light a flame in their own heart that will illuminate the path of loved ones on earth or beyond the grave... Your wife and son are not lost to you... But you will find them again on a new level of love... In the meantime, struggle to conquer yourself! The world is crying for servants who are loyal to the Good... Do not seek the wealth that disappointment corrodes... Do not cling to illusions or demand from the earth more than it can give you... Only one happiness never ends — the happiness of the love that honors God in service to our neighbors.”

Corvinus rested for a few moments.

With great difficulty, he pulled a greasy old bag from under his old tunic. It contained a handful of coins. He gave them to Varrus, saying:

“Varrus, in the church of Lyon, there is an old preacher named Horacius Niger. He is my coworker, and I want you to send him my news and greetings... When you can, give him these letters and this money on my behalf... Tell him that it is all I could collect in Rome for our children who are sheltered in the church.”

The young man took the money with reverent tenderness.

Then, with much effort, Corvinus asked him to read some Christian passage to him.

He wanted a thought from the Sacred Scriptures before he died.

Quintus Varrus did not hesitate.

At random, he pulled out a worn sheet of parchment from a scroll of teachings, and in the flickering light from the torch burning beside the bed, he repeated the beautiful words of Simon Peter to the lame man at the Beautiful Gate: “Gold and silver have I none, but such as I have I give to you.”⁹

Corvinus gazed at his friend with a wide smile on his colorless lips, as if to say that he was offering God and humankind his own heart at that moment.

Very sorrowful and heavy moments ensued.

The young man thought that his venerable friend had reached his final moment, but the old man, as if awakening from a short but concentrated prayer, spoke again:

“Varrus, if possible... I would like to see the sky before I die.”

Varrus opened a small hole in the cabin that served as a window.

The wind rushed in in strong, fresh gusts, blowing out the dim light. But the moonlight invaded the room in a silver stream.

With boundless caring, as if indulging a sick child, Varrus carried the old man to get a magnificent view of the night.

In the soft light of the moon, Appius Corvinus’s face looked like a living portrait of an ancient prophet who had suddenly appeared, haloed in splendor.

His calm, bright eyes probed the firmament, where multitudes of stars were sublimely twinkling.

After a moment of silent expectation, he spoke in a fading voice:

“How beautiful our true homeland is!”

And turning gently to the young man in tears, he concluded:

“That is the city of our God!”

The patriarch’s body was shaken by a wave of new life. His gaze, which had gone pale, slowly returned to having a strange glow, as if he had been revived by a miraculous force.

Enraptured, he cried out:

“The grand road has opened up!... Attalus is coming!... O my God, how sublime the golden carriage is!... Hundreds of stars are shining!... Oh!... it’s Attalus and Maturus, Santus and Alexander... Alcibiades and Ponticus... Pintomiana and Blandina...”¹⁰

The old man made a gesture of being ready to fall on his knees, totally oblivious to Varrus’s presence and the precariousness of his own physical condition.

“O Lord! Such goodness!... I am not worthy!... I do not deserve this!” he kept saying in a protracted voice.

The tears were now pouring from his inexplicably strengthened eyes. Varrus carefully took him back to the blood-stained bed.

Lying down again, the old man fell silent. However, in the rays of moonlight that illuminated the cabin, the young patrician saw the throes of death in his eyes, wreathed with an elusive brilliance that seemed to be gazing at festive landscapes in holy wonder.

Holding his hands, he noticed that the dying man was squeezing his in farewell.

The blood seemed to have been restrained by the mental strength of the dying man, who wanted to fulfill his final duties. But when peace finally appeared on his wrinkled, noble face, the blood flowed abundantly from his open wound, soaking the linen shroud.

The young man noticed that the apostle’s wearied heart was coming to a stop, like a machine acting without violence. His breath vanished like that of a

bird asleep in death. His body grew stiff.

Varrus knew it was the end.

Feeling whipped by boundless grief, he embraced the corpse and pleaded:

“Corvinus, my friend, my father! Do not forsake me! Wherever you are, guard my steps. Do not let me fall into temptation. Strengthen my weak resolve! Give me faith, patience, courage...”

The young man was muffling his sobs when the door flew open noisily and Subrius came in with a torch, illuminating the grievous scene. Seeing the young man holding the dead one, he shook him forcefully and exclaimed:

“Are you crazy! What are you doing? Time is precious. Helcius will be here in a few minutes. He must not find you here. I got him drunk to save you. He cannot see the dead man’s face.”

He pushed Quintus Varrus roughly aside and wrapped the lifeless body in the large sheet, which he tied over its rigid head. Then he addressed the young man again, quietly and forcefully:

“To the left you will find a ladder waiting for you. At the foot of it there’s a boat that I prepared myself. Flee in it. The wind will take you to the coast. But listen! Look for other lands and change your name. From now on, as far as Rome and your family are concerned, you are buried under the waters.”

Varrus wanted to react and confront the situation with dignity; however, he remembered that if Corvinus had taken his place in death, he should replace him in life. Feeling in one of his hands the weight of the bag that his hero had entrusted to him, he grew still and humble, his eyes welled up with tears.

“Take the old man’s baggage with you, but leave your own documents here,” advised Flavius Subrius decidedly. “Opilius Veturius must be certain that you are gone for good.”

But as the young man was gathering the apostle’s inheritance, Helcius Lusius’s staff knocked rudely on the door.

Subrius dragged Varrus behind an onboard cabinet and opened the door.

The drunken commander entered, let loose a curt laugh when he saw the bloody load, and said:

“Very good, Subrius! Your efficiency is amazing. Everything ready?”

“Absolutely,” replied his advisor with a servile attitude.

Staggering, Helcius hit the cadaver a few times with his staff and said:

“He’s quite the scoundrel, our Opilius. This wretch Varrus could have been finished off in any alley in Rome. Why such an honor, to kill him at sea? Anyway, I understand. A decent patrician should never wound the sensibilities of a beautiful woman.”

He demanded the dead man’s documents from his advisor, and in a picturesque voice, he ordered:

“Feed him to the fish before the night is over. Tell the noble Cynthia Julia that her husband was on a mission against the Nazarene plague, but was murdered by Christian slaves on the galley.”

With a sarcastic laugh, he added:

“Veturius will have to tell her the rest.”

The commander left, and urged by Subrius, Varrus took a final look at his friend’s remains. Carrying his memories with him, he climbed down the ladder and settled into the tiny boat.

Alone in the cold, clear night, he lingered for a long time in the boat, thinking, thinking...

The whistling wind seemed to lick away his tears, prompting him to get moving; but the young man, stung by bitter uncertainty, inwardly wanted to throw himself into the sea and die as well.

However, Corvinus had marked his heart for the rest of his life. His sacrifice had given him valiant courage. He had to fight on. He no longer existed for Cynthia and his dear little son, but there was an opening in the Lyon church that it was his responsibility to fill.

Whatever the cost, he would reach Gaul with the resolution to devote himself to the grand cause.

Trusting himself to God, Varrus untied the boat, and with a pull or two on the oars, he surrendered to the wind.

Indifferent to the dangers of the journey, he felt no fear of being alone on the deep.

He was carried forcefully over the waters and at dawn he reached a wide beach.

He changed his clothes and put on Corvinus's ragged tunic. He threw his patrician garment into the sea, having decided to return to the world in the garb of another man.

He reached a seaside village, where he received some food, and then journeyed on until he reached Tarracina, a thriving resort town in Lazio.

He had no difficulty finding the home of some fellow believers. Despite the terror it spread in public life, the government of Bassianus-Caracalla left the Christians in relative peace, although strict vigilance dogged their movements.

Saying he was a messenger of the Gospel on his way to Gaul, Varrus, tired and ill, found help in the home of Dacius Acursius, a pious man who kept an inn for the indigent.

Cared for by anonymous friends, he was delirious for three days and nights with a high fever; nevertheless, his robust youth conquered the malady that had suddenly overcome him.

Because he could say nothing about himself at first, and because he was carrying messages from the Christians in Rome to their brothers and sisters in Lyon, where the bearer was known as "brother Corvinus," he came to be called by that name among his new friends.

Animated with transcendent inspiration, he taught the Good News, preaching in tears. The community of Tarracina was touched to the core, and even though they wanted to keep him there, they helped him with his trip to Gaul, where the young man arrived after numerous difficulties and enormous hardships.

When his stay in Massilia¹¹ ended, he finally arrived in the city of his destination.

Due to its strategic geographical position, Lyon had become the significant political and administrative center of the Gallic world ever since its occupation by the proconsul Munatius Plancus. Several important roads converged there, and thus it became an almost mandatory residence of numerous leading representatives of the Roman nobility.

Vipsanius Agrippa, the son-in-law of Octavian, had strengthened its privileged situation by expanding the channels of communication. Courtiers at Claudius's court had built magnificent palaces there. The sciences and arts, commerce and industry flourished with immense vitality. Within its walls, the major assemblies of the Concilium Galliarum met annually next to the famous altar to Rome and Augustus, where each city of the three Gauls had a representative.

The festivities of the first day of August, held in memory of the great Emperor Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus, were celebrated with solemn ceremonies. Numerous ambassadors and thousands of foreigners congregated there in dazzling ceremonies in which they renewed their oath of allegiance to the gods and the authorities with joyful demonstrations.

The city, which had been the metropolis of the Segusians in former times, had existed under the most refined Latin tastes ever since the imperial occupation. Situated at the confluence of the Rhone and Saone, it offered residents the most comfortable conditions. Under patrician influence, it boasted well-tended streets and parks, temples and monuments of great beauty, theaters and resorts, as well as superb villas that stood out from ordinary housing like small, charming palaces framed in gardens and vineyards, where magistrates and warriors, artists and wealthy free slaves isolated themselves from the capital of the world to enjoy life.

At the time of Bassianus-Caracalla, when it had served as his cradle, Lyon had attained immense splendor.

The new Caesar had granted it special graces several times.

The court often got together there for games and celebrations.

However, despite the protection that the emperor gave to his hometown, in the year 217 the city still held painful and vivid memories of the massacre of 202, ordered by Septimus Severus. Years after the triumph over General Decius Clodius Septimus Albinus, the elect of the legions of Britain, who died in 197, the conqueror of Pescennius Niger issued an edict of persecution instigated by his advisors. After taking possession of the property of all citizens opposed to the prevailing policies, unscrupulous officials carried out a horrible carnage of Christians inside the city of Lyon and in the surrounding towns.

Thousands of Christ's followers had been tortured and put to death.

The persecution continued for several days, with mass murders.

Poles of martyrdom, spectacles involving wild beast, crosses, axes, bonfires, stonings, whippings and stabbings, not to mention scenes of savagery against defenseless women and children, were implemented by the unconscionable troops.

During the killing, Irenaeus, the great bishop and guide of the city's evangelical community, was tortured with all the refinement of perverse violence, until his last breath. Born in Asia Minor, he had been a student of Polycarp, the selfless and most revered priest of Smyrna, who in turn had received the faith through the Apostle John the Evangelist.

Because of this, the church of Lyon felt it was the depository of the liveliest traditions of the Gospel. It possessed relics of the son of Zebedee and other figures of early Christianity, which strengthened the spirit of its faith. In its circle of profound spiritual enlightenment, the pious spirit of the Jerusalem community was thought to be nearly intact.

Whereas Rome had been initiated in baptisms of blood during the time of Nero, the Lyon community had begun its evangelization work in relative peace.

Emissaries from Palestine, Phrygia, Syria, Egypt and Achaia visited it incessantly.

Epistles from Asia brightened its path.

Thus, it was the center for ongoing theological studies in the area of interpretation.

Irenaeus had devoted himself to detailed commentaries on the Scriptures. He handled both Greek and Latin with great mastery and wrote significant works refuting the opponents of the Good News, preserving the apostolic traditions and guiding the various services of Christian edification.

But the community was not known just for its intellectual achievements.

Making the shrine dedicated to St. John the center of its general work, the church excelled in relief to the poor.

It would be hard, centuries later, for anyone to fully grasp the sublimity of primitive Christianity.

Experienced with suffering, the early Christians loved their brothers and sisters in the faith according to the standards of the Lord.

Everywhere, the evangelical organization prayed to serve and give instead of praying to be served and to take.

Christians were known by their capacity for personal sacrifice for the sake of all, for their good will, sincere humility, cooperation and fraternal care, and for their diligence in perfecting themselves.

They loved each other and spread the rays of their loving self-denial over all the centers of human struggle, never betraying their calling to help without reward, even in the face of the most obdurate tormenters.

Instead of stirring up discord and rebellion among their companions yoked to slavery, they used dignified work as the best way to support their freedom.

They were able to overcome the temptation of selfishness in order to shelter survivors of the persecutions under their own roofs.

Afire with faith in the immortality of the soul, they did not fear death. Their martyred comrades, who left behind the families they were meant to protect and educate, departed like soldiers of Jesus.

The community of Lyons kept under its custody of love hundreds of the old, the sick, the disabled, women, young people and children.

Thus, the church of St. John was, above all, a school of faith and solidarity that reached out with various means of providing relief.

Worship brought followers together for group prayer and the extension of the apostolic practices, but fraternal homes multiplied as necessary for the spiritual work under construction.

Many homes took the guardianship of orphans and the care for the sick upon themselves; still, the number of needy was invariably huge.

The city had always been a gathering place for foreigners. The persecuted from different places knocked on the doors of the church, begging for help and asylum.

The authority of the faith, expressed in the older and more experienced brothers and sisters, appointed deacons to various sectors of action.

The assistance and children's education services, comfort to abandoned elderly people, support for the sick, and the healing of the insane were handed over to specialized departments. In this way, they expanded the primitive apostolic organization of Jerusalem into broader coverage, where Christ's

loving work with the lame and the blind, the lepers and the possessed, had the best continuity.

All the brothers and sisters shared the institution's efforts between the professional work that was their duty to their families and the evangelical activities that determined their obligation as disciples of the Good News for humanity.

In a twilight of harmonious beauty, Quintus Varrus, now "brother Corvinus," arrived at the small, plain room set aside for the preaching at St. John's church, where, according to what he had been told, he would meet Horatius Niger.

In a corner of the sanctuary, an old man with a long grey beard and a wrinkled, noble-looking face was listening to a young woman with a sorrowful demeanor.

He stood up respectfully to welcome the newcomer, had him sit beside him on the stone bench, and continued to talk to the lady in a fatherly tone.

It was a humble widow who had come from Valencia begging for help. She had lost her husband in the massacre of 202. Since then, she had been living with her father and an uncle in the aforementioned city, but unfortunately she had fallen on extremely hard times. Because she had denied the whims of an influential soldier, she saw the two family members she lived with murdered on a night of agonizing trials.

Wanting to defend herself, but completely without means, she had run away in search of asylum.

She wept and added sadly:

"Father Horatius, please don't abandon me... I'm not afraid of dying for our divine Master, but I can't agree to handing myself over to the vices of the legionaries. For the love of Jesus, let me work in the church."

Her listener replied respectfully:

"Of course. I'm not opposed to it, but I must tell you that we don't have any paid positions."

"I'm not looking for compensation. I need protection."

"Then you can help out in the infirm elderly people's shed. You may have lost your father and uncle, but you'll find many other kin among those whom Christ asks for your watch-care."

The humble woman smiled peacefully and left.

Now it was the Roman pilgrim's turn for an audience with the old man.

Humble and trusting, Varrus told him about everything that had happened to Appius Corvinus and himself since his first encounter with the unforgettable friend that had been stabbed to death at sea.

Horatius listened to his story calmly and politely with no alarm at this unfortunate news.

He seemed toughened by greater afflictions. Even so, when the young man finished his confession, he spoke of his deceased friend in an emotional tone:

“Dearest Corvinus! May he be happy among the glorified servants. He was faithful to the end.”

Wiping his moist eyes, he said:

“He will be with us in spirit. Death does not separate us from each other in the Lord's work.”

Then, he alluded to his vanished friend with great tenderness. Appius Corvinus had taken upon himself the task of providing for the needs of the children cared for by the church. To this end, he worked in agriculture and gardening, and he traveled frequently to collect funds.

After 177 he spent a long time in Egypt, where he had amassed valuable experiences.

The children had loved him.

Old age had not robbed him of his enthusiasm for the work. He tilled the soil with a cheerful group of young men, and taught them invaluable knowledge.

He showed his concern at how they would miss his presence, but in view of Varrus's offering to replace him whenever he could, Horatius became intensely happy and said:

“Oh, good! Here, in most cases, those who serve the church work in accordance with their spiritual problems. Constant persecution provokes various kinds of struggle and suffering among us. I know you bring a father's heart tormented with longing. You will work with the children. We have over thirty orphans. I'll talk with the elders.”

And in a quieter voice, he urged him to forget the person of Quintus Varrus forever. He would introduce him to everyone as brother Corvinus, successor of his venerable comrade who had been called to the kingdom of God. And he assured him that so many clouds of pain weighed on the Christian soul, forming sad dramas unfolding in the darkness, that no one would be curious enough to question him.

The loving welcome was warming the weary traveler's heart, when two little children, three and five years old, respectively, came into the sanctuary.

The older one turned to the old man with questioning eyes and asked:

“Father Horatius, is it true that grandpa Corvinus has come back?”

The patriarch stroked his curly hair and said:

“No, son. Our old friend has gone to heaven, but he has sent us this brother to take his place.”

He stood up, hugged the children, and set them on the newcomer's lap, saying kindly:

“Now, my children! Give our blessed friend a hug. He has come from far away.”

The children, with the innocent sweetness of childhood, wrapped their arms around the messenger.

The young patrician held them to his heart for a long while; however, only the old Niger could see the tears filling his eyes.

Quintus Varrus was no more.

The years would unfold before him and the new Corvinus's ministry was just beginning.

⁹ Acts 3:6 – Emmanuel.

¹⁰ The dying man was receiving a spiritual visit from some of the Christian martyrs from Lyon, who had been put to death in the year 177. – Emmanuel.

¹¹ Today Marseille. - Emmanuel.

4

A Woman's Adventure

The year 233 was quickly unfolding in our characters' drama.

In Rome, the Veturius family, surrounded by privileges and slaves, was enjoying all the favors of wealth.

Opilius, in his well-fed maturity, seemed happy finding himself in the spotlight of his wife and children's well-being; but Cynthia, who had married him after Varrus's supposed death at sea, had changed considerably. She was more reserved and avoided the party life. She did not willingly leave the house except to perform her religious vows in praise of her guardian numens, to whom she offered her devotion. She had grown to love Helen and Galba, Heliadora's offspring, with the same tenderness she devoted to Tacianus, and she received an equal show of respect and love from all three of them.

Such behavior from his dear companion crystallized Veturius's love and veneration for her. He watched for her slightest desires to fulfill them like a faithful servant. He never left the city without her and he never committed himself to any of his practical male achievements without her approval of his plans. And although he was a Roman of his times with all the hidden misdeeds normal for a society in decline, he was a loyal friend to Cynthia, seeking to understand her and helping her with every thought.

Among the children, however, the situation was different.

Helen was a seventeen-year-old of Grecian beauty. She excelled in the pleasures of social life and habitually indulged in amusements and distractions with no inclination toward the virtues of the home. Tacianus, on the other hand, dedicated himself to studying and was fascinated by the patrician traditions. He was nearly always immersed in philosophy and history. Galba detested any type of spiritual environment and made no secret of his close friendship with ill-bred tribunes and mindless procurers. He could

not stand his brother's intellectual superiority. Turbulent and quarrelsome, he became angry over trifles and lost nights of sleep in the company of unworthy people, despite his parents' efforts to guide him to respectability.

Tacianus took substantial advantage of the opportunities that life offered him.

Although still a youth, he had experienced some of the most worthwhile travels. He was acquainted with vast regions of Italy and Africa, besides more than a few places in Achaëa. He spoke Greek with the same fluency that he spoke his native tongue, and he devoted himself to books with the hunger for illumination that marks men who are inclined toward wisdom.

He especially related to matters of religious faith with a deep and ardent fervor.

He admitted no restrictions on the Olympian gods. For him, the family divinities were the only intelligences able to guarantee human happiness. He was extremely fond of the cult of Cybele, the *Magna Mater*, and continually visited the temple of the goddess on Palatine Hill, where he would rest and meditate for hours, seeking inspiration. He believed that Jupiter Maximus was the invisible guide of all imperial victories, and although he was still young, he stuck to his own ideas about it and always said that the Romans should be compelled either to offer sacrifices to Jupiter or die.

Therefore, despite the mental gifts that adorned his personality, he could not attune himself to the principles of Christianity.

When he superficially examined the Gospel in conversations with Veturius or with young men his age, it seemed to him an incomprehensible jumble of teachings that would darken the world if it were ever to take over the realm of philosophy and religion.

He would ask himself why so many men and women went to their deaths, as if life were not a gift from the gods worthy of spreading happiness among mortals. He compared Apollo, the inspirer of fertility and beauty, with Jesus Christ the crucified, avowing that the Christian movement was simply a collective madness that governmental power was supposed to restrain.

How could a patrician, he wondered, love a slave as himself? Was it right to forgive one's enemies and completely forget about the offense? Was it advisable to give without expecting anything in return? How could one reconcile overall fraternity with the defense of the elite? Could a Roman

magistrate actually rub shoulders with an illiterate African and think of him as a brother? How could one ask heaven to bless one's enemies? How could one accept a plan of goodness for everyone when the wicked were multiplying everywhere and required the restraints of justice? Wasn't nature itself a never-ending battlefield where sheep were sheep and wolves were wolves? How could one expect social and political victories under the guidance of a savior who had died on a cross? The destiny of the fatherland was presided over by guardian geniuses, who granted them the purple of power. Why disdain them in exchange for crazy people who died miserably in the prisons and circuses?

On many occasions, while Cynthia was admiring her son's brilliant conversation, Veturius pondered the differences that separated the two boys, who had been raised according the same principles but were so morally different from each other, and he lamented the inferior condition of Galba, the son of his hopes.

On a hot day at dusk, we find our acquaintances on a large terrace in a cordial get-together.

Cynthia is silently knitting a delicate woolen piece, not far from Helen, who has been joined by Anacleta, the governess Opilius had chosen for her from among his first wife's family ties.

Slightly older than Heliodora's daughter, Anacleta had been born in Cyprus, and at the request of her mother before she died, she had been sent to Rome at an early age to live under Veturius's care. An orphan, the girl had grown up under Cynthia's care and was company for her stepdaughter, who was affectionately devoted to her.

Compliant and kind, Anacleta knew how to cover up all of Helen's defects, which made her not only a loyal servant but also a loving refuge in every situation.

As the two girls chat somewhat nervously near Cynthia, who seems interested only in her knitting, in another corner Veturius and the boys are conversing animatedly.

They are talking about social problems, with Tacianus's visibly enthusiastic and Galba obviously reserved.

"I agree that the struggle that started more than a hundred years ago," remarked Opilius, "will end in the victory of the patricians, of course. I have

confidence in Alexander. He is recognized as the prototype of prudence and justice.”

“Well, even so,” noted Tacianus, moved by youthful indignation, “the emperor’s family is infested with Nazarene women. On his mother’s side he’s surrounded by demented women who are not ashamed to receive religious instruction from Asian vagabonds. The death of Ulpianus without any disciplinary action reveals the emperor’s character. He is weak and indecisive. He may be a model of individual virtues, but he shows no aptitude for leading our political life.”

He smiled somewhat sarcastically and said:

“If the mind is weak, a strong body is useless.”

“You’re probably right,” replied Opilius good-humoredly, “but you’ll have to agree that the government isn’t asleep. We haven’t held punitive spectacles in a while, but methodical persecution is being carried out in a legal manner. The death of Callixtus,¹² for example...”

“Who was Callixtus but an outlaw slave?”

“True,” Veturius agreed. “We can’t compare a servant of Carpophorus to the magistrates of the empire.”

“The loss of Ulpianus is irreparable...”

“But what do other people’s lives have to do with us?” Galba interrupted, annoyed. “I’ll never have a problem choosing between a glass of wine and a philosophical discussion. What good is it for us to know whether Olympus is full of deities or if some madman died on a cross two hundred years ago?”

“Don’t talk like that, son!” said Veturius, concerned. “We mustn’t neglect the destinies of our people or the homeland where we were born.”

The boy laughed insolently, and tapping Tacianus on the shoulder, he asked:

“What would you do, brother, if the emperor’s crown came looking for your head?”

The boy caught his brother’s sarcasm, but replied firmly:

“If I were entrusted with any administrative task, I would not only exterminate Christianity by wiping out all of its followers, but I’d also destroy

all the dissolute and depraved citizens that our traditions are embarrassed by.”

Galba turned red and tried to catch his father’s eye, wanting him to admonish Tacianus, but when he saw Opilius’s silent rebuke, he made a few disrespectful remarks and walked away.

By this time, Helen and Anacleta were heading toward the garden with somber faces.

Noticing that Helen was wiping away her tears, Tacianus forgot about the social problems that were consuming his thought and asked his adoptive father why there had been such a change in his sister, who was usually so carefree. He was then told that the young man Emilianus Secundinus, whom the girl had approached with great hopes of a romantic bond, had been murdered in Nicomedia, according to news that had arrived by courier some hours earlier.

Tacianus was deeply moved.

He had known the young man and had admired his intelligence.

Availing himself of this opportunity to touch on a difficult subject, Veturius said to his stepson in a low, emotional voice:

“My son, the years teach us, little by little, the need to reflect. I would like to see Galba as a sure successor for my work; however, you know that so far your brother has not come to grips with this responsibility. Despite his inexperienced youth, he is a gambler and an obstinate quarreler. I have gone over our family’s problems with your mother and I have accepted the fact that we need you to help us out in Gaul, where we have numerous important properties. We had an invaluable friend in Vienna, Lampridius Trebonianus, but he died some time ago. Alesius and Pontimiana, our faithful servants in Lyon, are old and tired. They ask for you all the time and hope you will go there so you can be my legal representative.”

Opilius paused momentarily to see the effect of his words, and asked:

“Would you agree to take on the preservation of our provincial heritage? In my opinion, our residence in Lyon is even more comfortable than our home in Rome, and the city enjoys the esteem of the families that most represent our nobility. I am convinced that you will establish valuable relationships and find the work to be very stimulating. Our lands produce regularly, so we mustn’t relegate them to abandonment.”

The young man seemed pleased and remarked:

“My mother has spoken to me about the move several times. I’m ready and willing. You are my father.”

Veturius smiled, comforted, and added:

“But that’s not all.”

And, insistently fixing his eyes on Tacianus, he asked:

“Have you ever thought of getting married?”

The boy laughed sheepishly and said:

“Of course, but the books haven’t yet allowed me to go off on any mental tangent on the subject. It’s hard to get away from my intimacy with Minerva to hear anything Aphrodite might have to say.”

His stepfather found that amusing, and continued:

“For all of us, however, the moment of inner maturity invariably arrives to lead us to the haven of the home.”

After a long pause that suggested the sensitive issue his words would raise, he continued:

“Faced with the news of Emilianus’s untimely death, Cynthia is naturally distressed by Helen’s grief, and being the devoted mother she is, she urged me to allow Helen to take a trip to Salamis, where Anacleta has several relatives. Apollodorus, her uncle, is leaving from Cyprus in two weeks, and I intend to send the girls to him for an excursion that, in our view, will be extremely advantageous for them. Helen would rest for a few months from the hubbub of Rome, and recuperate so she can embrace more serious duties. As a parent interested in the security of the future, I’ve been thinking...”

Given Tacianus’s silence, Opilius finished revealing the plan that was occupying his mind:

“I confess that I’ve been nurturing the hope that your marriage to her would become a reality. I don’t wish to impose my desires on you two. I know that the spousal bond must comply with the affinities of your sentiments above all, and I realize that money doesn’t bring the happiness of love. However, our peace would be complete if we could keep our financial and territorial prospects as solid tomorrow as they are today. I can’t expect

Galba to understand our concerns about the future. He is wasteful and undisciplined, and everything is telling us that he will be a hard load to bear.”

Veturius’s remarks were spoken in a tone so particularly touching that the young man felt an irrepressible emotion weighing on his heart. He squeezed his stepfather’s hands tenderly, and said:

“Father, your wish is my command. I’ll move to Lyon when it pleases you, and as for the future, the gods will decide.”

Their warm, intimate conversation continued and revealed the spiritual self-assurance of Quintus Varrus’s son. But in the lovely arbor of the flowered courtyard, Heliadora’s daughter’s mood was otherwise.

Embraced by her governess, Helen wept in frustration and cried out in despair:

“Anacleta, could there be any misfortune greater than mine? Disaster is ruining my life! Emilianus promised to speak to my father as soon as he came back from Bithynia... But now? What’s to become of me? We were engaged for more than three months... You know our secret union should have been consecrated by marriage... O immortal gods, have pity on my bitter fate!”

The Cypriot girl caressed her beautiful hair, adorned with a golden net, and said maternally:

“Now calm down! Courage is an important quality for difficult times. All’s not lost. We’ve already come to an understanding with your mother about your need for medication and rest. Uncle Apollodorus is traveling to the island. We can get permission from your father to go with him. There, everything will be much easier. We’ll wait in relative rest to see what the gods have in store for us. I have good friends in my homeland. Faithful slaves will help us in secret... Don’t worry.”

But the young woman, willful and rebellious, objected nervously:

“How can I stand to wait for so many months? I’ll agree on the trip as a last resort... Emilianus couldn’t die...”

“So, what are you saying?” Anacleta asked anxiously.

“Let’s go see Orosius... He must know of some remedy that will set me free...”

“The sorcerer?”

“Yes, him. I can’t become a mother and create a public scandal. My father would never forgive me.”

The governess understood her inner struggle and tried to pacify her burdened soul.

The girl, however, blaming herself in tears, retired to her private quarters only much later on, and was unable to fall into blessed sleep.

She was troubled, and sighed and wept the whole night long.

Although she was reluctant to do so, the next morning Anacleta went with her to the home of Orosius, an old, vile-looking man who kept himself hidden in a miserable hovel in the Velabrum.

Among piles of roots and various pots overflowing with unpleasant smelling infusions, Orosius welcomed his guests with an attempted smile.

Helen was hiding under an assumed name. She tried to explain the reason that had brought her.

This was not the first time she had come to him, she explained politely. On another occasion she had asked for his help for a certain defenseless friend. The results were satisfactory and now she here on her own behalf. She was feeling ill, helpless and distressed. She wanted a consultation with the supernatural powers.

The sorcerer carefully took the coins the girl offered as an advance payment and sat down in front of a tripod, upon which a symbolic shell was sending out aromatic spirals of incense.

Orosius repeated formulas in a tongue that was unknown to them. Then he stretched out his bare arms toward the tripod, and with all his members rigid, he closed his eyes and exclaimed:

“Yes!... I see a man rising from the abyss!... Ah! He was murdered!... He has a large wound in his chest!... He is asking for forgiveness for the evil he did to you, but says he has been linked to your destiny as a woman for many years... He is weeping! How bitter is the pain that is bursting into tears! What copious tears are tying this soul to the clay of the earth! He is speaking of someone who will be born... He is reaching out his arms and begging for help for a child...”

After a slight pause, the old man asked in trance:

“Ah yes! So young and you will be a mother? For all the blessings that descend from the gods, he is begging on his knees that you will spare him one more pain... Do not get rid of the little angel that is to take on a new garment of flesh!”

At this point in his strange revelation, Orosius was overcome with a tremendous pallor.

The sweat poured down his face.

He seemed to be listening closely to the ghost, whose presence Helen and Anacleta sensed, terrified.

After a few moments of agonizing expectation, the sorcerer spoke again and prophesied:

“Madam, do not refuse motherhood!... No one can escape heaven’s designs with impunity! The child will be your protection and comfort, readjustment and support... But if you consummate your intention to get rid of it...”

Orosius’s voice was raspy and cavernous, as if he were being directly influenced by the entity assisting him.

He stood up, propelled by a mysterious impulse, and turning to Veturius’s daughter he said:

“... then you shall die in a pool of blood, overcome by the power of darkness!”

Helen threw herself into Anacleta’s arms, sobbing wildly.

She knew that the spirit of Emilianus had intervened to awaken her conscience to her maternal responsibility, and because she felt unable to remain in contact with this unexpected manifestation, she cried out to her companion:

“No more of this! Get me out of here! I want to travel, to forget...”

Orosius had fallen back into his torpor and seemed to be extremely interested in his dialog with the invisible, but both of the girls were terrified. Leaning on each other, they left hurriedly to find the vehicle that was waiting for them a little way off.

Instead of finding a remedy to rid her of her commitment, Helen was overcome with greater affliction.

Her melancholy around the house was so intense that her concerned father began to organize the itinerary for her voyage.

Apollodorus, their Cypriot friend, was called to have a talk with the family.

After they had given him an appropriate sum, Veturius and Cynthia entrusted the girls to him for the long trip.

Even though their major personal expenses were ensured, the girls started on their journey unhappily. A profound sadness was etched on their faces.

Absorbed in gazing at the calm waters of the Mediterranean, they frequently found themselves in conversation about the future.

Helen often wandered around in silence, wondering to herself: Was it right to believe what she had heard? Orosius was a sorcerer. The miraculous power he displayed to impress her surely came from the influence of infernal beings, or who knows what? Perhaps the vision of Emilianus was nothing more than simple dementia. She was young and at the start of her life. She felt it was best to choose her own path... Wouldn't it be more advisable to relieve herself of the obligation of this dismal burden? What right did her lover's soul have to come back from the grave to impose such a heavy duty on her?

Amidst such constant musings, she arrived at the island, lovingly assisted by Anacleta and her elderly uncle.

Salamis, the ancient capital, was once beautiful and prosperous, but had been destroyed by a tremendous Jewish uprising during Trajan's rule.

The exodus of the population was slow but continuous. Several small villages and farms had sprung up on the outskirts of the declining city.

Apollodorus had built his home in one of these little towns.

Welcomed with obvious displays of respect and esteem, Helen, supported as always by Anacleta, received the services of an elderly Nubian slave, Balbina, to whom she promised freedom and the return to her homeland as soon as she no longer needed health care. And against all the loving protests of her host, she rented a comfortable villa in the countryside, claiming she needed fresh air and complete rest.

Day after day went by.

Helen was finally overcome with boredom and desperation, so she decided to find a way out.

She subtly managed to draw some information out of Balbina about some herbs she planned to use.

The knowledgeable servant did not realize her intentions and told her everything she knew. Helen herself, without saying anything to her governess, prepared the beverage one night and retired to her bed to drink it before she went to sleep.

She placed the glass on a table within her reach and tried to reflect for a few moments. She immersed herself in deep musing, and when she forced herself mentally to take the silver cup and drink its contents, she felt enveloped in a strange lethargy. Although she was conscious, but as if dreaming while still awake, she saw Emilianus looking pale and downcast next to her.

He placed his right hand over his chest wound, as in Orosius's vision, and addressing her, he said sadly:

“Helen, forgive me and have mercy on me! My violent separation from my body was a terrible ordeal. Do not blame me! I would give anything to have stayed and married you, but what can we do when the heavens have uttered themselves against our wishes? Can you imagine the suffering of a man beyond the grave without any means to protect the woman he loves?”

The girl, temporarily disconnected from her physical body, listened in terror... If she could, she would have fled immediately. Emilianus was a mere shadow of the enviable athlete she had known. He resembled a ghost whom the Fates had clothed in pain. Only his lively, fascinating eyes were the same. She tried to retreat and hide but she felt weighted to the floor and imprisoned by imponderable ties to her revived lover.

Showing his intention to reassure her, the recent discarnate approached her more lovingly and said:

“Do not be afraid. Death is an illusion. One day you will be here too, like all mortals... I know how stormy the horizon seems to you. You are just a very young woman but have been overcome by the anguishing problems of the heart... Even so, it is always worthwhile to know the truth early on.”

In her heart, the young woman wanted to know why he had come back from the world of darkness to afflict her.

Did she not already have enough to torment her?

And thinking that her lover had been exonerated of all his moral duties, she pondered in her innermost conscience: Why would Emilianus insist on following me when he's free? Hadn't he been taken from the earth to a dwelling of peace?

Showing that he perceived her unspoken words, the unexpected visitor replied:

“You mustn't believe the tomb is a direct gateway to the home of the gods... We live far from the light if we do not think of kindling it in our own hearts. Beyond the flesh, where our souls are shaken, we are confronted with ourselves. The thoughts we nurture are obscure webs that bind us either to the darkness or the paths of sublime splendor that propel us forward... Those we leave behind either slow our steps or help us advance, depending on the sentiments our memory inspires in them. Do not think there is impunity in the courts of divine justice! We invariably receive according to our deeds.”

At this point in the unusual dialog, Helen recalled more vividly the enigma that was tearing her apart.

Had Secundinus returned from the grave to remind her of the obligations she wanted to avoid?

A sudden affliction loomed in her restless soul.

How could she lighten the burden of her anguish?

She found herself between the spirit of Emilianus, who kept reminding her of a happiness that would no longer smile on her as long as she was on earth, and the presence of an intrusive child threatening her existence.

Deep down she wanted to be a mother and develop in her heart the potential for love that was bursting within her – but not under these circumstances.

She had never felt such moral flagellation.

Ardent tears stung her eyes.

She knelt down in despair and cried out:

“How can you ask me for compassion if I'm even unhappier than you are? Can you possibly understand the torment of a woman shackled by commitments that will tarnish her personal dignity? Do you know what it

means to wait for a shameful event, without the arms that promised love and security? Ah! The dead cannot fathom the misfortune of the living, because if they could, you would take me as well... The life of beings in hell must be more benign than living with cruel men!”

The disfigured messenger stroked her silky hair and said:

“Do not blaspheme! I have come to ask you to be brave... Do not despise the crown of motherhood. If you accept this difficult trial in submission to the divine plan, we will not be separated. Together in spirit, we will continue searching for immortal joy... Endure calmly the blows of fate that sting us today. Do not scorn the fruit of our love... Sometimes, in the tender arms of a child, we find the strength that regenerates and saves us... So do not refuse heaven’s decisions! Keep the flower that is blooming between us with you. The scent of its petals will nourish our communion... And one day we will be together again in the spheres of beauty and light!”

The young woman tried to prolong the conversation of that unforgettable hour, but perhaps because her sensitivity was becoming unbalanced, the figure of Emilianus seemed to be merging into a white mist, moving away... away...

She called to him loudly, but in vain.

She woke up thrashing in her bed, screaming wildly:

“Emilianus!... Emilianus!”

One of her flailing arms unintentionally toppled the glass beside her, spilling its contents.

The criminal potion was lost.

Helen wiped away her copious tears, and because she could no longer fall asleep, she got up and sought the fresh air of dawn on a nearby terrace.

The vision of the starry firmament seemed to ease her inner torment and the velvety breezes from the ocean dried her moist eyes, calming her heart.

More self-contained and melancholy, she waited in resignation for time to do its work.

Anacleta, loyal and kindly, learned indirectly from repeated and supposedly casual conversations with Balbina, all the essential information she needed to assist her, and after long weeks of remaining in bed, Helen gave birth to a baby girl.

Assisted only by Anacleta, who tended to her like a mother, Helen looked at the baby with an uncontrollable conflict in her heart.

She did not know if she hated her intensely or loved her dearly.

The servant called her attention to the coincidence that the little one had inherited a certain trait from her mother — a large birthmark on her left shoulder.

Dressing her carefully, she said:

“This mark will make her recognizable everywhere she goes.”

Although she was tired, Helen said resolutely:

“I’m not planning on finding her again.”

“Nevertheless,” her friend conjectured, “time rolls on, and perhaps someday you’ll be brought together again. It pains me to think that we’ll be separated from a little doll like this. Isn’t there a way...”

But Helen cut her off firmly:

“She has to go away. She is a daughter I didn’t ask for and didn’t expect.”

Anacleta was disappointed and nestled her against her heart, wrapped in woolen blankets, and then showed her to her distressed mother and said:

“She’s yours. Give her some memento. The poor little bird! How will she get along in the storms of life?”

The young woman, strangely overcome with contradictory thoughts, stifled the tears in her eyes. From a bureau next to her, she took a beautiful cameo that had an image of Cybele admirably carved in ivory, and placed it on the baby girl.

Then she ordered:

“Anacleta, get her ready. You are to leave her in a large basket under some tree in the countryside. Do not leave her at anyone’s door. I do not want any links with the past. I consider it dead and gone from this moment on.”

“Helen!” sighed the girl, with the obvious intention of giving her some advice.

“Don’t argue. By daylight, I’ll have a new destiny. Say no more about it. I’ll be sure to reward you. Take what you want from me.”

Anacleta still tried to insist, but Helen said without hesitation:

“Don’t argue. The gods will decide.”

Anacleta obeyed, mumbling, and wrapping herself warmly, she left with her small burden.

Day was about to dawn.

The sun would soon make its appearance on the horizon.

Anacleta was tempted to leave the child at the threshold of some estate where she could watch her grow, unseen; however, although she did not agree with Helen’s attitude, she knew her situation was one of subservience. She depended on Opilius’s house and most especially on the Veturius girl. To watch the child, even from afar, would bring affliction down on her own head. She did not want to give up her social standing in Cynthia’s house. She was much too happy to easily let go of the advantages that surrounded her life. But the pain of abandoning the little one completely to her own fate was breaking her heart. Could it be right to hand over a human being in that way to a den of beasts? What destiny could the little innocent one hope for out there in the underbrush?

She looked at the tiny face, barely covered by the blanket around her, and her compassion became even more intense when she realized that the little one was letting herself be taken away without even crying.

A cool wind was blowing like a caress from heaven.

The brave governess had walked about two miles toward a small nearby village.

She could not go much farther for risk of being caught. But how could she abandon the child to the vagaries of the heath? She just could not accept the idea of being responsible for such cruelty. She would stay with her in some corner of the road until she felt it was safe. And in prayer, she beseeched the numens of her faith to send someone whose presence would calm her.

Worried, she waited.

And when the brightness of day began to spread out through the sheets of fog, she noticed that a man, who seemed to be doing his morning meditations in the fields, was approaching from far off, walking slowly...

The girl hid herself quickly, and the child, perhaps sensing the approach of a helping hand, began to wail.

The man quickened his pace, went over to her, and kneeling next to the basket, he cried:

“Great Serapis! What is this? An angel, O gods! An angel who has no one!”

He leaned over carefully and patted the little bare head; then lifting his eyes to the heavens, he exclaimed:

“Divine Zeus! Fifteen years ago you took Livia, my only daughter and my comfort in my widowhood, to the glory of thy bosom! Today, knowing that I’m a pilgrim with no support, you are giving her back to me! May you be praised! From now on, I will not be alone anymore.”

With great tenderness, he lifted the little girl from her makeshift cradle, held her against his heart under the folds of his warm cape and turned back to the path from which he had come.

The first golden rays of the morning unveiled the landscape, and it seemed that heaven was reaffirming its protection to the earth. The birds began to sing sweetly, as if they were thanking divine providence for the happiness of a lost child that had found the blessing of a home.

¹² Reference to Pope Callixtus. – Emmanuel

5

Reunion

At the end of 233, a small group of friends had gathered in a plain room at St. John's church in Lyon to discuss some urgent matters related to the work of the Gospel.

Three elderly men, and another in full adulthood, were discussing the needs of the Christian movement.

The Empire was being ravaged by a plague that had come from the Orient, claiming countless victims.

The situation was the most serious in Rome.

The epidemic had invaded Gaul, and the Christian community in Lyon was mobilizing all its resources to alleviate the problems of the people.

The youngest member of the group was Brother Corvinus, who advocated the cause of the abandoned and unfortunate sick.

“If we neglect our neighbor,” he commented, ablaze with confidence, “how can we meet our mandate to be charitable? Christianity means the spirit of Christ living within us. We see in our study of the apostolic narratives that, in the Lord's company, the legions of Heaven take possession of the earth and turn men and women into instruments of Infinite Goodness. From Jesus' first contact with humanity, we see the manifestation of the spirit world, which seeks in individuals living points of support for the work of regeneration. Zacharias is approached by the angel Gabriel, who tells him of the coming of John the Baptist. Holy Mary is visited by the same angel, who heralds the coming of the Savior. A celestial messenger comes to Joseph of Galilee in a dream to reassure him about the birth of the Redeemer. And when the divine Master appears among the people, he does not limit himself merely to fulfilling the old law and repeating its precepts with his lips. He goes beyond himself and joins people's suffering. He cleanses lepers along the road. He

extends a friendly hand to the lame and lifts them up. He restores sight to the blind. He raises Lazarus from the tomb. He heals the sick. He reintegrates women who have strayed from their personal dignity. He inspires people with new principles of fraternity and forgiveness. And even when he is on the cross, he speaks lovingly with the two criminals, seeking to direct their souls higher. And after him, selfless apostles have continued his glorious task of uplifting human beings and his ministry of enlightening souls and healing bodies, devoting themselves to the Gospel till the day they die.”

“We understand the wisdom of your comment,” said the presbyter Gallianus, an elderly Gaul who had spent a long time in Paphlagonia, “but we must escape from the attacks of the tempter. I think the time has come to think about building our retreat on our lands in Aquitaine. We cannot get to Heaven without focusing our souls on prayer.”

“But how can we help humanity simply by praying?” rejoined Corvinus, self-assured. “We have admirable friends living in the desert. They organize solitary retreats, disfigure themselves, torment themselves and believe they are helping with the work of human redemption by doing these things. But if we are to seek our own peace to serve the Creator, why would Jesus have come to share the bread of life with us? In what war would a soldier who runs away in battle be decorated? In what country would there be a valuable harvest for the farmer who does nothing but look at his land because he loves it? How can he sow if he has no contact with the soil? How can we sow the good among people without enduring the ravages of poverty and ignorance? We cannot experience salvation without being close to the one who saves those who have gone astray or are lost.”

After a spontaneous pause, Gallianus ventured:

“Your observations are more than fair, but we cannot go along with sin or allow unsuspecting souls to get near it.”

“The pagans accuse us of being thieves of happiness,” added Paphos, a deacon with a halo of white hair. “They believe that the Gospel is a cloak of sadness smothering the world.”

“And there is no lack of those who see the plague as a vengeance of the Olympic deities,” remarked Ennius Pudens, a fine fellow whose hair had gone gray with time. “Many people are crying out against us again because they believe that we are the cause of heavenly wrath. Valerianus, a friend of ours who works at the Forum, told me in private that among the requests made by

the Council¹³ at the feast of Augustus, there was an appeal for us to be persecuted again. And he said that the implementation is being delayed only because Emperor Alexander Severus isn't secure enough."

Gallianus smiled and added:

"One more reason for isolating those whose purpose is to worship God without being bothered by people..."

His taciturn remark hung in the air, but Corvinus, touched by a deep passion for the cause of the Gospel, responded decidedly:

"Venerable brothers, I agree we do not have the right to interfere in the resolve of those who seek solitude, but neither do I believe we should encourage a movement that could be classified as desertion. We are in a war of ideas. The first legionary who died for the liberation of the human spirit was the Master himself, our divine Commander. Ever since the cross of Calvary, our comrades, in a broad front of brave testimony, have been suffering the martyrdom of a living faith. For nearly two hundred years we have been fodder for beasts and the despised object of public entertainment. Men and women, old people and children have been led to the arenas and prisons, poles and bonfires, showing the heroism of our faith in a better world. It would not be right to betray their memory. The opponents of our cause think we are embittered bearers of indifference to life, but this is because they are ignorant of the lesson of the Heavenly Benefactor, who has shown us the source of true good and perfect happiness in fraternal service. And so I urge you, let's not turn away from toil and struggle. There are endeavors in the spirit realm as well as on the physical. The victory of Christianity, with the free expression of our thought, is the work that is our duty to carry forward."

There was a short pause in the conversation, which Ennius broke:

"As for service, our situation is not among the best. Many families who have foreseen persecution have been dismissing their Christian employees. Just yesterday Poponius's workshops fired ten of our brothers."

"But we have the right to ask for alms for the church and the church must support them," observed Gallianus cautiously.

Corvinus, however, responded firmly:

"Yes, we have the right to ask for alms. But beggars also have this right. It's not fitting, so it seems, to forget to provide benefits for the world. We

have land available, under the responsibility of several brothers. The plow doesn't lie. The seed responds faithfully to our efforts. We can work. We should not resort to outside help, except in special circumstances. It wouldn't be advisable for the community to be kept unproductive. Idle minds are a den of temptation. I believe in our ability to help everyone through well-directed efforts. Our daily work is our means of testifying to the performance of our duties to those who follow us closely. Unprompted work for the good is the means the Lord has placed within our reach so we can serve others and grow with them to the glory of God."

He had not quite finished when the door opened and a friend announced:

"Brother Corvinus, Sister Pontimiana is asking for you."

The presbyter asked to be excused and left.

On the access plaza to the church, which was just starting to be built, a respectable woman was waiting for him.

She was the guardian of Opilius Veturius's country villa.

Although it was against her husband's wishes, she had become a faithful friend of the church after listening to Corvinus, who had supported her spiritual renewal step by step.

Pontimiana was quite elderly, but her clear eyes were sharp and always reflected the pristine goodness of her soul.

Having been helped so often by the presbyter, she had become his invaluable sister and was sincerely devoted to him.

She smiled, greeted him and then informed him:

"Tacianus, the boy you knew in Rome, arrived today. He is now a young man. Since he is someone whose destiny has always interested you, I came to bring you the news."

The devout man's face paled.

At last he would see his beloved son again!

Nearly twenty years had gone by.

He had constantly seen him in the faces of orphans and had found his love in the hearts of the homeless who sought him out, trembling with cold. In all his prayers to the Lord, he remembered his name, deep in his soul. According to what the apostle who had consolidated his faith advised him, he

had dedicated himself to working the soil. He had left behind his nautical knowledge, renounced his vocation as a commander, softened his voice and learned to obey. Taking old Corvinus as a standard for renewal, he divided his time between the sanctuary and everyday work. He had not become famous in Lyon just for the selfless way he devoted himself to the sick, healing them and reviving them through prayer, but also for the deep-seated tenderness he showed in caring for children.

He lived in a church property with thirty boys, whom he served as a mentor and father, followed closely by the help of two elderly women.

Quintus Varrus, now a presbyter, had found spiritual nourishment for his longing soul in those little ones.

In spite of the prevailing precautions against the church, the townspeople respected him.

The poor and unfortunate offered him open gestures of love. But he was not only great in the apostolate of the faith. He had grown a good deal in humility and had become the head gardener of five patrician residences. He supervised the slaves with such mastery in soil preparation and education about plants that he had secured not only a significant salary but admiration and favor.

Veturius's country villa was one of the aristocratic dwellings he tended. He had won the trust of the stewards and the esteem of the servants. He was a worker and friend on the extensive property.

Deep down Varrus knew that this was his only means of seeing Tacianus again and reaching out his fatherly arms to him.

This is why he was so diligent in creating the garden, at the center of which stood Opilius's villa. No garden in Lyon equaled its beauty.

Alesius and Pontimiana, who sometimes visited Rome, told him that his son had a passion for red roses, and so he made large flower beds in the special shape of a heart bordered with them. In the middle, he put quaint marble benches among peaceful fountains that invited rest and meditation.

He had toiled hard for the seventeen years he had been away from his home so he would deserve the joy of that moment.

He had become more experienced, more enlightened. He had had extensive contact with the masters of thought in several languages. He had

overcome the woes of his own destiny and had sought to overcome every hardship so that he might be able to display the dignity of a man of the good to the son he had never forgotten, even if his son were never to recognize him.

How would he cope with the emotions of that moment? Would he have the strength to embrace Tacianus without disclosing who he was?

Pontimiana's voice woke him from his haunting thoughts:

"Brother Corvinus, aren't you feeling well?"

As if waking from a troubling dream, the presbyter composed himself and said kindly:

"I'm sorry, sister. I'm fine."

"It's just that I don't have much time," she said with concern. "Young Tacianus has arrived ill."

"Ill?"

"Yes, everything indicates that he has the accursed plague."

And before his painfully surprised paternal heart, she continued:

"I came here not only to tell you this but also to ask for your help."

Responding to his questions, Veturius's housekeeper explained that the young man had arrived with a high fever and frequent vomiting, and was suffering from a sore throat that made it hard for him to swallow. The slaves of his entourage added that the young man seemed very weak the whole trip, but that he had worsened only on the previous evening, just hours before reaching the city. She and her husband had handled all the arrangements. Tacianus was settled in a comfortable bedroom that had been waiting for him for some time, and a trusted physician was called. She did not know the results of his examination yet, but she had immediately decided to ask Corvinus for help because of his experience in the health-care related tasks he had undertaken for victims of the plague. She knew beforehand that the house would be quarantined and that she and her husband would have only inexperienced servants to rely on. She could not expect any help from the prestigious Romans. Most of the patricians were in far-off countryside villas for fear of contagion.

The presbyter listened with a heavy heart, longing to be near his son no matter what. But given the responsibilities that tied him to the church, he promised to visit the sick man as soon as he could free himself from his most

pressing obligations.

Indeed, at dusk he found someone at the boys' home to fill in for him, and in the evening, he went to his son's room.

Cared for by Alesius, the young man was seized by attacks of nausea. His haggard face showed how weak he was.

Although the steward introduced the religious man several times, Tacianus, delirious with fever, was oblivious.

His glazed, expressionless eyes wandered around the room.

While Corvinus stroked his perspiring head, his caregiver said:

“He became delirious two hours ago.”

After a few moments of difficult expectation, Tacianus stared at his visitor with his swollen eyes and the light in them changed. An undeniable interest was written on his face. He looked at the presbyter at length, as if he had gone mad, and then tried to push away the soft blanket, crying out:

“Who brought the news of my father's death? Where are the slaves who murdered him? The villains! They shall all die...”

The benefactor of the sick was caught off guard by this and resorted to prayer so he would not reveal himself.

Pale and half-terrified, he prayed silently while Tacianus, as if he were catching glimpses of reality in the ravings of his fever, kept shouting:

“Let's take the galley to Carthage!... I cannot turn back... I shall find out the truth for myself... There will be an investigation. I will punish the guilty. How could they overlook such a crime? Opilius told me there are many crimes committed in the shadows and the law is incapable of solving all of them... but I will be my father's avenger... Quintus Varrus will be avenged. I will not forgive anyone... I will kill all those scoundrels!”

Perhaps because he was concerned about brother Corvinus's reaction, Pontimiana's husband said to him discreetly:

“The young man is hallucinating and is remembering his father's murder many years ago by Nazarene slaves on a ship that was taking him to Africa on a punitive mission.”

And probably because his listener was expressing himself only in monosyllables, he added:

“Quintus Varrus was his mother’s first husband. He was reportedly sailing to Carthage to take charge of arranging the punishment of numerous unruly Christians, when he was stabbed by unconscionable slaves.”

He aired out one of the sheets covering the patient and continued:

“Poor lad! Even though Veturius raised him as his own son, he always seemed tormented by the memory of his father.”

Then he carefully lowered his voice and drew close to the presbyter, allowing him to see how awkwardly he was taking him into his confidence, and said:

“As one would expect, Varrus’s death only made his family’s hatred of Christianity worse. Tacianus was brought up by his mother with extreme reverence for the gods. She has always said that she prepared her son to fight against the Galilean mystification, and she doesn’t hide her determination to make him a supporter of the imperial munificence. Although I respect your cooperation, which Pontimiana swears by, I feel I must ask you to be cautious so that the young man does not feel his principles offended.”

The selfless brother of the poor was not surprised by this.

Despite his feelings, he thanked him for the warning.

What would he not do to spend this time with the son he longed to hold in his arms?

He lovingly busied himself with giving him the potions recommended by the doctor, making an effort with every means at his disposal to nurse him as best he could.

But Tacianus kept getting worse.

Late at night, Alesius and his wife retired and suggested that three slaves take turns with the night watch.

Brother Corvinus, however, would not leave the bed.

The young man lingered in the crisis phase of the insidious fever. The scarlet fever was in the stage of invasion.

For thirty hours straight, the devout man, with the strength of his faith and the selflessness of his love, watched over him with an unveiled caring that won the recognition of all the bystanders.

On the second day, the rash appeared in small red patches, starting with his chest, and for several weeks Tacianus was the object of meticulous attention.

Often in tears as he watched him sleep, the presbyter stroked his hair and endured the temptation to reveal himself.

But how could he declare a deadly war on Cynthia? Had he not acquired a new way of being, based on the Gospel? What would his testimony of loyalty to Christ be if he sowed hatred and bitterness in his beloved son's heart? Would any attitude that tended to impose his love really do Tacianus any good?

On many occasions, he asked Jesus to inspire him, and he often saw old Corvinus in his dreams, recommending utmost selflessness, as if bringing him the answer from Heaven.

As an expositor of the Good News, he was connected to thousands of people who looked to his example and words for trustworthy guidance.

Therefore he could not vacillate.

His love for his son was great, but the Master's sublime love was greater and he had to remain worthy of his supreme responsibilities.

When the patient finally regained consciousness, he embraced him, acknowledging the fact that he was not only the place's head gardener but his benefactor as well.

Tacianus felt strongly attracted to the humble man who visited him so faithfully, and he enjoyed talking with him for hours on end about science and art, culture and philosophy.

They had the same interests and preferences in common.

They discussed Virgil and Lucretius, Lucan and Homer, Epicurus and Timaeus of Locri, Seneca and Papinianus and found they had similar points of view about them.

However, as if they were afraid of losing this fascinating communion, they were careful to avoid any discussions on matters of faith.

Supported by his friend, Tacianus was finally capable of going for walks in the park filled with lush vegetation. There, in the shade of robust firs or amid blossoming gorses, they engaged in delightful conversations, smiling

and happy, like the ancient Greeks who preferred to discuss higher knowledge in the sanctuary of nature.

Once, prodded by curiosity, Tacianus asked Corvinus why he stayed isolated in Gaul when he could be a celebrated teacher in Rome. Where had he come from and why had he condemned himself to colonial obscurity?

Reluctantly, Corvinus confessed that he had been born in the metropolis of the Caesars, but had fallen in love with serving the Gallic community. Consequently, he was held there by strong ties of the heart.

“But what type of work would keep you imprisoned in Lyon to the point of your being forgotten?” asked the young man with guileless affection. “I don’t think that the heirs of patrician glory should leave education in the hands of slaves. An Egyptian or a Jew cannot instill the thoughts we need to ensure imperial grandeur.”

“No, of course not,” his friend agreed. “Even so, I believe that the provinces are also in need of our attention. The world is filled with our legionaries. We possess the incoercible forces of civilization on all fronts. Our emperors may come from anywhere on the earth, and that is why we cannot neglect the need for education in all sectors.”

And smiling, he said:

“That is why I became a schoolmaster.”

Tacianus shared his good humor.

Varrus suddenly thought of something: What if he were to bring some of the children for a loving visit? Mightn’t that be the surest way to awaken Tacianus’s heart to the gospel? The young man might never recognize him, but would it be right not to invite him to the banquet of divine light? Who could imagine the benefits of such an undertaking? Because of the natural intelligence he displayed, his son had of course made an impression on his family. He had seen right away that his son’s opinions were respected. Although still quite young, he was master of his own convictions. A children’s song would surely open his mind. Tacianus might be inclined to study Jesus’ lessons if such little ones touched his heartstrings...

After considering this for a few seconds, he turned to the convalescent, his eyes shining with secret hope, and asked him if he would like a greeting from the little ones under his care.

Veturius's ward loved the idea.

He said that such an honor would make him very happy. He had always believed that the future belonged to children. In his opinion, Roman civilization must not neglect the preparation of its youth.

On a day decided on beforehand, Tacianus himself, with the help of Alesius and his wife, arranged a festive atmosphere for the reception on the lovely Red Rose Plaza, one of Corvinus's delightful creations.

Baskets of fruit and jugs with an abundant supply of grape juice were artistically placed among the marble benches.

The estate's musical corps of young slaves was brought to the gathering.

Elegant young men played joyful melodies on lyres, lutes, drums and sistrums.

The property was divided into two sectors: one for the Christian servants, ablaze with joy and hope, led by Pontimiana's optimism; and the other for the workers devoted to the Olympian gods and headed by Alesius. The latter group did not see the event in a positive light. On one side, there were prayers and fraternal smiles; on the other, there were insults and gloomy faces.

With the wisdom of an apostle and the innocence of a child, brother Corvinus entered the scented area leading three dozen little ones in a simple procession. Led by their mentor, they came in singing a simple hymn that expressed an endearing vow of peace.

Friend, friend!

On the path ahead of you,

May Heaven grant your life

The blessings of Light Eternal!

Friend, friend!

Receive the greeting of

Our flowers of joy

In the vase of your heart...

The humble voices resembled a choir of angels that the wooded area welcomed on the wings of the wind.

Tacianus kindly welcomed the group of little ones.

Two dancers performed some comical numbers, while the children laughed happily.

Then, everyone played some simple games.

Six boys recited poems of noble refinement using monologues and dialogues that delighted the assembly, which included several dozen slaves in festive clothing. At one point, Tacianus spoke about the ideals of the fatherland and the excellence of the human race.

Next, a feast capped the jubilant occasion.

The priceless gardener, who had become the fortunate creditor of so much attention, brought the smallest of the group to the young patrician. Silvanus, a boy only five years old, was the son of a legionary who had died at sea. The unfortunate widow had been smitten by the plague and had entrusted the boy to him a few weeks ago.

Tacianus embraced him with sincere tenderness and spoke affectionately to him. Brother Corvinus said he had to get the children ready to leave, and so he asked Silvanus to say a prayer for his host's happiness.

The bashful little boy exchanged a look of joy with his guardian and went to the center of the plaza.

It was a very expectant moment.

All the bystanders looked at each other anxiously.

Veturius's ward watched the scene with a smile, certain that he would be acknowledged in a usual prayer to the gods.

The little boy, however, with his head lifted to Heaven like a triumphant little soldier, began to speak with feeling:

“Jesus, our Divine Master! Help us...”

At that moment a sudden pallor came over the young patrician's face. His former quiet and polite demeanor vanished. A fearsome expression effaced his joy. Suddenly converted into a human beast, roaring with anger, he cried out dreadfully:

“Down with the Nazarenes! Down with the Nazarenes!... Damn you,

Corvinus!... What shame! Who dared to bring Christians to my house? I will have justice, justice! I shall put an end to this plague!”

A painful surprise fell over the place.

His fatherly benefactor came to him and begged:

“Have mercy! Have mercy!”

But Tacianus did not heed the tears glistening in his eyes.

He stepped back in dismay and replied dryly:

“Mercy? That’s the old refrain of the filthy Galileans!”

And waving a metal-tipped staff, he roared:

“Get out! Out of here, you infernal devils!... Dung-heap vipers, children of darkness, get out of here!”

The young man seemed possessed by demons, such was the outrage and wickedness written on his face.

The little ones trembled, frozen.

Between them and his angry son, Varrus did not know what to do.

Many of the servants from Alesius’s group began laughing loudly.

Tacianus stared into the eyes of everyone in the group and shouted to the captain, whom he knew to be the fiercest enemy of Christians:

“Epipodus, go get the dog! Let’s drive out this scum! Let’s slay these frauds!”

The slave did not hesitate, and in a few minutes he came back with a huge dog, barking and growling ferociously.

Screaming, the children scattered, many of them scratching themselves on the thorny rose bushes in bloom.

Brother Corvinus was stunned and tried to calm everyone’s fears; but the beast tore into youngest one.

At Silvanus’s cries, Alesius’s wife stepped in courageously and grabbed the child, forcefully pushing the mastiff off. The dog backed off, barking loudly.

Varrus rushed to collect the wounded child, who was crying and bleeding. Overcome with grief, he tried to help him, while Tacianus, in a

frenzy, went inside the house, yelling over and over:

“You’ll all pay! ... You’ll all pay!”

Rufus, one of the estate’s old slaves, approached the presbyter and offered his assistance.

Corvinus accepted his cooperation and asked him to take the children back home so that he could care for Silvanus – it was his responsibility.

He got ready to return, holding the innocent victim to his chest.

He was absorbed in dark premonitions as he walked slowly along the isolated stretch connecting Veturius’s residence to the city.

The boy, with his chest torn open, was breaking his heart. At some point, he had stopped screaming, but continued to bleed profusely.

Brother Corvinus saw that the boy’s strength was failing. He stopped to rest under an ancient oak tree so that he could listen to him.

The little one looked at him with eyes glazed over with agony.

In tears, Varrus bent over him paternally and asked:

“Are you remembering Jesus, my son?”

“Yes sir, I am,” he replied in a weak voice.

But revealing that he was far removed from the transcendental matters of faith — a human flower thirsty for tenderness — he said to his benefactor:

“Papa, hold me... I’m cold...”

Quintus Varrus understood.

He held him against his heart as if he wanted to warm him with the heat of his own soul.

But it was all in vain. Silvanus was dead.

The awful event augured dark horizons for the church’s future.

Dejected and disillusioned, the presbyter asked himself if the visit might have been too soon. However – he asked himself – was it indiscrete to offer someone the best you had, with the purity of your sentiments? The crown of his work lay in those little students of the Gospel. Could he be accused for doing everything he could to awaken his son to the truth? How could he reach an understanding with Tacianus without touching his innermost fibers? With

his physical health restored, the young man would be summoned to the busy life of society. He would find out about his father's ministry. He would be forced to decide. So, wouldn't it be best to inform him indirectly about his Christian activities? And what better way to do it than to introduce his principles to him in a practical demonstration of his work? If his son could not stand to hear any reference to the Good News from the lips of a child in prayer, how would he tolerate any mention of Jesus in a sterile discussion? He, Varrus, could not vacillate between personal sentiments and the Gospel. His duties to humanity surpassed any blood ties. Although he acknowledged this fact, he had meant to act rightly, somehow, on behalf of his beloved son.

Tacianus, however, had shown himself to be impervious and unbending.

He seemed far removed from any access to justice.

He had hardened his mind with racial pride and erroneous learning. Through his display of explosive anger when he heard the simple utterance of the name of Christ, he had revealed the perhaps irreparable enmity that separated them...

Deeply dismayed, he turned to the refuge of prayer.

No one in the evangelical community said anything unfavorable about the tragic event that had resulted in the death of the child. Brother Corvinus was too highly respected to arouse any unseemly criticism as to his conduct.

In city get-togethers, however, the matter was coming to a boil.

The flow of opinions originating in Veturius's residence was spreading everywhere. Most regarded Tacianus as a hero, wielding the avenging sword of the Olympic gods. But the group sympathetic to Christianity saw it as a terrible omen of renewed persecution.

Christians were often accused of shameful and detestable spells and of practicing sorcery, including infanticide. That was why there was no lack of those who saw Silvanus's death as somehow related to sorcery and magic.

Terrible pictures were painted by the overexcited populace, and the widow Mercia, mother of the dead boy, was called on to become part of the uproar.

In this suffocating atmosphere, Tacianus began receiving visits from prominent Romans, who congratulated him for his reactionary and vigilant

spirit. Invigorated by such applause, the young man felt encouraged to increase the scale of his operations.

Even the quaestor Quirinus Eustathius, an old patrician retired from political life but influential with the Proprætor of Lyon, came to offer him greetings in his pompous style.

Of all the matters they discussed, his favorite could not be ignored.

“I don’t think that the younger generation of Rome could have sent a worthier ambassador to our province,” gushed the nobleman in the calculated tone of voice of one who loves to flatter. “The deplorable doctrine of the Jewish outcasts is insinuating itself frighteningly, threatening our traditions. This city is full of Asian anchorites, vagrant prophets, preachers and ghosts. I have lived here since the good old days of our magnanimous emperor Septimius Severus – whom the gods have preserved in his divine glory – and I can state my conviction that this movement amounts to a collective madness that can drag us to our doom.”

“No doubt about it,” the young man agreed. “It is up to us to restore the cult of our fatherland. In my opinion, a large concentration of power is needed to wipe out this evil rabble. I cannot understand what is so great about a doctrine whose followers find it an honor to have their throats slit. In Rome, I knew of several legal actions having to do with the persecutions and I was amazed by the responses of those miserable people. They reject the gods with astounding effrontery. I think the authorities should promote a social purge in grand style.”

Quirinus Eustathius, with the sarcastic laugh of an old faun, added maliciously:

“That is precisely why we are so happy that you are here. If the patrician young people cannot come up with a response to meet our needs, we are headed for ruin. Your courage in expelling this recalcitrant Corvinus is a relief to us. I received the news with genuine delight. I am convinced that our faith is now less threatened. We do not see this strange man in a good light. No one knows where he came from. I see him as nothing but an adventurer or a madman disturbing our ways.”

Veturius’s stepson was dying with curiosity and asked:

“No one knows who he is? Or why he is so educated yet mysteriously stuck in the job of a gardener?”

The quaestor blinked his shrewd eyes and said:

“Who knows? He has insinuated himself into the popular mind with incredible ease. Some take him for a saint, but I’m inclined to believe that he’s nothing more than some sorcerer, surrounded by infernal beings. He looked like a beggar when he turned up here. But he gradually acquired a reputation for healing with his Nazarene prayers and with the laying on of hands. The first noteworthy house to fall into his clutches was that of Artemius Cimbrus. They say that his little daughter was suffering from dreadful mental problems. She underwent Corvinus’s treatment and it seems that she reacted favorably and recovered, as if by a miracle. The family made him their gardener and introduced him to other homes. That’s all I know about his professional life. Of his activities as a sorcerer, however, I could say a great deal. The plebeians have told me of a thousand things. If it were only the plebeians that were impressed... But there are some illustrious patricians caught in his web. Some say that his words are invested with miraculous power; others claim that he can heal the most complicated illnesses.”

“It’s strange to see a city like this lose its head like that!” exclaimed Tacianus.

“And that’s precisely why we need elements of renewal. Your decision to banish Corvinus is extremely comforting. He is incompetent to lead children, even worthless ones. I know that Artemius is on his side, but I’m convinced that it won’t take long for us to put a stop to his mystifications. Zenobius, an old friend who used to be a high dignitary of imperial favor, told me last night that, according to credible sources, the dead boy was sent into the jaws of that dog by Corvinus himself so that the Christian rabble would have innocent blood for the black magic at their gatherings. It’s interesting that Corvinus was the only witness with him when he died.”

And lowering his voice, he asked:

“Did you see it yourself, dear friend? It would be very important to hear about it from your own mouth.”

Tacianus, with a nervous look that revealed the shock of his conflicting emotions, quickly explained:

“I have nothing to say about that. When I heard the name of the crucified one, my rebelliousness went to my head. I only cared about defending our property against that pestilential influence. I decided to release the dog in extreme desperation. So I cannot verify something I didn’t see for myself.”

Quirinus, however, bit his lip in annoyance and said:

“Well, I’m sure that things could not have been otherwise. Let’s fight this thing together. Our slaves can’t be at the mercy of unthinking sorcerers and it wouldn’t be right for people of our social status to let themselves be defenselessly lured away.”

“We are in full agreement on that point,” said the young man firmly. “As for me, I plan to discipline and cull my group of servants.”

“And what plan have you drawn up for that? I would like do the same thing in my own house.”

“My parents will be arriving in a few days. Helen, my future wife, is coming with them. Since I will be living here after my marriage, I have planned ahead for them by adapting life on property to my family’s ways and by adapting my own life to the customs of the province. However, I do not want them to run into the same problems that caught me off guard. I plan to gather all the servants together and make them swear fealty to our gods. I will remove any of them who refuse. Then I plan to implement the worship of Cybele in my home, starting with a processional ceremony through our woods. It is essential for us to purify our customs and airs.”

Quirinus enthusiastically agreed and promised to follow the plan. He would not only do the same in his own home, but would ask his friends to do likewise.

He had admired Opilius Veturius for many years and enjoyed seeing his home zealously well-guarded.

Indeed, a few days later, as the suffering from the plague was vanishing into oblivion, Tacianus held a meeting in his home for reaffirming loyalty to the gods.

In a large annex on the estate, a superb statue of Cybele had been installed to receive everyone’s vows. Now, on the idol’s right, on a high podium adorned with crimson silk and golden threads, stood Tacianus, two priests of the goddess and the steward couple, Alesius and Pontimiana.

In a long, elevated gallery near the access doors to the sanctuary, the city’s nobility, brought by Eustathius, rejoiced at the ceremony.

Below them, the family servants were all crowded together. In their midst were some cantors who recited chants dedicated to the deity.

On a small, gracefully-flowered altar, the idol that Veturius had imported from Pessinus stood as an impassive witness.

Before the questioning, sad glances of dozens of slaves witnessing the display of pride by their masters, Cybele, flanked by two lions and carved in spotless marble, was actually the symbol of a wavering civilization.

The first to approach, obviously setting an example to be imitated, was Tacianus, who stood reverently before the idol and said in a loud voice:

“Under the invocation of Divine Cybele, Mother of the gods and our mother, I swear unqualified allegiance to the beliefs and traditions of our ancestors and perfect obedience to our immortal emperors.”

Frenzied applause crowned his words.

A lilting and melodious sacred hymn accompanied by Phrygian flutes was heard.

Then Alesius descended from the dais, and giving the impression that the scene had been rehearsed beforehand, reverently pronounced the same vows.

Then came Pontimiana.

The woman looked ill and worn out. One could imagine her inner struggle.

Very pale, she gave her husband a pleading look, but because of the cold way that Alesius looked back, one could guess the argument they had had before the ceremony.

Restrained by her spouse’s cold eyes, the house’s supervisor wiped away her tears and slowly repeated the same words, thus denying her Christian faith.

Alesius smiled in triumph, while there was widespread whispering among the large group of servants.

Signs of grief appeared on several faces.

All the slaves, one by one, some emphatic and others humiliated, reaffirmed the phrases initially pronounced by their master.

The last one was Rufus.

Epipodus, the overseer, had left him for last because he knew the strength of Rufus’s convictions and was afraid of any irregularity that might

cause trouble.

With a grim face, and showing that he was completely responsible for what he was about to do, he raised his bronzed face, as if he were searching the heavens and not the impassive statue, and stated in a clear, stately voice:

“I swear respect for the emperors who govern us, but I am a Christian and I renounce the gods of stone that are incapable of correcting the cruelty and pride that keep us oppressed.”

A murmur ran through the assembly.

In a low voice, Tacianus addressed the older priest, who, assuming the role of judge, exclaimed to the servant in an authoritative tone:

“Rufus, do not forget your status!”

“I’m not,” he replied courageously. “I am a slave, and have always served my masters loyally; nevertheless, my mind is free... I acknowledge only Jesus Christ as the True Lord!”

“I demand that you retract your words before Cybele, the sublime Mother of the gods.”

“I have done nothing that is not approved by the righteousness of my conscience.”

“Take back your words and you will be forgiven.”

“I cannot.”

“Do you know the consequences of your rashness?”

“I believe I am speaking with full knowledge of my responsibility. But whatever the outcome, I cannot deny my faith.”

Rufus glanced at the bystanders and noticed that dozens of his comrades were inciting him to resist. Pontimiana, looking somewhat relieved, was silently sending him a mute message of encouragement.

“Take back your words! Take them back!” the priest’s voice thundered harshly.

“I cannot!” Rufus repeated, unmoved.

After a few words with the young patrician, the self-proclaimed judge told Epipodus to fetch the whip.

Ordered by his torturer, Rufus removed the celebratory tunic he had put on for the feast and knelt with his hands behind his back.

The thin, cutting cord struck his bare skin three times, raising bloody welts, but the slave did not flinch.

“There’s still time, you wretch!” the priest of *Magna Mater* cried out in puzzlement. “Take back your words and your wrong will be forgiven.”

“I am a Christian.” Rufus calmly repeated.

“This punishment could lead to your death!”

“Suffering does not scare me,” sighed the victim humbly. “Jesus experienced martyrdom on the cross to save us. To die out of loyalty to him is an honor I aspire to.”

The whip came down on his back violently, opening bleeding wounds, but noticing the uneasiness that the savage scene was creating in the sanctuary, Tacianus suggested that the slave be taken to prison until they could decide on a definite punishment.

When the service ended, the recessional ceremony began.

Cynthia’s son wanted a complete purification of the property.

A massive crowd jammed the courtyards, waiting for the recession.

The statue of Cybele was placed on an opulent silver litter decorated with lilies.

Young couples, formally dressed in white, symbolizing chastity and beauty, opened before the statue, dancing in graceful rhythms to the sound of the flutes and tambourines of the cult.

Then all the women, carrying aromatic palms, proclaimed the idol, which was supported on the shoulders of Tacianus and other young men devoted to the goddess, followed by the priests saying the prayers of the Phrygian rite, along with the incense bearers.

After them, a young woman of rare beauty carried the sacred cutlass.

Accompanying her was a group of musicians with horns, flutes, cymbals, drums and castanets playing votive songs, whose harmonious passages faded away into the woodland.

Dignitaries and leaders followed in a line, silent and reverent, and at the end of the recession came the mass of slaves, mute and melancholy.

Hymns of praise to the mother of the gods perfumed the woods with sweet melody, interrupting the singing of startled birds.

The recession went around the estate in several stages, through the well-tended trees and extensive vines, and returned to the house, where Cybele was restored to the tiny temple that Opilius Veturius had erected for her in the midst of the garden a long time ago.

Tacianus took the floor after the prayers of the priests and gave thanks for the presence of the devotees, the authorities and the people, praising their trust in the protection of the Olympic Gods.

The colorful crowd dispersed.

It was growing late...

Alone now on the broad terrace, from which he could see the open, limpid horizon, the young man instinctively remembered brother Corvinus, Silvanus's death and Rufus's reaction; without realizing it, he began to struggle with the influence of Christ, no longer just in his mind, but in his heart.

¹³ Gallic assembly with the right to opine before the authority of Caesar. - Emmanuel

6

On the Path of Redemption

Hard times befell the church in Lyon after the death of Silvanus.

Encouraged by the Gospel-hating Eustathius, the child's widowed mother, Mercia, publically accused brother Corvinus of being a sorcerer and a child killer. She told the authorities that the boy had been a victim of accursed sorcery, and she was even so cruel as to add that the fatherless Silvanus had been bewitched by the preacher's wiles.

Extremely humbled, the friend of the poor was handed over to official interrogations, during which he conducted himself with admirable dignity.

Varrus did not deny what had happened.

He explained that he had visited Veturius's residence with the best intentions, that one of the children had been inadvertently attacked by a savage dog, and that no one knew how it had gotten loose.

Thus, no one could be blamed.

There was no shortage of insults from the sarcastic Romans, which he endured humbly and heroically.

However, when he was about to be incarcerated, Artemius Cimbrus, a generous patrician of great wealth, advocated his cause and used his status and assets to keep him out of prison. He mobilized top political figures, as well as the propraetor legate,¹⁴ and managed to halt his imprisonment temporarily, with the legal action being filed, awaiting further orders. However, the cheerful boys' home was disbanded.

The children were hastily placed in several of the believers' households, where they were welcomed with love.

The “friend of the suffering” was considered by the authorities as being unworthy of taking care of children. He thought his heart was going to break when the last little one hugged him in tears as he said goodbye.

Quintus Varrus was a masculine standard of good cheer and an example of living faith, but despite his display of spiritual strength, he gave in to the torment that forebodes depression.

Between his love for his inaccessible son and his zeal for the children who had been irretrievably taken from him, he suffered frequent and sudden bouts of weeping.

Often, in the middle of the night, he would stand in front of Veturius’s stately country house and try to get a glimpse of Tacianus’s face from some angle through the lighted windows. Also, in his idle moments, he would go to some private home or other to see one of his beloved little children.

He would try to escape his thoughts by studying intensively for long stretches of time that ended in extreme fatigue. Poorly fed, he would engage in sacrificial work for the sick, perhaps fearing he would become overwhelmed with bitterness, which would lead him inevitably to depression.

Despite warnings from his superiors and friends, he continued with his excessive activities until he finally fell into bed with overwhelming exhaustion. A high fever slowly devoured him and he hung between life and death.

But because of the love and devotion of his friends, he was finally able to overcome his imbalance; still, he was listless and despondent and continued to lie on the straw bed in his humble room with no courage to get up.

One night, caressed by a passing, softly whispering cool breeze, he had a strong memory of old Corvinus.

The moonlight and the pure atmosphere, his small room and his loneliness, forced him to go back in time.

He sorely missed the apostle who had taken his place in the dark arms of death.

He had espoused the evangelical mission with extreme fervor.

For the church, he had given up his most beautiful dreams. He had renounced all the pleasures of ordinary men for the work of spiritualizing

himself. In order to become the brother of all, he had tried to forget who he used to be. He had divided his time between the enrichment of his inner life and constant service, but he bore a heart that was thirsting for love.

Was his goal of getting close to his son to devote himself to him a crime? Was his desire to want his son to love him back reprehensible?

As a man, he had tried to understand his wife and honor the choice she had made. Cynthia could take any path she wished. She was free, and that is why she did not occupy his thoughts. But the memory of Tacianus was pure punishment. The urge to help him had almost become an obsession. Yes, he did see him as aggressive and cruel. He would never forget Tacianus's indignation when he heard Silvanus speak Jesus' name. But — he thought — the young man was the product of a wrongful education in Opilius's home. The man who had condemned him to physical death had sentenced his son to moral death.

Was it right to do nothing for the young man who was just starting out in life? Was it wrongful for a father to devote himself to his own son with the best intentions?

However, when he remembered the grandeur of the ideal that had driven him to love humankind, he asked himself why he wanted Tacianus so much. If the church was filled with children and young people who needed his attention and care, why did he want to focus on Tacianus with so much affection when he was aware of the insurmountable obstacles that separated them? After many years of resignation and heroism, listening to the enigmas of his soul, Quintus Varrus finally surrendered, not to tears of serenity resulting from having come to his senses, but to convulsive sobbing from despair.

The refreshing currents of the gentle breeze came in through the open window as if they wanted to caress his aching head.

But for now, at least, he was oblivious to the charms of nature. Despite his multitude of friends in Lyon, he felt forsaken, all alone... His son's presence would probably be the only force capable of restoring a feeling of inner wholeness.

Thinking back to old Corvinus, he remembered his final moments. His venerable friend had spoken to him in unforgettable words about the survival of the soul after death. He had encouraged him with his certainty that death was unreal, and had strengthened his trust, investing him with undying faith.

Ah! How he could use a word right now to snatch him out of his whirlwind of troubles!

He, who had taught moral strength, was now frail and sickly.

He thought about his deceased friend, just as a lost child longs to find his mother's comfort again.

As he sat sobbing with his head bowed over his knees in the exile of his room, he felt that a hand was resting lightly on his hunched shoulders. Perplexed, he lifted his tear-swollen eyes and — oh! How marvelous! The discarnate old man had returned from the dead and was standing right there before him, clothed in light... He was the same apostle as before, but his body had become more diaphanous and younger.

His forehead emitted rays of sapphire light like a sublime outpouring of the soul.

The presbyter wanted to shout with joy and prostrate himself in front of the heavenly messenger, but an irrepressible force made his throat mute and pinned him to his lowly bed.

With an ineffable smile that revealed melancholy and longing, love and hope, the entity spoke to him:

“Varrus, my son, why are you so dismayed when the fight has just begun? Rebuild your strength for the task ahead. We have been called to serve. The love between souls is divine, an eternal bond connecting us to each other for triumphant immortality; but what will become of this heavenly gift if we cannot renounce ourselves? The heart that is unable to surrender itself for the benefit of someone else's happiness is a dry seed that cannot grow.”

The spirit emissary paused briefly, as if to gather his thoughts, and continued:

“Tacianus is the son of the Creator, just like us. Do not complain about what he cannot yet give you. No one can make themselves loved by demanding it. Give everything! Those we want to help or save are not always able to grasp the meaning of our words right away, but they can be inclined or drawn to renewal by our actions and examples. We are often forgotten and humiliated by those to whom we devote ourselves, but if we know how to persevere in self-denial, we will light the blessed flame in our hearts that will illuminate their way beyond the grave! Nothing in the world is lasting... The unconstructive cries of youth become the music of meditation in our old age!

Lend support to your son, who is also our brother in eternity, but do not consider enslaving him to your own way of being! A tree that decided to devour its own fruit would be monstrous; the fountain that swallowed its own waters, condemnable! Those who love uphold life and pass through it like heroes, but those who long to be loved are often nothing more than ruthless tyrants... Get up! You have not yet drunk the cup to the dregs. Moreover, the church – Jesus’ home and our home – is waiting for you... Those who knock on your door, dismayed and disillusioned, are also our members of our family... The old, forsaken people who come to us also had parents who loved them and children who broke their hearts... The sick who plead for us to help them have known childhood and grace, beauty and youth firsthand! Our pain, my friend, is not unique. Suffering is the purifying forge, where we lose the heavy dross of the lower passions so that we can rise to a loftier life... It is almost always in the dark room of adversity that we perceive the rays of divine inspiration, because the excesses of earth often numb our minds.”

The messenger was silent for moment, looked him more tenderly, and then added: “Varrus, look for your son with the burning torch of love in others’ children. The Lord will bless you and turn your sorrow into peace-of-mind... Stand on your own two feet and look to the struggle by which you will re-educate the ones you love the most.”

The presbyter, with mixture of pain and joy, emotion and distress, remembered the exhaustion that was tormenting him; but the spirit envoy, reading his innermost thoughts, advised:

“Do not yield to the icy breath of misery, nor believe in the power of fatigue... What would become of us if Jesus grew weary of our wrongs and gave in to useless fatigue? Even if your body is given over to the transformation of death, stay firm in faith and optimism... The tomb is the entryway into the light of a new day for those who have gone through the night with a vision of hope and toil.”

The devout man wondered what use any information alluding to the future might be to him... Could he perhaps expect some access to Tacianus? Would he be able to rebuild the school he had lost?

It was enough that such questions were looming in his mind for the entity to say to him kindly:

“Son, do not expect anything for now but renunciation and sacrifice... Jesus has not yet been understood even by many who call themselves his

followers. Serve others, forgive and wait! The ultimate victories of the spirit shine beyond the flesh.” The discarnate apostle leaned over him in a loving embrace.

Quintus Varrus realized he was saying goodbye.

Oh! He would give anything to open his heart and tell him everything that had happened during those years of longing and separation, but his vocal cords were numb.

Corvinus kissed his hair like a father saying goodnight to his little son at bedtime, and moving toward the door, he sent him a touching goodbye.

Outside, the star-studded night was lulled with fragrant, refreshing breezes.

In bed, the sickly Varrus calmed himself with a sense of peace understandable only by those who have overcome the great inner battles of the heart.

As if he had taken a mild sedative, he was soon peacefully asleep.

The next day, he woke up feeling unusually invigorated.

To everyone’s astonishment, he went to the morning worship services with a sense of joy and gratitude. He had barely finished the usual prayers when he noticed, not far from the atrium, unusual movement among the people. Deafening shouting filled the air. Seeing the questioning look on his face, someone explained that some masked dancers were performing in the street, announcing a gala to be held at the amphitheater in honor of the marriage of young Tacianus to the patrician girl Helen Veturius.

Opilius’s house planned to commemorate the event with entertainment for the public because the wealthy man, the owner of extensive properties, wanted to make himself more deeply respected in the community.

Indeed, Veturius and his family, accompanied by a large entourage of dependents and adulators, had arrived for the grand celebration.

The once simple, yet imposing, estate had become a veritable Roman palace, filled with fashionable ladies and attorneys, idle politicians who gossiped about the intrigues of the royal court, and smiling flatterers after the wine had flowed for a while.

Many slaves were busily coming and going.

Litters and carriages of various origins continued to arrive.

Helen was beside herself with joy, between her fiancé's love and the admiration of those who praised her for her beauty.

She was extremely well-trained in social life and worked wonders to please the Gallic aristocracy, spreading her attentions everywhere.

Cynthia, however, had changed. She purposely avoided all festivities involving her home. When Veturius and Tacianus were questioned by their visitors about her absence, they said she was ill.

But an old, life-long associate of Opilius was telling his close friends that she had become a Christian.

This man was none other than Flavius Subrius, the lame old soldier, who had also renewed his views of life.

Subrius had received priceless benefits in Rome from the evangelical community and had changed the principles that guided his destiny.

He had gone from atheism and sarcasm to faith and meditation.

He was not a follower of Christ in the true sense of the word; nevertheless, he engaged in uplifting reading, revered the memory of Jesus, gave alms and avoided wrongdoing, which he used to regard as a trivial matter.

He had attended the preaching in the catacombs a few times and had changed. He had managed to retain the blessing of remorse in his consciousness and had reconsidered his ways...

However, of all the dark tragedies that occupied his mind, the murder of Corvinus was perhaps the one that tore at his heart the most.

On many occasions, he had asked himself what might have become of Quintus Varrus, but he had found no answer. Where had he landed? Had he managed to survive? Never again had he heard any news of him.

He had never forgotten the calm expression in Corvinus's eyes when he stabbed him in his aged chest. He had thought that the apostle would cry out in dread, but instead he had clutched his afflicted chest without the slightest moan of reaction. Furthermore, as Subrius left, he saw that Corvinus was praying... He had never gotten that picture out of his head. It followed him everywhere. If he tried drowning himself in glasses of wine or if he sought other places and company to escape from himself, there, engraved on his

mind, was the indelible figure of the old preacher using prayer to repay having been stabbed.

Tormented by his own conscience, Subrius could not stand the torment he had inflicted on himself, and had gone mad.

Amid the trials of dementia, he had been rescued by a group of Christians, whose prayers had relieved his suffering mind. Ever since then, he had changed his ways, although he kept his troubling secrets to himself, believing that time would heal him.

When Opilius invited him to move to Gaul, he did not hesitate.

He knew that the deceased missionary had belonged to the Lyon church and he planned to do something for the organization that Corvinus had loved so much. He knew about Veturius's hostility toward the Gospel; however, that did not mean that he could not anonymously help the spiritual family that brother Corvinus had left to his brethren.

He had stayed in touch with Veturius's household. He had been told by a trusted slave that Cynthia had been ill and that she had received Christian help in her private rooms. After her recovery, she, too, changed her spiritual course.

He had sympathized with his matron's new attitude, but he had never been able to have the briefest conversation with her about it.

In fact, what he had heard was true: Cynthia had suddenly become inclined toward Christianity.

Soon after her son had left for Gaul, she herself had come down with the plague. She had been healed by a holy man who, when secretly brought to her bed by some slaves, laid his hands on her in prayer and restored her inner peace.

She had arisen from her bed, but still felt captive to an uncontrollable melancholy.

Her crises of the heart were frequent.

When the house was enveloped in silence, she would go down to the garden, preferring meditation to the domestic hustle and bustle. On those occasions, Opilius would often take her in his arms and dry her copious tears.

At first, he thought she was enslaved to the memory of Varrus, and he tried to distract her from it. However, he finally acknowledged the fact that

his beloved had embraced new religious principles.

He tried to talk to her about it, but their conversations gradually became bitter and spiteful. Finally, he thought it might be best for them to leave Rome for a while, hoping that Tacianus would be able to dissuade her.

In Lyon, Opilius spoke with the young man who, proud and inflexible, listened to his confidences with a stunned and somber look on his face.

Tacianus waited for the right opportunity, and on the eve of his wedding, he told his mother that he needed to talk to her about some new projects he had been pursuing, and they both retired to the nearby vineyard.

In the sun, which looked like a burning coal lost in the fiery sunset, the young man recalled along the way that it was the last day of his unattached youth. The following morning, he would be setting out to meet his new destiny.

Under an ancient, many-branched oak that seemed to want to protect the spring planting, he took his mother's hands in his and told her of the fears that were afflicting his soul...

Had she perhaps forgotten the sacred vows of her heart? He had heard from his adoptive father that she was now living under the domination of the Nazarene spells... Could this be true? He couldn't accept the idea that she had changed the direction of her faith. He knew she was strong, as devoted as ever to the domestic numens without betraying her ancestors. He would trust her to the end.

His mother took in his words with her eyes veiled by a haze of tears that had not yet fallen, and as if she were holding in her soul the shadow of twilight that was starting to cover the landscape, she said sorrowfully:

"Son, tomorrow I will have completely fulfilled my duties as a mother. Your wedding marks the end of my responsibilities in this regard. So we can talk heart to heart like two old friends... For a few years now, I have been feeling very thirsty for spiritual renewal..."

"But why renewal if the love of the gods rests on our home?" interrupted the young man, irritated and apprehensive. "Are we perhaps lacking something? Don't we live for each other in the sweet reciprocal trust that our celestial protectors have given us?"

“An abundance of material things doesn’t always bring happiness to the heart,” said his mother with a sad smile. “Veturius’s wealth may not be my wealth.” She gazed at him with her moist, calm eyes, which her inner suffering had ennobled, and continued after a long pause:

“While we are young, our character is like a precious, unpolished stone. But day by day, time consumes and transforms us until a new understanding of life makes our heart glow. I feel that I am in a new phase. You’re a man now and you can understand... For a long time, I’ve been observing the decadence around us: the decadence of those who rule, expressed in all sorts of excesses, and decadence in those who are governed, who make life a pursuit of pleasure... I too was also blind. The more wisely your father tried to speak to awaken me, the more I turned a deaf ear. Today, however, his words resonate more clearly in my conscience. We are under attack in a mire of vice and moral want. Only a spiritual intervention other than that which we have believed until now can uplift the world.”

“But,” said Tacianus, obviously troubled, “my father was a philosopher who never deviated from our traditions. The documentation he left us proves it. Moreover, he was murdered while fulfilling a noble duty in combating the Christian plague.” The woman showed unmistakable signs of grief on her serene face, and replied: “You’re mistaken, son! You grew up with Veturius under a thick fog that has kept the past hidden from us... I must tell you now that Varrus was a follower of Jesus.” Upon hearing this unexpected revelation, the young man was thrown into turmoil.

A strange flush rose to his forehead, the veins in his face became swollen, and his lips curled into an animal-like expression.

Frightened, Cynthia was speechless.

Just like on the day of Silvanus’s death, the young patrician was outraged.

He could not rebel at that moment, but he shouted in an outburst: “I’m always confronted with this Christ that I don’t want anything to do with! By the glory of Jupiter, I will never, ever give in!”

His mother stepped back in profound shock.

She had never seen such imbalance.

Tacianus had an inexplicable mask of pain and hatred on his face, as if he were suddenly face to face with his worst enemy.

He stared at Cynthia, trembling, and struggling in vain to calm himself down, he stated with an air of despondency:

“Mother, Opilius is right. You really are demented. The plague made you crazy!”

And after a few moments of silence in which all that could be heard was his labored breathing, he added ruefully:

“Tomorrow I will marry Helen with a poisoned dart lodged in my chest.” He embraced his mother uneasily, like someone caring for a gravely ill person, and left her, distressed and disheartened in her ornate bedroom, without saying a word. From that unforgettable twilight onward, Cynthia Julia was considered insane by her family.

The wedding of the young couple was held with exceptional celebrations. For three consecutive days, the estate and arena were overflowing with guests invited to the free games and festivities, with joyful ceremonies of praise and acknowledgement to the guardian numens. But in the splendor of the public rejoicing, two characters were stigmatized by profound anguish. Compelled to keep the lady of the house in impenetrable domestic exile, Opilius and Tacianus wore the artificial smiles of two persons receiving the people’s joy like a sparkling glass filled with gall.

The matron’s rooms were kept under the strict guard supervised by Epipodus.

She was forbidden to receive visitors.

Even the coming and going of her own servants was tightly controlled. She could be visited only by the individuals closest to her.

Meanwhile Opilius, now more closely associated with Galba, devoted himself to enterprises involving livestock. Helen and Tacianus loved each other and were smiling and happy. Varrus felt discouraged about ever reaching an understanding with son. He resumed his position as protector of the helpless, dividing his time between the usual sacrificial tasks and uplifting sermons, in which his sublime words seemed to be bathed in redemptive light.

Brother Corvinus’s fame grew day by day amid the gratuitous hatred of the Roman scoffers and the appreciation of simple souls who sought refuge and solace, health and hope in him...

The year 235 arrived with dark forebodings.

The Empire was replete with nagging problems.

An important group of patricians were incited by priests devoted to the Olympic gods to make bitter accusations against the followers of the Good News, blaming them for the disasters that were tormenting the lives of the people.

The plague that was lashing the Latin world in every direction, the withered crops, the vicissitudes of war and political instability were seen as works of retribution by the gods, who were punishing the Christians as they became more numerous everywhere.

Terrible clouds were gathering over the workers of the Gospel, who waited in prayer for an outbreak of more storms.

Amid omens of gloom, Caius Julius Verus Maximinus ascended the Roman throne.

Alexander Severus had been cruelly murdered; consequently, the influence of the pious women who supported Christianity in the imperial court disappeared with him.

The new Caesar was like a monster that had seized the purple robe, thirsty for blood and power.

He quickly strengthened the tyrants in the administration and the army, and a widespread persecution of the converts to Christ was implemented with overwhelming momentum.

Although Maximinus concerned himself with persecutions within Rome itself, the movement of death spread out from there, inciting autocracy and violence.

At first, a number of proclamations went into effect ordering only the murder of bishops and clergy, with amnesty granted to those who recanted their faith. But soon the devastating wave began engulfing all followers of the persecuted creed.

Innumerable churches that had been built with enormous sacrifice during the reign of Caracalla were victims of arson.

In the metropolis, Christians worshiped exclusively in the catacombs. In distant cities, repression depended on the will of the leaders.

With the promulgators of the Gospel hauled once again into court and thrown into dungeons and arenas, the widespread spilling of blood was

resumed.

In Lyon, the church of St. John was banned and its sacred objects came into the irreverent hands of unscrupulous authorities. The church leaders and clergy with defined roles were ruthlessly expelled. A few, however, brother Corvinus among them, endured the situation and stayed in the city to look after their anxious flock.

Despite all the setbacks of the immense struggle, the followers of Jesus in Gaul persisted in their faith and were valiant and invincible. Like the Druids, their heroic ancestors, they went into the forest to sing their songs of praise to God. After work each day, they went at night into the friendly, silent countryside, where they prayed under the starry sky in a cathedral of trees and interpreted the divine revelations, as if they were living in anticipation of the joys of the Heavenly Kingdom.

The quaestor Quirinus Eustathius wove the darkest webs of intrigue and calumny to instigate mass murder, but the respected patrician Artemius Cimbrus used all his powerful influence to oppose any extreme measures.

Given the obstacles standing in the way of his wishes, Quirinus suggested that masters carry out what was known as “fair punishment” in their own homes. Slaves known to be Christian would be put to death and their children sold to other regions so that the city would be purged as completely as possible.

Quirinus easily obtained an order from the imperial legate completing his plans and he started the slaughter in his own home.

Six male slaves were put to death in spectacular fashion to the sound of music and general rejoicing, and the measure spread to several other noble houses.

When it was Opilius’s turn at his country palace, the quaestor visited him to explain the necessary arrangements.

“To my knowledge,” Veturius told him, “we have only one recalcitrant slave here.”

“I know,” said Eustathius maliciously, “Rufus, our stubborn, long-time acquaintance.”

Tacianus was called in to offer his opinion.

Cynthia's son was accompanied by his young wife, with Lucila, their first newborn, asleep in her arms.

The discussion continued, animated and heartless.

"I do not think we have any alternative," said the arrogant dignitary. "Either we wipe out that scum or it will wipe us out. I've noticed that some of our most eminent compatriots are afraid to confront the Galilean threat in our city, perhaps because of its vast numbers. It's essential that we respond. Lyon is the moral metropolis of Gaul, just as Rome is the center of the world. What would be thought of us if we showed leniency here? For Artemius Cimbrus to protect those rogues and use his prestige to influence the senators and high magistrates in Rome is a calamity we can't avoid, but if we ourselves protect such filthy servants and thieves, would that be worthy of our noble status?"

The others approved his words with open signs of sympathy.

"Slaves," continued Quirinus with conviction, "are passive instruments for work, and an instrument cannot reason for itself. We are the ones who are responsible. It is our duty to do something."

After a lengthy pause, Helen firmly stated her opinion:

"I agree completely. For a long time, I've seen that the Nazarene plague has, above all, deleterious psychological effects. It disfigures people's character and effaces their dignity. In the past, those who were sentenced to death in the circuses were undaunted and actually fought the beasts or gladiators, often retaining their right to life and even earning their freedom. But now, with the teachings of that crucified Nazarene, their daring is gone. There's been a widespread deluge of shame. Combat during the festivals used to be a beautiful symbol, but nowadays, instead of spears at the ready, we see crossed arms and hear hymns sung until everyone's dead."

Eustathius guffawed loudly and said:

"Good point! Good point! If that fad catches on, we'll be living on our knees so those vagabonds can stay on their feet."

The discussion was long and detailed.

They scheduled a day for one, last attempt to reform Rufus.

They would solemnize the event.

The slaves would not be spared the final scene.

Eustathius would bring a buyer from Aquitaine, and if the stubborn Rufus did not surrender, they would sell his wife and two little daughters the moment he was marked for death.

The measure would be a warning to the others and would probably halt further outbreaks of rebellion.

They discussed the most appropriate type of death if Rufus remained inflexible.

Veturius said that an ax in the hands of Epipodus might be a good idea, but Quirinus perversely suggested that a delinquent servant dragged to death by a wild stallion was always a festive scene worth watching.

The day of the purge at Opilius's estate arrived under a cloud of heavy expectations.

Undisguised anguish was written on the faces of many of the servants who were gathered in a large courtyard.

Veturius, Tacianus and Galba, followed by Quirinus, some other distinguished personalities and the slave merchant, entered the area haughtily and unrestrained.

Rufus, flanked by muscular guards, was brought to the center of the square, which was crowded to the limits with men, women and children.

Veturius ordered a woman and two girls to approach.

They were Dioclecia, the prisoner's wife, and his two little daughters Rufilia and Diona, who hugged him eagerly and happily.

"Papa! Papa!"

Their sweet voices echoed poignantly, eliciting tears, while the slave wept openly, the tears flowing from his eyes like diamond drops of dew rolling down his expressive bronze face.

Epipodus obeyed a signal from his master and separated the lovely family. Opilius's voice rang out, his words infused with maximum energy:

"Rufus! The decisive moment has come! Swear allegiance to the gods and you will be spared; follow the Galilean impostor and you will be put to death. Your family will be banished forever. Choose, this second!"

"Ah, sir!" the servant cried, falling to his knees. "Please do not condemn me! Have mercy! I have been a slave in this house since I was born!"

Overcome with anguish, the poor man fell silent and lowered his once erect and proud head into the dust at Veturius's feet.

"Never mind the past! This is now! Why the Nazarene illusion, when our gods have given you plenty of bread and a happy life?"

Rufus, however, raised his head and regained his composure.

He looked at his wife, who was gazing at him sorrowfully, and then held out his arms to Dionia, a sweet, dark-skinned four-year-old, who rushed to him asking trustingly:

"Aren't you coming with us, Papa?"

Rufus looked at the little girl with unspeakable tenderness, but did not answer. No one could imagine the drama going on behind that face, furrowed by suffering.

His motionless eyes had stopped weeping.

A sudden and unwavering resolution was stamped on his face.

He shifted his attention to the heavens in a familiar attitude of prayer, but Opilius shouted:

"Stop stalling! Stop stalling! Will you now deny the Nazarene superstition and despise the imposter of the cross?"

"The Gospel is divine revelation," said Rufus, possessed with an impressive calm, "and Jesus is not a deceiver but the Master of eternal life..."

"How dare you?" interrupted Veturius angrily. "Your death will be nothing more than suicide and you will be the executioner of your own family. Dioclecia and the girls will be sold off, and as for you, in a few moments you will descend to be with the powers of hell."

He gave him a rancorous look and added after a brief pause:

"You miserable wretch, aren't you afraid?"

The slave, who seemed to be enveloped in vigorous spiritual forces, looked at him sadly and replied:

"Sir, those who are about to die are staring the truth in the face... It grieves my heart to see my wife and daughters humiliated by the uncertain fate that awaits them on earth; however, I'm handing them over to the Judge of Heaven. You may condemn me today. The house, land, trees and gold will

remain in your hands. But tomorrow you will be called to settle accounts at the divine tribunal. Where are those who persecuted and condemned in another time? They have all become dust, where servants and masters are mingled together. The litters of vanity and pride rot over time... I do not fear death, which for you is an enigma and mystery, but for me, freedom and life..."

The large assembly listened in an irrepressible stupor of amazement.

Opilius, perhaps constrained by invisible cords, was as motionless as the carved staff he was leaning on as a prominent sign of his domestic authority.

"You mention my wife and daughters' lamentable situation," Rufus continued after a brief pause, "in view of your decision to exile them to other lands. However, with the respect that your family has always deserved, I am led to ask about your own ancestors... Where might your parents be living today? The rights of patricians did not keep your forefathers from their obligations to the grave. You are as separated from them as I will be from my family from now on. And while your longing wanders like a useless shadow haunting your days, my wife's suffering, as well as my own, will give us the comforting assurance that we are taking part in building a better world... Yes, we are slaves born under the heavy yoke of cruel captivity; even so, our minds are free to worship God according to our understanding. Other friends before us have known martyrdom... How many have been killed in circuses, on crosses and bonfires, and in the courts? How many have gone to their graves, bearing burdens of affliction! Nonetheless, our wounded hearts, like wood thrown on the fire, feed the flames of the sanctifying ideal that will illuminate humanity! Our children will never be orphans. Wards of Christ in the world, they are the blessed heritage of our faith, destined for a great future... The bliss of Heaven dwells with us in the prisons of earth. Our sufferings are like the thinning shadows of dawn that mingle with the emerging light of a new day!"

The prisoner looked straight at Veturius with courageous serenity, and said without affectation:

"But you, overbearing Romans, tremble while you laugh! Jesus reigns over Caesar!"

Conquering the heaviness that had come over him, Opilius Veturius waved his arms and cried:

"Shut up! Not another word! Epipodus, the whip!"

The overseer cracked the whip on the slave's face, while Veturius quickly closed the deal with the slave merchant.

Dioclecia and her daughters were sold for a meager price.

While a wild horse was being harnessed, the martyr's wife tried to throw herself into his arms, but some friends led her and the little girls to a nearby corner.

Rufus was about to be tied behind the animal, which was whinnying and kicking, when Berzelius, the slave merchant, approached and whispered in his ear:

“Your family shall have a home with us in Aquitaine. Die in peace. I too am a Christian.”

For the first time on that day of terrible memories, a beautiful smile spread over the martyr's face.

Later, some pious women from the church collected his remains in a nearby thicket.

Rufus had been set free to serve the Lord's purposes more securely.

Cynthia watched the horrific scene from the high window of her quarters. Seeing the animal run wild through the woods, dragging its helpless victim, she had fainted from fear.

Trusted slaves, guided by a distraught Helen, were coming and going in the frenzy of assisting Cynthia. Afflicted and downcast, Tacianus forgot his visitors and stood at her bedside.

Two slow and sad hours of waiting went by.

After a lot of rubbing and after a number of stimulants were placed in her nostrils, Cynthia finally came to; but to everyone's amazement, she started laughing strangely.

Cynthia Julia had actually gone mad...

From then on, the Veturius family covered up this disturbing fact.

A year passed without any major events.

Cynthia was taken on several excursions around Gaul in the company of Opilius and Tacianus, seeking an improvement that never came. Doctors and famous oracles were consulted to no avail.

Despite the heightened vigilance at home, it was becoming increasingly difficult to take care of the sick woman.

From time to time, she was found talking to herself in a loud voice, more mentally deranged than ever.

One day she sneaked past the guards and walked to an old hovel where brother Corvinus was helping sufferers.

Quintus Varrus was praying with his hand on two paralytic children when he noticed the presence of the dear woman. He recognized her immediately.

Irrepressible grief filled his heart.

Cynthia was a wraith.

Her emaciated body and many wrinkles, her nearly all white hair and her twisted lips had disfigured her mercilessly.

At first, she looked at him indifferently, but seeing that he was alone after his visitors had left, her expression lit up with faith and trust.

She approached the apostle respectfully and humbly begged him:

“Father Corvinus, I’ve heard about your work for a long time. You’re an interpreter of Jesus! Help me; have mercy! I am sick, tired of it all...”

And probably because she noticed the good man’s perplexity, she quickly added:

“Don’t you know me? I am the second wife of Opilius Veturius, one of the enemies of the Christians! My family thinks I’m demented... Ah! Who knows? What can a poor woman do but go mad when she has been completely cheated by life? Can the heart overcome irremediable pain? How can a tree survive the lightning bolt that strikes it? Can anyone stop a river with a twig? At one time, I was the wife of a man whom I didn’t understand, and now I am the mother of a child who doesn’t understand me... I’m exhausted... I was wrong; I preferred the hell of wealth when God was offering me the paradise of peace... When I disdained the husband who really loved me for the glory of the spirit, I was seen as a level-headed woman... Now, I am trying to restore my soul and they treat me as if I were insane... I’m tired of illusions... I want the blessing of the consoling Christ. I yearn for renewal...”

The unhappy matron wiped away her tears in front of the missionary, who looked at her, dumbstruck and deeply moved. She continued:

“Can you imagine the sacrifice of a mother’s heart, feeding her child day by day, bathing him with her tears of pain and strengthening him with her beaming joy, only to see him give himself over to savagery? Can you imagine the suffering of a woman, a victim herself, who is trapped between disenchantment and regret, afflicted even in her least aspirations? Ah! Father Corvinus, or whoever you are! Have pity on me! I want to find the Master, but I’m doomed to live among the idols that have deceived me... Rescue my bleeding soul!”

She knelt like someone who could give nothing more of herself but supreme humility, and she was surprised to see that the eyes of the brother of the unfortunate were filled with tears.

“You’re weeping?” cried the woman in bewilderment. “Only an emissary of the Lord would do that... I’m guilty! Guilty!”

Looking upward, she cried out, obviously disturbed:

“Forgive me, O my God! My sins are great. I have committed crimes that make your chosen ones weep! Damn the gods of stone that throw us over the precipice of ignorance! Damn the daemons of selfishness, pride, greed and wickedness!”

Quintus Varrus, whose aging face and long beard made him unrecognizable, leaned toward her. Overcome with spontaneous love, he whispered:

“Cynthia! Hope and trust!... God never forgets us, even when we are led to forget him...”

A strange glow came over the sick woman’s face. She interrupted him and exclaimed:

“Oh! That voice, that voice!... Who are you? How did you know my name without my telling you? Are you perchance a ghost who has come back from the grave or the shade of a man who died without ever being dead?”

The missionary caressed her tenderly and kissed her hair, instinctively repeating the gestures of his younger days.

Perplexed, the matron pulled away with a profoundly lucid look, as if she were suddenly being called to reality by a great emotion.

She looked directly at him with inexpressible astonishment, and cried:

“Varrus!”

The way she uttered that simple name carried all the love and wonder she was capable of feeling.

The apostle, however, waited in vain for the words that were lost on his discolored lips.

Cynthia looked at him for a few moments in silence, with the look of ecstatic joy of someone who has found a long-cherished treasure...

A religiously faithful pilgrim who had stumbled into paradise could not have shown more bliss than that face, transformed by supreme inner joy.

The unforgettable scene, however, passed as quickly as a lightning bolt in the night.

Her heart giddy with the joy of the reunion, the poor woman suddenly turned pale; her eyes opened wide and her body started to shake uncontrollably.

Varrus, in distress, rushed to support her.

The dying woman grew quiet in his arms with child-like submission.

The gallant patrician-now-presbyter covered her face with his own tears as he reverently closed her eyes.

Cynthia Julia died like a bird, with no death throes, no spasms.

Pressing her against his heart, Quintus Varrus wept and said a prayer:

“O Lord! You, who have mercifully brought us together, would not separate us forever! Divine Friend, you give us the light of day after the darkness of the night. Grant us peace when the storm is over! Sustain our fainting hearts on the winding ways of the world and open to us the horizon of peace! We so often die in the darkness of ignorance, but your compassion lifts us up to the divine light once again! I can ask nothing of you, servant that I am, favored with so many undeserved blessings. But if possible, I beseech you to protect her; she who seeks you today with her spirit thirsting for love. O Master of our souls, help us to meet our needs! We can do nothing without your light!”

Choked with emotion, he fell silent.

His spoken prayer had died in his throat, but his burning mind continued in silent prayer, which was interrupted only by the arrival of a brother who helped him pay his final vows of love to the deceased, whose lips were partially open, frozen in an indescribable smile.

A trusted messenger was dispatched to Veturius's palace, but fearing reprisals, the emissary only reported that a woman, a victim of sudden indisposition, was in need of immediate assistance.

The news was received disagreeably.

Her escape to the Christian circle was an abominable incident.

Epipodus, the head of security, received a stern warning, and a man of the family's esteem, the head of numerous employees, was asked to oversee the bringing of the ailing woman back to the house.

That man was Flavius Subrius.

The old soldier found brother Corvinus, and surprised by his voice, which seemed familiar, learned of the deplorable event.

Glancing suspiciously at the apostle, who had the same name as the victim that he had never forgotten, he respectfully made arrangements to transport the body. Varrus lovingly helped him place in a carriage, which was now a hearse.

Great consternation enveloped the Roman household that had once been bright and cheerful. At dusk a platoon of legionaries surrounded the hut where brother Corvinus was meditating...

Veturius had called for his imprisonment for the investigation he planned to conduct. The presbyter was arrested and imprisoned without the slightest consideration.

Quintus Varrus's martyrdom was set in motion.

¹⁴ An ancient Roman official, appointed to be the chief administrator of a province after serving his term of office as praetor [magistrate]. <http://www.answers.com> – Tr.

7

Martyrdom and Love

After he was thrown into the dungeon, brother Corvinus began to feel the effects of Opilius Veturius's relentless persecution.

Decrees from Maximinus's agents began arriving, ordering the punishment of the so-called "Galilean troublemakers."

Artemius Cimbrus and other influential patricians tried in vain to stop the criminal slaughtering because the deplorable activity was spreading unrestrained.

Accompanied by a number of frumentarii,¹⁵ Alcius Novacianus, an old warrior from Thrace, was festively welcomed when he arrived in town as an envoy of the tyrant in command.

Exhibitions in the city's arena were organized with great attention.

Maximinus's friend had brought several letters to the authorities of Leon, ordering stricter punishment of the followers of the Nazarene cult. And to comply with the illustrious messages, dozens of plebeians were thrown to the carnivorous fury of wild African beasts to the sounds of rousing music.

The benefactor of the poor, however, and other prisoners held in high esteem by public opinion, were held for an interrogation directed by the distinguished visitor.

On the scheduled day, the tribunal and its galleries were packed with people.

It was as if all the opponents of the new faith were congregated there to mock and scorn.

Rubbing shoulders with the incumbent ambassador, Opilius, Galba, Tacianus and Subrius watched the events unfold with somber faces.

Veturius's aging face displayed the extreme affliction that was tormenting him. He seemed uneasy and covered his eyes with his hand from time to time, showing the emotion he was feeling. Meanwhile Tacianus, remembering his selfless caretaker, showed a mixture of compassion and contempt on his face. Galba was as cold as usual, but Flavius Subrius, although decrepit, picked up on the slightest rumors in the large room with feline quickness, seeming to be ready to record the smallest details of the spectacle.

Brother Corvinus was escorted into the large hall by several guards.

Gaunt and pale, he wordlessly told of the hunger he had suffered in prison. There were several red wounds on his wrist and the whip marks on his face revealed his torture in the cell by drunken legionaries. But it seemed that the condemned man's eyes were brighter. It was not just patience that shone in them, reflecting his spiritual greatness, but also an indefinable superiority, mixed with understanding and pity for his torturers.

When they saw the missionary, the representatives of Opilius's house grew pale.

Curses resounded from all sides and tempers flared against the defenseless apostle.

"Down with the sorcerer! Death to the murderer! Death to the murderer of women and children!"

Invectives such as these roared wildly from hundreds of callous, foaming lips.

Quintus Varrus, however, whose peaceful conscience seemed crowned with unruffled serenity, looked calmly and kindly around the angry assembly. The crowd abruptly quieted down, as if overcome by an irresistible power.

Even Alcius, who was used to the aggressiveness of the barracks, was surprised.

He stood up in a commanding manner, and in a vain attempt to assume the respectable demeanor of a magistrate, harangued for several minutes. He stressed the government's concerns to eliminate the forbidden religion and warned citizens against a religious ideology that sought to mix slaves and masters together.

Then, he turned solemnly to the presbyter and said:

“I think I am exonerated from any consideration for prisoners that hold no titles that grant them the respect of the state; however, so many recommendations have been made on your behalf and so many aristocratic families are interested in your fate, that I feel it is my duty to judge your case with special benevolence.”

Corvinus listened quietly to the legate, but uncontrollable agitation dominated the crowd.

“You are accused of having caused the death of a child in order to cast evil spells,” said Novacianus stiffly, “and of having murdered a distinguished patrician lady who was ill and unstable, probably after seducing her with promises of an imaginary cure. However, considering the requests of several leaders, I will deign to analyze the case alluding to the aforementioned crimes and treat you as a citizen of the Empire. But first of all, I wish to certify your fidelity to our traditions and principles, because you have been accused of being a member of the renegade sect, for which we have no other recourse but exile, torture or death.”

He paused briefly, looked directly at the presbyter, and tried in vain to withstand his confident, calm look. He continued:

“In the name of Emperor Maximinus, I urge you to swear allegiance to the gods and obedience to Roman law!”

Inwardly focused and revealing his great spiritual distance from the atmosphere of cruelty and pettiness that prevailed in the room, Varrus responded confidently and humbly:

“Illustrious legate, in accordance with the lessons of my Master, I have always given Caesar the respect that Caesar expects of me, but I cannot sacrifice to idols. I am a Christian and I have no intention of abandoning my faith.”

“What audacity!” Novacianus angrily exclaimed while the mob cried out:

“Death to the traitor! Off with the villain’s head!”

But the devout man’s facial expression did not change at all.

The judge waved a small brass hammer, demanding silence, and continued to question him:

“You dare insult me?”

“I beg your forgiveness if my words offend you, but you asked and I answered.”

Corvinus’s calm and dignified attitude imposed a hush on the crowd once more.

Alcius wiped the copious sweat running down his wrinkled face and said:

“So then, you confess that you are a member of the cursed Nazarene sect?”

“I see no curse in it,” the prisoner replied with no bitterness. “The followers of the Gospel are the friends of fraternity, service, kindness and forgiveness.”

Caesar’s envoy ran his hand over his oily bald head, shook his silver staff over the dais that supported him and shouted:

“You’re all just an old gang of liars! What kind of fraternity could an unknown Galilean teach you, one who died nearly two hundred years ago? What service can you offer society by preaching rebellion to slaves with misleading promises of a heavenly kingdom? What kindness do you exercise by leading women and children to the bloody spectacle of the circuses? And what forgiveness do you exemplify, when your heroism is nothing but shame and humiliation?”

Varrus realized his interrogator’s intellectual hardness, and said:

“Our Master died on the cross because he was the greatest brother of a humanity that did not need brute force or violence, but moral understanding so that it could grasp the grandeur of the eternal spirit. Service, to us, is not mutual exploitation but people being free to work for the growth of each one’s personal worth. Kindness, in our realm of action, is...”

But Alcius cut him off, gesturing angrily:

“Hold your tongue! Why should I put up with your senseless sermon? Don’t you know I can decide your fate?”

“Our fates are in God’s hands!” Varrus retorted calmly.

“Don’t you know that I can sentence you to death?”

“Respectable legate, the transitory power of the world lies in your decisions. Obey Caesar, ordering as you see fit! I will obey Christ and bow to

your will.”

Novacianus exchanged a meaningful glance with Veturius, as if they were in silent agreement, and cried:

“I will not tolerate sarcasm!”

He summoned one of the aides and ordered the prisoner to be given three short lashes to the mouth.

A fierce-looking guard was chosen.

Varrus seemed to be in prayer as he was whipped.

The blood was flowing from his lips, running down onto his humble tunic, when a young man came and knelt at his side and exclaimed in tears:

“Father Corvinus, I am your son! You took me in when I was wandering the streets and had no one! You gave me a job and a decent life... You won’t have to suffer alone! I’m here with you.”

However, amid the overall shock that the scene had imposed on the audience, the bleeding man leaned toward the young man and said:

“Crispus, my son, don’t provoke the authorities! Why do you rebel like this if you haven’t yet been called?”

“Father,” sobbed the boy, “I too want to bear witness! I want to prove my loyalty to the Lord!”

And turning to Caesar’s representative, he said:

“I too am a Christian!”

Corvinus stroked his uncombed hair, and continued:

“Have you forgotten that the greatest example for followers of the Gospel is not death, but life? Don’t you know that Jesus expects us to teach the lesson of love and faith wherever we are? My testimony here in the tribunal or in the arena will be the easier one, but you can honor our Master more sacrificially, more worthily, by working for him on behalf of our brothers and sisters in humanity and by suffering for him each and every day... So, go in peace! Don’t disrespect the emperor’s legate!”

As if the room were magnetized by intangible forces, the boy wiped away his tears and left without anyone bothering him.

Having recovered from this surprise, Novacianus raised his voice again and said:

“Augustus’s legate must not waste time. Sacrifice to the gods and the legal action against you will be carefully examined.”

“I cannot!” Corvinus insisted, unpretentiously. “I am a follower of Christianity, and that is how I wish to die.”

“Then die you shall!” Alcius shouted indignantly.

And he signed the sentence, indicating a nearby field where the prisoner would be beheaded at dawn the next day.

Varrus listened, unmoved.

His faith and imperturbable calm shone on his face.

However, a general uneasiness had fallen over the assembly.

Opilius and Galba embraced the legate with visible signs of satisfaction, but Tacianus felt inexplicably distressed and struggled with himself to rise above committing some act of sympathy. The talks he had had with the caregiver at another time came to mind. That outrageous and abased man had won his admiration, even against his own will. He would do anything not to think about it, but Corvinus’s moral strength confused him and made him reflect. Instinctively, he was inclined to defend him, but it would not be right to allow himself such an indulgence. Corvinus might be a heroic giant, but he was a Christian nonetheless, and he, Tacianus, hated the Nazarenes.

He stood back a few steps so that he could admire the superb statue of Themis standing in the room, but someone ran after the condemned man, who was resignedly returning to prison.

That someone was old Flavius Subrius, who approached and said to him in a low voice:

“I have finally figured out who you are! There’s no doubt in my mind... It’s been twenty years but I haven’t forgotten you!”

Quintus Varrus gave him a sorrowful look and said nothing.

The old soldier took his silence as the confirmation he was looking for, and barely holding back the tears that filled his eyes, he took his hands with their heavy shackles, and said:

“My friend, wouldn’t it have been better to have died at sea after all? How it weighs on me that I have been a party to your death! How I regret your unfortunate luck, seeing the burden of grief bending your back!”

But Varrus smiled sadly and replied:

“Subrius, slavery to Jesus is real freedom, as much as death in the company of our Divine Master is resurrection to life everlasting! There’s only one burden we should fear – a guilty conscience!”

And surprised by Subrius’s tears welling up in sincere repentance, he said:

“If you’re looking for some way to access the truth, don’t put off your encounter with Christ until tomorrow. Do something for your salvation and the Lord will do the rest.”

Just then, however, the head of security, thinking that Subrius was taunting the prisoner, approached and blustered sarcastically:

“Noble Roman, leave this sorcerer to me! I’ll get him ready for tomorrow with a few blows.”

And before the stunned Subrius could move, Varrus was dragged off to prison.

The old soldier seemed overcome by an incomprehensible disturbance.

He left his friends, hurried off to the estate, took all the gold pieces out of his coffer and returned to the city’s center, looking for brother Corvinus’s friends.

Informed by some pious women, he found Ennius Pudens in an abandoned hovel near the church.

He introduced himself to the clergyman and on behalf of St. John’s church, handed him all the money he had amassed over the years, asking him to bless his new resolutions. Ennius was touched. He prayed with Subrius, pleading for heavenly assistance and comforting him with kind words of goodness, understanding and faith.

In spite of such help, the old soldier looked odd, self-distracted, perhaps demented...

Opilius searched for him at home and Tacianus sought out his company, but to no avail.

Subrius had gone to a spot out in the countryside, where he pondered the paths he had taken.

He went home in the early morning, but he could not manage to calm himself.

When Veturius went to wake him up so that they could go to the field to watch the execution, he found that he had already gone there. Galba and his father joined him later.

Tacianus abstained. He claimed a sudden bodily ailment so he could avoid the spectacle. He did not want to face Corvinus, whose serenity bothered him.

Despite the early hour, a large crowd had gathered in the square, along with a large number of eminent personalities, including Novacianus, who had been strongly impressed with the prisoner's moral strength.

Complying with the formalities in effect at the time, Maximinus's representative ordered the executioner to approach.

Brother Corvinus showed indescribable concern in his eyes as he searched Opilius's group, looking for someone who had not appeared...

Heavy moments went by.

Nature, as if indifferent to the crimes and misfortunes of humanity, was decked with light.

The sun crowned the landscape with golden rays while the breeze sang in fresh gusts, spreading the fragrance of the blooming branches far and wide.

Saddened by not having found Tacianus in the crowd, Quintus Varrus turned to silent prayer.

Spiritually distant from the deafening din, he noticed that two luminous figures were tending to him... He instantly recalled the venerable Corvinus and felt comforted by the prospect of dying in affirmation of his faith as well... He was trying to sharpen his senses to securely enter the invisible world, when he heard someone close by shouting loudly.

It was Flavius Subrius, crying out as if possessed:

"I, too, am a Christian! Down with the gods of stone! Long live Jesus! Long live Jesus! Arrest me! Arrest me right now! I am a murderer who has been transformed! I have slain many! Now it is my turn! You Romans are

wretched because you have turned the honor of your ancestors into a river of blood! We are all villains not to be forgiven! That is why I want the new law!”

Amid the general confusion, Veturius approached the aristocratic visitor and said:

“Honorable Novacianus, let’s get this over with. Flavius Subrius has been a welcome guest in in my home for many years. Perhaps because of his advanced age, he has just gone mad. I’ll take responsibility for removing him without causing any trouble.”

The order was issued.

The condemned man knelt.

Artemius Cimbrus, whom no one dared bother because of his status, bravely approached Varrus and covered his face with a small, linen towel so that he would not have to see the fatal blow.

Glabrus Hercules, a former gladiator from the arena, now an executioner, raised his sword with trembling hands and brought it down on the victim’s neck. However, unseen powers were in play that prevented the sword’s blade from hitting its target. When he had struck the third blow, Caesar’s legate ordered him to stop.

There was a law forbidding a fourth blow in any decapitation.

Quintus Varrus, bathed in blood, was taken to the dungeon where he had the right to die slowly.

Veturius had watched every detail of the terrible scene without flinching, and when he went to look for Flavius Subrius, who had left because he did not want to see the horrendous exhibition, he could not find him. Opilius’s ward had taken a carriage and had rushed home.

Deeply troubled and nearly unrecognizable, he called Tacianus for a private conversation and began to tell him about the past as briefly as possible.

The young patrician, stunned and terrified, was listening to his reminiscences when Veturius arrived in an anxious sweat. He guessed what was going on and tried to stop it.

“Flavius Subrius has gone mad!” he bellowed angrily.

“No, Tacianus, no!” Subrius protested in an unwavering voice. “My mind is not deranged! My health has never been as good as it is now! It’s just that my conscience is awakening to its punishment. I have committed many crimes! I will not perpetrate another one by hiding the truth from you. Run quickly to the place of execution, and if your father is still alive, don’t deprive him of your love in his final hour! I’ll go with you; I’ll go with you!”

Opilius was desperate. Betraying an incriminating imbalance that was nothing like his usual calculated, courteous temperament, he shouted:

“Get out, you dog! You’re not going to ruin the harmony of my home! Do not denigrate the sacred memory of Tacianus’s father!”

With its veins popping out, revealing the emotion weighing on his soul, Subrius’s previously stolid and impregnable face took on a fearsome expression and he retorted:

“That’s not true, Tacianus! Opilius told me to stab Quintus Varrus to death at sea, but out of gratitude for the past, I spared him and instead killed an apostle who was with him, and who evidently left him his name. Even if I’m to die, I feel relieved, almost happy now. I’ve gotten rid of the gall that has been poisoning my soul; I’ve expelled some of my vileness... But there’s no time to waste; let’s go!”

But Veturius immediately grabbed his waist and pinned his arms. Alarmed and livid, he called for his servants.

Muscle-bound slaves obeyed and locked Subrius in an impeccably furnished, but dark and dreary room.

Despite his old age, the former warrior was as agile as a tiger in chains in his efforts to defend himself at the height of the attack.

However, before Opilius and Tacianus left, Subrius became inexplicably still. His eyes, overcome by a strange lucidity, were shining, and after a few moments, he said slowly:

“Tacianus, my story is the true version of the events. Something tells me that your father’s spirit has not yet departed. Veturius has imprisoned me, thinking to stifle the truth... Of course, he thinks he can hide me away, as he did with your poor mother, but he is mistaken yet again... and since I am unable to confess to Augustus’s legate to receive the punishment I deserve, I will die so that you may believe me! I will trade my harmful, useless life for the moments of comfort that Varrus deserves from us.”

Opilius laughed nervously, trying to reinforce his belief that the fellow was delirious.

But Subrius remained calm and said to Tacianus:

“After I have punished myself, think about what I have told you and do not waver.”

Veturius prevented any further conversation. He pulled his son-in-law inside the house and told him to get ready for dinner.

In the triclinium, he tried to dispel his adopted son’s sadness with happy, calming conversation, and at the end of the meal, they rested briefly on the large terrace, both of them trying to distract and refresh themselves.

When Tacianus was feeling more cheerful, Epipodus turned up, looking very pale and announcing that old Subrius had hanged himself.

Stepson and stepfather looked at each other in dread.

They ran to the dark room and found the body of their old friend hanging lifeless from the heavy wooden beams.

The old soldier had kept his word by committing suicide.

Tacianus, as if he were being impelled by an implacable energy, did not hesitate any further. He rushed to the stable and as he was climbing into a light carriage, Opilius caught up with him and said:

“I’m going with you. You’ll see that that wretched sorcerer is dead and that Subrius was simply the victim of insanity and delusion.”

The early afternoon sun darted through the branches of the giant oaks that covered the path along which the two partners in fate went silently, ruminating on their own thoughts. However, while Tacianus, young and vigorous, was lost in a morass of questions, Opilius, aging and uneasy, was drowning in agonizing suffering. How would he escape the troubles of that moment if the offender was still alive? How would he regain his son-in-law’s trust if Subrius’s words were confirmed?

At the door of the dungeon, they were received by the prison warden with special deference. Loquacious and kind, he informed them that brother Corvinus was dying.

At Artemius Cimbrus’s request, the jailer Edulius was tending to him because the benevolent patrician had been given permission to bury the body

as soon as Varrus was dead.

Opilius, trembling, asked permission for them to visit the dying man alone and was immediately accommodated.

When the caregiver left, they both entered the narrow chamber, where the condemned man, his eyes immensely lucid, was awaiting his final moment.

The fine bedding, provided by anonymous hands, was stained with blood.

Hercules' blows had crushed his collarbone and had gashed his chest.

Tacianus, overcome with unspeakable anguish, exchanged an unforgettable look with him...

And enlightened by the truth, which happens to great souls as they approach death, Quintus Varrus said to him openly with effort:

“Son, I begged Jesus not to allow me the grand journey without finding you again... I know that Flavius Subrius told you what happened...”

Because the young man turned to Veturius in terror, his father continued:

“I know... This is Opilius, who raised you as a father. I understand how awkward it must be for him to hear this; however, I beg him to allow me this final conversation... Yesterday, Cynthia left the earth; today, I leave it.”

The dying man smiled resignedly.

But Tacianus, revealing his own mental conflicts, let his emotions out and asked:

“If you are my father, how can you be so serene? If Subrius was telling the truth, isn't my stepfather your worst enemy? If Veturius ordered your death so he could impose himself on my mother's life, how could you have tolerated such a horrible situation, when a single word from you would have cleared up everything? O gods! What is the way out of this dark maze?”

The dying man, however, composing his facial expression once more, tried to extend a gesture of affection and said:

“Tacianus, do not be troubled now, just as we are saying goodbye. Do not think of Veturius as an enemy of our happiness... Remember, my son, how he lovingly guided your development... No one attains personal dignity without selfless guides. Have you perhaps forgotten his devotion to your well-

being? Sincere appreciation is a law for noble and loyal hearts. Even if he were a common criminal, he would deserve respect for the caring way he guided your first steps... You believe we should see him as an enemy of our home, but we cannot forget that he is the man your mother loved... I always honored Cynthia's wishes in their smallest details and could not fail to understand her heart's choice."

The dying man paused for a few seconds to regain his strength, and continued:

"You mustn't think that I'm misled in my sentiments. Jesus has taught me that love, above all, is the means of helping those whose happiness we are devoted to... Loving means self-sacrifice... I admit that the past could have been guided by other standards, but who among us can really discern the conscience of others? What would we do if we were in their place? Opilius was obviously loved with infinite tenderness by the soul to whom you and I owe so much, and perhaps that is why he didn't hesitate to show you his innermost aspirations."

"If I must acknowledge you as my father," sobbed Tacianus on his knees, "I do not understand how you can forgive me!"

Varrus caressed his head and, as if strengthened by otherworldly forces, said:

"You're too young to understand the storms raging in the heart... I, too, started out seeing life through the traditions of our ancestors. For me, Jupiter was the ultimate power and I believed that men and women were merely beings that were either blessed or persecuted by the favor or displeasure of the gods... But then I met Jesus Christ and I realized the greatness of the life meant for us... Each person is an eternal spirit growing toward heavenly glory. We are happy or unhappy because of ourselves... That is why we cannot grow without the blessing of great understanding... Divine justice is watching us... How, then, can we increase in virtue if we cannot forgive the hand that has wounded us? Resign yourself! Time calms all troubles... Help those who torment you; support those who do not understand you. How often a criminal is simply unhappy! Don't throw yourself over the cliff of vanity and pride! You are still young... You can accept the Gospel of the Lord and do works that will last forever!"

"I cannot! I cannot!" cried Tacianus, on the verge of despair. "I simply cannot run from the truth! I am your son, yes, but I am against Christ... I

cannot accept a faith that annuls pride and valor! If you were not a Christian, we probably would not have arrived at this pit of moral suffering! I shall die with our ancient guides. I have put all my faith in the gods; I cannot abandon the sanctuary of our beliefs!”

“Calm down, son! This isn’t the time for me to take up arms against you in a religious dispute... You are just starting out in life. How many problems does the future hold for you? How many lessons will you learn through human suffering? Our old gods will all collapse into the dust that formed them, but Jesus will live forever. He will rescue you at some point along the road, just as he rescued me! Tomorrow, even though the wall of darkness will have been raised between us, I will still keep watch over your steps! I will follow you closely in your struggles and I will be with you again, possibly in another body. We will continue to be reborn over and over until our souls are fully perfected... Those who love one another are never separated... Dying does not mean irreparable separation... From a freer life, we can follow the loved ones on our itinerary and inspire them to take a new direction... For now, I have nothing of myself that can help you, but I believe in the efficacy of prayer and I will continue to implore the blessing of Jesus on our behalf... Your temporary inability to believe does not really matter... As for me, I have done nothing to deserve divine protection; still, I have received heavenly support... Spiritually, my son, we are still children on the great and blessed journey... As is the case with the unthinking child in earthly childhood, who grows up without realizing the grandeur of the sun that sustains us, we, too, follow the human path oblivious to the infinite wisdom that sustains us and guides us... Nevertheless, behind all the gifts that make us happy, lives God, who created us for the Eternal Good and who paternally waits for us to grow...”

Just then, probably because he had over-exerted himself, the dying man fell into a hemorrhagic crisis.

Blood gushed from his mouth and nose, making it hard for him to breathe.

Tacianus leaned over the dying man in filial piety, in an effort to help him.

He finally felt overcome with compassion.

Perhaps because he saw love being reborn in his stepson’s heart, Veturius withdrew without saying a word and left them alone. However, the

presbyter could no longer speak. When he opened his eyes again, they were very wide, as if focused on different horizons of life...

Quintus Varrus no longer saw the cramped cell. The walls had disappeared to his sight. The hard bed was the same and he could see Tacianus next to him, but the space around him was filled with spirit entities.

Among them, the dying man immediately recognized old Corvinus and the little boy Silvanus, who were lovingly looking at him.

The holy apostle that had preceded him on the great journey of death was sitting at the head of his bed and was stroking his forehead, drenched in the sweat of death...

As for Silvanus, he was accompanied by a few dozen children carrying exquisite musical instruments.

Varrus broke into a broad, beautiful smile.

Turning to Corvinus with words that the young patrician thought were the effects of hallucination, he spoke softly, strangely revived:

“My dear benefactor, this is the son of my soul! He is the dear boy I told you about in our earlier conversations in Rome. He grew up in the arms of others and was raised in a different environment! Oh, my father, you know that long and torturous yearning tore at my heart! You know how I sighed for this moment of understanding and harmony!... But alas! Those who love each other deeply on earth tend to meet again only at the moment of the great separation... Oh, my dear father, do not abandon me to this affliction... Soothe my tortured spirit; uphold me for the journey of death!... Give me strength so that I can go forward in peace on the path the Lord has laid out for me! Do not let my feet falter on this new journey! I would give anything to stay and devote myself to my never-forgotten son, but our divine Master has honored me with this trial of faith!... I must leave behind the weary body that has served as my tabernacle!... But I am consoled by the certainty that we will continue to be linked to each other by the sublime bonds of love that are the glorious heritage of our Heavenly Father!... Forgive my insistence in holding on to Tacianus in the final moments of my departure from earth!... He is still young and inexperienced... He does not have enough spiritual stature yet to understand the Gospel, but the future will enable us to see him triumphant... Selfless Corvinus, do not abandon him! Help him to ponder the grandeur of life and to discover the light of Christian knowledge!”

The dying man paused at length while the young man stroked his hands, choking back his tears.

Then, he spoke again:

“I know that meditation on the magnanimity of the Eternal One should be my only thought now... I know that only the infinite goodness of the Lord can fill the emptiness of my insignificance; and yet... Tacianus is my son and Jesus promised us unlimited forgiveness when we have loved too much!... Tacianus...”

The martyr seemed inclined to go on and his son was anxious to continue listening, but Varrus’s strength had come to an end.

The dying man fell silent.

Only his eyes, fixed on the anguished young man, spoke wordlessly of the love and unrest roaming in his soul.

Silvanus and the crowd of children who accompanied him encircled the humble bed and began to sing.

Quintus Varrus listened to the simple and tender old hymn that he himself had written to welcome the visitors to his school:

Friend,

Friend!

On the path that leads you,

Let heaven grant your life

The blessings of Light Eternal!

Friend,

Friend!

Receive our flowers of joy

As a greeting in the

Vase of your heart.

When the children’s choir finished, Varrus stood up, amazed.

He looked down at his body, which had become immobile, haggard and bloodless. Gratitude for the friendly envelope that had taught him so many lessons was now bathing his soul in prayer. Within a few short minutes, he reviewed all the struggles and pains of the past with an indefinable feeling of peace and joy.

Corvinus embraced him with the tenderness of a father for a dear son, while several friends in the distance sent him thoughts of love.

The discarnate presbyter found that he was deeply relieved, almost happy, but unexpectedly, like someone who wakes up in the morning remembering some painful concern from the previous evening, he felt overcome by an unseen ulcer eating away at his heart. He looked at Tacianus, who was weeping silently, and recognized that he was his only pain.

He leaned impulsively over him and embraced him. Ah! The heat of that body seemed to fill him with new life, and the rays of sentiment issuing from his son's heart pacified him within, soothing his tormented mind!... He nestled him against his chest with infinite devotion, feeling unspeakable joy mingled with sorrow. Old Corvinus put his hand on his shoulder and said:

“Varrus, there are a thousand better ways to help someone besides the useless feelings of sadness or grief. Get up! Tacianus is God's son. After they die, many people imprison themselves in the dark webs of unconstructive emotions, and like birds entangled in honey-baited trap, they become unconscious loving tormenters of their own families... Raise the level of your sentiments and let's go. Of course, you will return to see your son again and reach out your firm, kindly arms to him, but for now Jesus and humanity must be our main concerns as servants of the Gospel.”

Varrus tried to compose himself and lifted his thought to the Lord in a prayer for peace.

Feeling in control of subtler faculties, he could make out silvery voices in the distance singing a hymn of praise to God.

Then, Varrus remembered the ties of work and ideals that linked him to the Christian community and he found the strength to let go of his son.

Obedying Corvinus's tender urging, he walked away. Outside the prison, hundreds of friends were waiting for him, rejoicing. Many martyrs from Gaul, bearing palms of light that shone according to the spiritual elevation of each one, joyfully sang in honor of the new hero.

Quintus Varrus, with tears of joy, recalled his old friends and remembered Clodius, his former benefactor. He was told he could meet the apostle that very night in Rome in the Callixtus cemetery.

In the dead of night, the luminous assembly set off like a procession of archangels heading for the imperial city.

They quickly reached the great metropolis, spreading the blessings of harmony in the firmament.

Innumerable missionaries from the spirit world joined the Gallic brothers and sisters so that, by the time the travelers arrived at the tombs, they had become an immense multitude.

United in thoughts of love and sustained by a mysterious communion, they created a wondrous ambiance under the mantle of the sequin-studded night, sparkling sublimely in every direction.

Corvinus uttered a heartfelt thanks to Jesus, and as he was ending his touching prayer of hosannas, a solitary star appeared in space and descended toward the glowing assembly.

It landed a short distance away and turned into an old man haloed in light.

It was Clodius, greeting his friends in faith with a smile.

He gave Quintus Varrus a long, loving embrace, and then went to the podium and preached with indescribable beauty on the sacrificial work of the Gospel for the redemption of the world.

All of his listeners were overcome with joyful amazement.

The general elevation of the collective thought sent out dazzling rays all around, which touched the tears that several pioneers of the Good News were shedding, overjoyed and deeply moved.

In closing, the preacher said with feeling:

“Today we celebrate the return of Varrus, our selfless brother in ideals and struggles. A champion of our cause, he honored every opportunity he received. A valiant soldier of Christ, when injured, he did not return injury; when humiliated, he never returned humiliation... In his hours of darkness, he lit the light of his own soul, and when the world thought to defeat him, he uplifted himself through faith and love and gave the Master the highest proof of trust... He understood the Gospel teaching of personal sacrifice for the

happiness of others, and after offering his own life in his earthly body, he has rediscovered himself in the glory of immortality! When he was with us in centuries past, he fought on behalf of deceitful human power, suffering bitter disappointments... A standard bearer of the ideal of political rule, he did not hesitate to crush others by force so that he could reach his goals of personal vanity and pride. But now, through true self-struggle, he has purged his sentiments and purposes, redeeming and sanctifying himself in a long, determined ascension... As a son, he fulfilled all the duties incumbent on him in the home; as a husband, he exalted the woman who shared his destiny, respecting her ideas even though different from his; as a father, he endured supreme selflessness to ensure the happiness of the son he loved; and in his stature as a man, he devoted himself to the moral uplifting of all individuals...

“A champion of service and fraternity, he fought against hatred, exemplifying love, and he extolled the unfading gifts of the spirit by humbly devoting himself to spreading the Good News!

“Now that his soul, worthy of our fullest recognition, has become attuned to the highest spheres of Divine Love through notable triumphs, let us greet our brave companion, who is in transit to the resplendent summits of life!

“If he wants to, he may now collaborate with the Master from the summit of learning and virtue in a daring commitment to sanctify the world!

“As he heads into the future, may the Lord bless him on the sublime path that is his because of his glorious victories!”

Clodius smiled as he finished his greeting, while a moving melody of hosannas vibrated under a sky swarming with twinkling stars...

Weeping with joy, the newly discarnate approached the sublime messenger and said humbly:

“My selfless friend, your words have spoken deeply to my soul. I receive them as a charitable incentive for my poor goodwill, since I do not deserve them at all. I know that your generosity will reveal new horizons to me and that your kindness can lead me to the heights; however, if possible, let me stay right here on the earth... I see myself as incapable of moving forward for now, because my task here is not yet complete. Someone...”

Clodius put his hand on his should and interrupted him:

“I know. You mean Tacianus. Proceed as you wish. The decision is yours. You were granted permission to help him for a whole century, and you will have plenty of time left over.”

He looked at him with kind, penetrating eyes that showed forth the beauty of his soul and asked:

“How would you like to proceed?”

“I would like to be reborn in the flesh and serve alongside the son that heaven entrusted to me.”

The emissary reflected a moment and said:

“On behalf of our superiors, I can authorize it, but I must tell you that Tacianus has wasted the best opportunities of his physical youth. Valuable resources were offered to him so that he could rise to the glory of the good, but to no avail. Now, even though he may be supported by your love, he will be touched by the sting of suffering so that he will awaken, renewed, for the divine blessings.”

Varrus smiled patiently and understandingly, and gave his heartfelt thanks.

The fraternal exchange continued resplendently, but when his companions were saying goodbye to return to their ordinary duties, the hero of Lyon, urged by old Corvinus to rest, wanted to see Tacianus again before leaving...

His venerable friend granted his wish.

Jubilant, they returned to Lyon and calmly entered the area of the palace where the presbyter had been a humble gardener.

They did not need to enter the palace itself. As they approached, they sensed the mental calls of the young patrician a short way off.

Tacianus had been unable to let go of the anguish that had overcome him the moment he had left his father’s body. Plagued with grief, Tacianus had left his private rooms and had gone down to the garden in search of fresh air. Filled with terrible bitterness, he went to the rose plaza, where he had often exchanged views with his father, then his loving caregiver. He seemed to hear, once again, remarks and comments from another time, reviewing precious conversations about writers and philosophers, teachers and scientists.

In his imagination, he saw his father's peaceful face again, and only now did he realize the familiar tenderness in the solicitude of each moment, which he had been unable to discern in his impulsivity.

A deep longing mixed with irremediable grief tormented his mind.

Under the canopy of the glittering morning stars, Quintus Varrus kissed his tear-drenched face.

"My son! My son!" he said, embracing him. "God is infinite love! Do not give up! The chance for redemption always reappears again with the divine mercy! Revive your troubled heart and stand up! Our good and sanctifying struggle has only just begun."

The young man's ears of flesh could not hear the words spoken to him, but he took them in as vibrations of incentive and hope.

Feeling inexplicably relieved, he wiped away his tears and looked at the star-studded sky.

"Come now," continued his selfless father, "don't waste your strength uselessly!"

Gently embraced, the young man stood up without knowing how, and supported by his spiritual benefactor, went back into the house, where he was able to rest.

The unseen missionary prayed next to him and laid his hands on him.

Enveloped in the comforting waves of gentle magnetism, Tacianus fell asleep.

With the inner happiness of one who has fulfilled a sacred and beautiful duty to his heart, Quintus Varrus leaned on Corvinus and left happily.

With their arms around each other, the two friends arrived at the haven of peace and comfort that would be their home in the spheres of immortal joy.

Around them, the dawn was reddening on the distant horizon.

The brilliance of the stars was fading and the early morning birds announced to the earth that a new day was beginning.

END OF PART ONE

¹⁵ Military intelligence operatives. - www.encyclo.co.uk – Tr.

PART TWO

1

Trials and Struggles

The year 250 was moving along under heavy clouds...

The Roman metropolis and the provinces had undergone great unrest ever since the rise of Decius to power.

The new Emperor hated the tenets of Christianity; as a result, he had unleashed a terrible, systematic persecution against the converts of the new religious ideal.

Bloody edicts, strict orders and punitive missions were dispatched far and wide.

Threats, searches, inquisitions and arrests were widespread. Bonfires, beasts, swords, hot iron nails, torture racks, pincers and crosses were brought in great numbers for the flagellation. Awards were given to those who invented new kinds of torture.

And the magistrates, almost all of them given to the cult of fear and flattery, excelled in implementing the new Caesar's wishes.

In Carthage, Christian families suffered humiliation and stoning; in Alexandria, the torture multiplied endlessly; in Gaul, the courts were filled with victims and informers; in Rome, the spectacles of death at the circuses increased.

Amid these deplorable events of the time, the Veturius villa in Lyons was less festive, yet more laborious and fruitful.

Ever since Varrus's death, Opilius had retired with Galba to the world capital without ever having exchanged one word with his son-in-law.

The terrible conflict between them since Flavius Subrius's suicide had left a gulf of mutual silence and cold aversion, at the bottom of which bitter revelations lay, like impenetrable secrets of the heart.

Feeling out of place ever since the moment he had learned the hidden truth about his past, Tacianus had tried to drown the sorrows and concerns that inwardly troubled him in his work.

He devoted himself to his wife, who had always been the target of his greatest affection, and tried to concentrate all his loving bounty on her. But Helena was too superficial to understand his dedication. She was absorbed in attending numerous social activities, traveling often, visiting friends in nearby towns, and sometimes going to meet her father and brother in the imperial metropolis. At first, she found her father's absence strange because she did not know the reason for it, but she finally got used to it and supposed that Veturius was happier growing old quietly in the city of his childhood.

Always accompanied by Anacleta, her old governess, she frequently went to the theater, the circus, to races and games.

Her husband was given to meditation and the dignity of the home.

His repeated requests for her to change her ways were useless. The young woman was a slave to public opinion, fashion and the inappropriate amusements of her status, and found a thousand pretexts to be absent from home.

Veturius had may have disconnected himself from his stepson, but he had not given up his property interests, and to protect himself, he sent a trusted Greek freedman named Theodulus to his estate, giving him the right to share administrative duties with his son-in-law.

Theodulus was a clever and cunning bachelor, invariably willing to grovel to gain something for himself. He made friends with Tacianus, but even more so with his wife, thus subtly trying to separate them.

If the lady of the house needed a ride to Vienna or Narbonne, he was the first to offer to take her. If she wanted to cross the Mediterranean on a trip to Rome and its environs, he was the one that went with her, because her husband did not seem to desire any reunion with her father, a fact that seemed very odd to her.

Despite the youthful vigor of his thirty-four years, Tacianus seemed to be profoundly changed.

He was no longer the young man he used to be.

He had become withdrawn.

Since he did not find a desirable confidante in his spouse, he lived mentally isolated and expended all the potential of his strength doing work in the countryside.

He could not think of himself as wealthy, since he was connected to Veturius's interests. He felt trapped with no way out.

The property was divided into shares with substantial income, but his status within the family placed him in an inferior economic position because Helen was actually the legitimate daughter, with whom the owner of the estate constantly dealt directly by courier.

He had often thought it might be appropriate to purchase a place where he could exercise his own authority; but the plan had never come to fruition. His wife's expenditures were too excessive for him to embark on such a commitment.

Helen was spending huge sums on the extravagance of her social interests.

This was precisely the reason why, having cut off his closeness with his stepfather since Varrus's death, Tacianus was tormented by incessant financial problems that his multiple activities hardly allowed him to resolve.

The only compensation he enjoyed was the consolation he had from the constant dedication of his second daughter. Blandina was born in 243, as if she were a blessing that heaven had reserved for his heart. While his first born, a growing girl, clung to her mother and imitated her predilections and attitudes, the younger one was attached exclusively to her father. She went with him on his solitary rounds in the woodlands and accompanied him during his meditations in the garden.

Neither the reprimands of her governess nor the remarks of her closest friends did any good.

Blandina looked like a permanent flower grasped in her father's right hand.

Every day at dawn, she was the only person in the house who prayed with Tacianus to the statue of Cybele, the mother goddess.

One morning, we find them talking in the large vineyard.

"Papa," she asked, her hair loose and kissed by the sunlight, "who made the countryside so beautiful?"

Her father smiled and replied happily:

“The gods, little one, the gods have given us the trees and flowers to make our lives beautiful.”

The girl, enraptured with childlike joy, took a bunch of ripe grapes and asked:

“But Papa, which of the gods brings us such sweet grapes?”

Her companion, happy with her curiosity, sat her on his knees and explained:

“The one who gives us the blessing of the harvest is Ceres, the benevolent goddess of agriculture.”

Perhaps anticipating further questions from the little girl, he went on:

“Ceres made long journeys among human beings, teaching them to till the soil and prepare a good sowing... She had a daughter named Proserpine, as loving and beautiful as you are. But Pluto, king of the underworld, cruelly stole her away.”

“Oh no! Why?” Blandina interrupted, very interested.

And Tacianus went on, patiently:

“Pluto was so ugly, so ugly in fact, that he couldn’t find any woman to love him. Then one day, when Proserpine was picking flowers in the Sicilian fields, the dreadful Pluto assaulted her and took her to his horrible home.”

“The poor thing!” lamented the little girl, distressed. “But couldn’t her mother save her?”

“Ceres suffered a lot until she found out where Proserpine was. She descended into hades to get her back, but her daughter was so sweet and kind that she had actually grown attached to the tyrant who had forced her to take him as her husband. She sympathized with him and didn’t want to go back. Ceres was very upset, so she turned to Jupiter, the lord of Olympus. However, so much trouble followed that the great god thought it would be best if Proserpine spent six months of the year in her mama’s company and the other six with her spouse.”

The girl sighed, relieved, and remarked:

“Jupiter, our father in heaven, was wise and kind.”

Then, her lively dark eyes lit up. She hugged Tacianus nervously and asked:

“Papa, if Pluto stole me, would you go looking for me?”

“No doubt about it!” Tacianus replied, laughing, “But there’s no danger. That monster will never bother us.”

“How do you know?”

Her father wrapped his arms around her and said:

“We have our mother Cybele, Blandina. Our divine protector never abandons us.”

The little girl had a look of trusting contentment and peace on her innocent face.

While the patrician went to explain a job to some of his slaves, she ran elsewhere and found a big butterfly that was barely moving.

She gathered it up carefully in the folds of her lightweight wool peplos and showed it to her father, asking:

“Papa, do you think that maybe butterflies don’t have a god to help them?”

“Why wouldn’t they, dear? The celestial genii take care of all nature.”

“But what help is there for a poor creature like this?”

Tacianus smiled, and giving her his hand, said:

“Come with me and I’ll show you.”

They walked a bit and came to a clear stream.

Tacianus lovingly pointed out the melodious stream to her and explained:

“The springs are heaven’s gifts to us. Put your butterfly beside the water; I think it might be thirsty.”

The little girl happily obeyed.

And for the rest of the day, they walked and played together, watching the lizards slithering in the sun.

For Quintus Varrus’s son, who had now become introspective, the girl’s company was perhaps the only happiness he enjoyed.

When they got home, flushed and content, they were greeted by a big commotion. A message had arrived from Rome and Tacianus, feeling disconcerted, knew that such an event was never something good.

His wife had become even more demanding and harsher. Indeed, as soon as he entered the house, Helen called him to talk privately and showed him the lengthy message from her father. Opilius insisted that his daughter and granddaughters come to Rome. He missed them, and most of all was extremely concerned about the situation of Galba, who was completely involved with undesirable company, as usual. He had not resigned himself to the idea that the boy should remain single, and he was confidentially pleading for Helen and his son-in-law to look into the possibility of a consortium between uncle and niece. His granddaughter Lucila was now fifteen years old, but despite their age difference, mightn't it be a good idea to marry her to Galba to make some attempt at his regeneration?

Roman society, said the old man, was decaying. Great fortunes had been wasted by the shortsightedness of traditional patrician families.

Mightn't it be best to preserve their property with a new marriage within the environment of the home itself?

Tacianus read the letter. His face revealing his immense displeasure, he said wearily:

“Old Opilius sure does live and breathe gold. He thinks of nothing but money, protecting his money and getting more money. I think that he'd live in hell without a care as long as the kingdom of darkness was built on gold. What nonsense! What happiness could come from the marriage between a fifteen-year-old girl and lecher like Galba?”

His wife was offended and said:

“I won't hear any disrespect for my father. He has always been kind and generous.”

And looking her husband up and down, she went on:

“What do we have to offer Lucila in this province full of slaves and paupers? Besides, the marriage of our daughter to my brother would be a very wise move. My father always knows what he's doing.”

Deep down, her husband wanted to break into shouts of revolt.

What right did they have to decide the fate of their older daughter like this? She was far too young to make such a choice. Why not trust her youthful heart to the passage of time so that she could make the right decision later on? He knew from experience that happiness could never result from coercion.

He refused to discuss the matter any further.

Between him and Veturius there was a sea of sludge and blood. He could never forgive Veturius for the tragedy of his father. The friendship that had bound them together in the past had turned into unspoken hatred. Nevertheless, Veturius's daughter was his wife, and he was obliged to receive the mark of the family in the blood of his daughters.

He could argue, quarrel and fight, but he was now poor and could not conquer the financial giant that fate had imposed on him in the person of his stepfather.

Instead of fighting verbally with Helen, wouldn't it be better to keep still?

Faced with her husband's grim silence, she continued:

"I haven't seen my father in over a year. I have to go. I have no choice. The boat will probably be in Massilia next week... This time, I think I should be able to count on you. My father has been waiting for you for years."

Like someone waking up from a nightmare, Tacianus replied with ill humor:

"I can't do it."

"That's it! Whenever I need your cooperation for some important trip, you're the first one to decline. We could have a vast world of fun and entertainment, but you prefer the smell of goats and horses."

"It's not like that at all, Helen," said her husband, vexed. "My work..."

But she interrupted him angrily:

"Your work is your eternal excuse. Don't bother. I'll go with Anacleta and Theodulus, along with the girls."

Tacianus felt hurt just thinking about being separated from his younger child, and said instinctively:

"Do you need such a large entourage?"

“Don’t complain,” said his wife sarcastically, “We’ll each get what we want. If you’re looking for solitude, you can’t complain about the lack of company.”

Her husband did not answer.

Helen began making preparations.

Seamstresses, flower arrangers, jewelers and craftsmen worked with great frenzy.

But amidst the general enthusiasm, Blandina whimpered incessantly. She insisted on staying home. She did not want to leave her father. But Helen would not hear of it. The granddaughters had to go see their grandfather.

On the eve of the trip, the little girl was complaining so much that Tacianus had to get up in the middle of the night to console her. His wife was busy with various preparations and had not yet gone to bed. Going from one room to the other, he could hear muffled sounds from a small terrace nearby. Unnoticed, he saw Helen and Theodulus having an amorous conversation. The intimacy between the two of them did not leave the slightest doubt as to their romantic relationship.

His heart beat wildly.

He had always been at ease concerning his wife’s behavior, in spite of her explosive temperament.

He felt like strangling Theodulus with his cold, ruthless hands, but Blandina’s whimpering aroused his fatherly sentiments. The scandal would not be worth it. Instead of recasting their destiny, which was now in complete turmoil, it would fall like a fiery arrow on the family that heaven had entrusted to him.

To punish his wife would be to condemn his daughters.

Instinctively, he remembered Varrus, and for the first time, he reflected deeply on the storms that had rained down on his father’s path.

What superhuman forces had managed to sustain him? How had his father been able to bear the unhappiness in his home without betraying his moral superiority?

He recalled the words he had heard *in extremis* and paused to examine his father’s lofty concept concerning women’s rights. He would like to have the same kinds of ennobling thoughts, yet he felt alienated from such a

conquest of the mind. For him, forgiveness was cowardice and humility, an expression of servility.

Then, he remembered Cynthia, the sad mother who had rocked his cradle. He forced his imagination to return to his boyhood and he realized that even on the most beautiful days of his stepfather's loving devotion, he had never seen his mother completely happy. The beloved matron had lived many long years with her soul veiled in indefinable bitterness.

Mightn't Helen be accumulating the same heritage of sorrow?

He overheard a few affectionate words from the loving couple that the night breeze brought to his ears; however, just as Quintus Varrus had done when he, Tacianus, was just a tender angel, he withdrew and went to his daughter's bedroom.

Blandina hugged him, comforted, feeling every danger vanish in her father's presence. And after giving him a kiss, she drifted off to sleep.

Tacianus held her close and then left silently, deeply troubled.

In his bed, he could not stop thinking about his father. He prayed, asking the immortal gods of his faith for help. He tried to stay awake and alert, but the prayer, like a mild soporific, left him slightly drowsy and he, too, ended up dropping off into a deep sleep.

At dawn the next day, he was noisily awakened by his wife. She wanted to say goodbye.

The caravan would be departing shortly.

Helen and her companions wanted to make a brief stop in Vienna to see some friends.

Tacianus was bitter and sullen. He uttered a few monosyllables, but when it was Blandina's turn, she threw herself into his arms in tears. Tacianus became highly very distressed.

"Don't let me go, papa! I want to stay here. I'm afraid to go! Take me to the vineyard!" sobbed the little girl in desperation.

Her father kissed her tenderly and said:

"Now calm down! Do as your mama wishes. Your grandpa is kindly waiting for you! The trip will make you happy!"

“No it won’t!” the child cried, her eyes swollen from weeping, “Who’s going to pray with you in the morning?”

Whether it was the moral torment from the day before that was breaking his heart, or if it was the anguish of that goodbye, the patrician could feel his burdened breast choking with emotion. He delivered Blandina into the arms of Anacleto, who was waiting for her impatiently, and with a brusque gesture, he went inside to seek solitude and melt into tears. He wanted to detach himself from the bitterness that was ravaging his mind, but when the carriages left among the murmured goodbyes of the slaves, he almost went mad hearing his daughter’s shrill voice crying out:

“Papa!... Papa!”

From the outset, Helen was troubled.

Despite every reprimand, Blandina refused to eat anything. The beautiful scenery of the Rhone did not interest her in the least.

And so their arrival in Vienna, after various worries, was under a heavy cloud.

The little girl had a high fever and her heart felt like a frightened bird in a cage in her breast.

Her unfocused gaze revealed that she was completely oblivious to reality. She spoke her father’s name in strange cries and said she saw Pluto in a chariot of fire, coming to steal her away.

Theodulus called a doctor who found the girl in a serious physical condition. He advised against traveling any farther.

As a result, her father was immediately urged to come and get her.

Tacianus responded quickly. Helen’s group delivered the girl into her father’s arms and continued on without the little one, who happily went home.

Then, a wonderful time of renewal began for the patrician and his daughter.

They loved each other so deeply, with the sweet and perfect love of those who seek to give without receiving anything in return, that they truly were enough for each other.

Completely dedicated to nature, they took lovely walks through the vineyards and woods, pastures and heaths.

But they did not limit themselves to walks in the countryside. Tacianus bought a small boat, in which they made long trips down the Rhone.

From conversation to conversation, her father began to talk with the girl about her education.

They needed to hire the services of a decent teacher. There was no slave on the estate that was capable of such a job.

“Why don’t you teach me yourself?” the child once asked him as they sailed beyond the walls of the city, enchanted by the magnificence of the river filled by the recent spring floods.

“I can’t by myself,” Tacianus explained. “The two of us wouldn’t be able to stick to a disciplined schedule, which would be indispensable.”

Blandina rested her gaze on the glorious view around her...

Dusk had descended slowly, plunging the earth into semi-darkness, and the stars in the sky began to shine...

Tacianus rowed easily over the waves from the junction with the Saone, and aided by the evening breezes, he turned toward the center of the city.

They seemed to be absorbed in profound silence, interrupted from time to time only by rapid flights of lingering birds, when they heard a soft female voice singing on the river bank:

*O stars - nests of life
Set in the depths of space,
New homes, new worlds,
Covered by a thin veil...
Winged roses of Ceres,
Born in the sun of Elysium,
You are the home of the gods,
Who have set you in the sky!
You tell us that everything is beautiful,
You tell us that everything is holy,*

*Even when there is weeping
In the dream that leads us.
You declare to the strange land,
Overcome with sadness,
That beauty reigns in everything,
Dressed in love and light.*

*When the night is colder
Because of the sorrow that seeks us,
You break the dark chain
That binds the heart,
Lighting the dawn
Of a new day,
Where happiness radiates
Eternal resurrection.*

*You give comfort to the pilgrim
Who follows at the mercy of luck,
No home , no peace, no direction,
Tormented, suffering...
Temples of infinite blue,
You reveal to humanity
The glory of divinity
In the glory of your love.*

*O stars - nests of life
Set in the depths of space,
New homes, new worlds,*

*Covered by a thin veil...
Winged roses of Ceres,
Born in the sun of Elysium,
You are the home of the gods,
Who have set you in the sky!*

“Who do you suppose is singing like that?” Blandina asked, amazed.

Tacianus, also impressed, rowed almost instinctively toward the inviting nearby shore. As they approached the young woman who was singing, they could not contain the delight arising in their hearts.

Tacianus secured the boat to the bank and they got out.

The young woman, surprised, approached Blandina and said:

“Beautiful child, may the gods protect you!”

“And may they protect our beautiful stranger,” said Tacianus, good humoredly.

And to help dispel her shyness, he added:

“By Serapis! I’ve never heard such a beautiful hymn to the stars before. Who wrote such a lovely poem?”

“My father, sir.”

Tacianus felt something strange in his heart. That voice penetrated his innermost depths. It inexplicably softened his soul. What was that woman doing alone on the riverbank, now covered in darkness? Noting that she and Blandina had connected in a loving and natural oneness, he forgot about returning to the boat and said:

“To tell you the truth, I would love to meet the author of that exquisite composition in person.”

“That would be easy enough,” said the young woman cheerfully. “We live right here.”

She offered her hand to the little girl and led the way.

After a few steps, the trio entered a simple house, in whose main area, a cramped, uncomfortable room, an old man was repairing a precious lute under

the light of two torches.

Various musical instruments were piled on the floor, revealing the householder's occupation.

She awkwardly introduced the new arrivals:

"Papa, these are two river travelers. They heard the song to the stars and wanted to meet its composer."

"Ah! How kind!" And the old man added with a broad smile, "Come in! The house is tiny, but please, make yourselves at home."

They engaged in a stimulating conversation.

The old man was nearly seventy but radiated youthful vigor in his eyes and words.

He told his life story unpretentiously.

His name was Basilius and he had been born in Rome, the son of Greek slaves. Although he was in debt to his former master, Jubelius Carpus, who had freed him, he lived as a freedman, making his own living.

Carpus, a Roman nobleman, was almost the same age. They had grown up together, and had ended up finding wives at about the same time.

Cecilia Priscilliana, his master's wife, had fallen ill with the plague shortly after the birth of their second son. Junia Glaura, his own wife, a slave and a friend, had devoted herself to Cecilia with such zeal that she managed to save her life, but at the cost of her own. When she caught the deadly disease, Junia had made him a widower, leaving him a daughter named Livia, who survived only a short time.

Feeling compassion for his misfortune, his masters freed him on the condition that at some point he would repay them the heavy debts he had incurred to help his family.

However, he had been unable to stay on in Rome, where so many painful memories tormented his mind.

Downcast, he had left for the island of Cyprus, where he spent many years immersed in philosophical studies in an attempt to escape from himself.

There he had received as a gift from the gods – he added, smiling – his new daughter, to whom he gave the same name as his first one.

Livia had come to him just at the moment when he was the unhappiest and loneliest.

Feeling desperate due to the persistent obstacles that faced him, having never found the resources to settle the financial commitments that bound him to his master's house, he had been waiting for death when heaven sent him a new baby daughter in a miraculous way, renewing his hopes.

Ever since then he had been invested with new courage for life's daily struggles.

He recouped his energies for work and resumed the routine activities of a man with monthly problems to solve.

His job was restoring and tuning musical instruments and he realized that his income on the island would not be sufficient for his new obligations. Consequently, he moved to Massilia, where he found plenty of work and enough money to educate the little girl.

Numerous setbacks, however, compelled him to move again, and he chose Lyon for his new field of activity.

He had found plenty of harps, lutes and zithers that needed fixing, and so, pleased with the renewed prospects for financial improvement, he had been in the city for six months, reorganizing his life.

Basilus spoke confidently and gently, but one could detect something painful in his voice that he was unable to express. Invisible wounds of suffering transpired in his words of smiling but slightly bitter comprehension.

The animated, cheerful patrician encouraged him and made him feel that his work had new horizons.

He had many friends and would find him profitable work.

The ambiance seemed clouded over by too many unsettling topics of daily life, so in order to lighten things up a bit, Livia fulfilled her father's request by performing a few songs on the harp. Tacianus and Blandina listened in delight.

The enraptured little girl had calmed down and was now sweet and silent, and Quintus Varrus's son, as if transported to other realms, wandered through many memories, barely containing the tears of emotion that had pooled in his eyes.

He combed through all the days of his past, trying to remember where, how and when he had seen the old man who was looking at him kindly, and the young girl who was singing with a voice of mingled joy and sorrow. But it was all in vain... He had the impression of having known and loved them, but his memory refused to place them in any specific time.

Livia stopped playing, but her visitor continued to be absorbed, thinking, thinking...

It was Blandina who interrupted his reflections when she lovingly asked:

“Papa, what would you think of Livia being my teacher?”

Everyone in the room broke out in a smile.

The idea was joyfully accepted.

And that night, when they said their heartfelt goodbyes, full of understanding and tenderness, Tacianus left feeling renewed. He had forgotten the struggles and problems of his life, as if he had sipped some miraculous nectar of the gods.

The patrician’s formerly gloomy and troubled heart seemed revived.

2

Dreams and Afflictions

We find Basilius with his eyes on the star-packed firmament and enveloped in the gentle breezes of the river as he converses with an amazed Tacianus:

“Life is an impenetrable heavenly secret. We are nothing more than microscopic, thinking organisms. Power is a fantasy in the hands of men, just as beauty is a lure in the hearts of women. I went to Egypt with two priests from Amatunte, and we found many remnants of immortal wisdom there. I thoroughly studied the problems of life and death at the pyramids of Giza, and I pondered the transmigration of souls. What we have grasped via our outward worship is a mere shadow of reality. The political brutality of recent times has damaged the endeavor of divine revelation everywhere. Thus, I believe that a new age is approaching. The world is starving for a living faith in order to be happy. I do not believe that we are limited to physical existence and Olympus must be expanded to meet our aspirations...”

“But don’t you believe,” interrupted Tacianus, concerned, “that in order for society to be happy, pure and simple trust in the watch-care of the gods as expressed in our ancestor worship is enough?”

“Yes, yes,” the old man replied. “Simplicity is also one of the sides to the enigma; however, my dear friend, in our era of immeasurable moral imbalances, the problem of the human being looms large. We are not mere puppets caught in the tentacles of fatalism. We are souls clothed in the garment of the flesh, and we are in transit to a greater life. I researched all the major paths of faith in the archives of Vedic India, Egypt, Persia and Greece, and in all the teachers of days gone by I observed the same vision of our destination of eternal glory. I sincerely believe that we are living temples under construction, on whose altars the divine grandeur will be expressed in the Infinite. In our lifetimes on earth, however, we are only able to lay the

foundations of that temple. Then, after the death of the body we continue to add to this sublime work. In the struggles of corporeal existence, we develop the spirit's powers that enable us to rise to the pinnacles of life."

And after a pause during which he seemed to be reflecting on the concepts he had shared, he said:

"This is why the problem is so far-reaching. It is essential for us to know how to bring out the human dignity inherent in all people. Slaves and masters are children of the same Father."

His friend, who had been attentively absorbing his words, suddenly objected:

"Equality? But that would run counter to the very fabric of our social organization. How can you equalize the classes without harming our traditions?"

The old man smiled calmly and replied:

"My son, I'm not referring to equality through violence. That would put the good and bad, the just and unjust on the same level. I am alluding to the need for fraternity and civility. I see life as a huge machine, whose living parts – us – should all function harmoniously. Some people are born for tasks that are very different from our own, just as there are those who see the common pathway differently than we see it. If we are aware of the fact that our spirits live on the earth countless times, we change the course of our work from life to life, just as the primary school student of reading and writing ascends, little by little, to the highest degrees of education. Consequently, we cannot see how it would be possible to equalize the classes because it would be impractical. Personal effort and its consequent merit are natural boundaries between souls, here and in the hereafter. Hierarchy will always exist as the inevitable mainstay of order. Each tree produces according to its kind, and each one deserves more or less appreciation according to the quality of its production. We can perhaps achieve the necessary balance in our understanding by replacing the words 'masters' and 'slaves' with 'overseers' and 'workers'."

Wishing to tone down the dialogue, the old man paused briefly and then added with a smile:

"We need to be more humane to be truly human. The captivity of the senses and the mind is unjust; so that our world can conform to the perfection

that awaits us, it is essential for us to have enough courage to reason differently than those who have been leading our collective journey for the past millennia. The conditions of struggle and learning will change completely when we finally realize that we are all brothers and sisters.”

Tacianus was not of the same opinion. He had never been able to hear the word “fraternity” without recoiling. Nevertheless, he was less impulsive now as he remembered the conversations he had had with his father in times past.

Basilius was a true successor of Quintus Varrus.

Tacianus conceded that his new friend was probably also steeped in the mystique of the Nazarenes, but he still hated Christianity too much to ask him about it. For him, sole worship of the Olympic deities should be compulsory. Years earlier he would have erupted in a sarcastic and blunt tirade, but moral suffering had changed his way of acting, and he did not want to spoil such a beautiful friendship.

Consequently, he tried to change the subject, and focusing on the philosophical angle, he asked:

“So, you think that we have lived and breathed together in other lives and climes?”

The good-natured old man said with conviction:

“I have no doubt about it. And I will go on to say that no one lives life without a purpose. Sympathy or antipathy does not happen overnight. Both are the work of time. The trust we have between us, the bonds of affection that have held us together since yesterday are not simply random. There is no such thing as chance. Higher, intangible forces most certainly bring us together again for some work for us to do. We proceed from the past, just as today is a continuation of yesterday in the sequence of time. On earth, we experience and are experienced in our ongoing progress towards other spheres, and from world to world, as from step to step, we will finally reach glorious immortality.”

These transcendent considerations would have gone further, but Livia and Blandina suddenly appeared and invited them for a light snack of fruit and drinks.

The two friends happily complied.

During that second evening of conversation, Tacianus seemed happier and more outgoing.

He noticed his daughter's contentment in looking forward to getting together with her teacher, and he disclosed the plans that he himself had drawn up.

Basilius would live in a house near the Veturius villa, where he would find ample resources for setting himself up decently with his daughter.

Thus, they could stay in touch with each other.

Enthusiasm, which is always responsible for the miracles of happiness, materialized the project in short order.

Within a week the desired change had taken place.

A small place was leased for the philosopher, and the first morning stroll was like a wonderful festival of light for Tacianus, Livia and Blandina.

Cool breezes blew through the dewy woodland, passing over the flowers and spreading their fragrance abroad.

Exquisite birds twittered in the slender, branching trees, still green and beautiful like living offerings from the land to the cloudless sky.

As the little girl, flushed by the sun, curiously chased a flock of butterflies, Tacianus stopped in front of a nest full of featherless chicks. He pointed them out to his walking companion and happily exclaimed:

“How much joy there is in that happy family!”

The young woman looked at the scene with great amazement and agreed:

“Nature is always a divine storybook.”

The patrician looked at her with unveiled affection, showing the indefinable feelings springing up in his soul, and said:

“Livia, there are times when the more we trust in the gods the more our heart becomes a maze of unanswered questions... Why is it that a bird can make its home as it sees fit, and yet a man is forced to put up with the influence of others to achieve even his smallest desires? Why does a river's current run peacefully to merge with the great sea, while the days of the human soul drain away in torment as it makes its way toward death? Do the immortal deities show more leniency toward lesser beings? Are we perhaps

consciences that have completely forgotten who we are, shackled to earth for the work of self-purgation?”

The young woman was troubled by the loving flame burning in his eyes. She uttered a few monosyllables and tried to change the subject, but Tacianus, encouraged by the involuntary blush on her face, said tenderly:

“I’ve always felt that family traditions should guide our sentiments. So, I married in obedience to them, and in accordance with them I formed the little family that follows my footsteps. In the wife that the gods gave me, I looked for a sister to accompany me on my journey through the world. I believed that love, as we usually see it, causing so many crimes and complications, was nothing more than a vulgar impulse of souls misaligned for the sake of social convention. Frankly, Helen wasn’t the friend that my soul had hoped for. As soon as our life together turned more intimate, I realized the moral distance between us. Nevertheless, I did find in her a loving mother for my daughters, and so I resigned myself.”

The young man smiled bitterly and continued:

“Life was not tailor made for us, since we are subordinate to it with the duty of learning its lessons. So, I shut the door on my ideals and just existed, as so many others do, quenching any awakening of my soul. But now that we’ve been seeing each other, I’ve been having sleepless nights... I think about some stroke of luck that will bring me the joy of getting close to you, of being free enough to offer you what I have... It’s not much, I know. But my whole heart would be restored if it could see you happy. I have imagined us living a life far from this place, where so many distressing recollections punish my soul... Blandina and your father could come with us, and we would leave everything behind that might alter the rhythm of our happiness. But would it be fair to imagine such a bold plan without hearing what you have to say?”

The young man looked at her tenderly, anxious to examine the state of her soul, and noticing the affection in her tearful eyes, he added:

“We met just a few days ago, but I get the feeling that we are old friends. My wife and elder daughter are very close to each other and will be in Rome for a long time... I don’t want to accuse them of being ungrateful, but I have reason to believe that neither of them would miss either Blandina’s absence or my own for very long... At home, we are two estranged people... Which is why I have been thinking of the possibility of a change... Don’t you think we

could be happy somewhere else? We could leave Gaul in search of different lands, perhaps in Asia or Africa.”

Turning his gaze to the abundant trees, he continued:

“In spite of its beauty, this estate is the grave of the most beautiful hopes of my youth... The breath of death here has changed my life... There are times when I feel like setting fire to the woods, destroying the crops, tearing down the villa and sending the servants away so that I can build a new world out of my loneliness. But who, no matter how powerful, will really do what he wants?”

He looked at the philosopher’s adopted daughter with unspoken hope reflected in his eyes, and gently taking her hand, he asked:

“What do you have to say about so many and such pain-filled secrets?”

Livia, whose blush had made her even more beautiful than usual, replied sadly and simply:

“Tacianus, my father often says that souls who could have weaved a perfect marital bliss usually meet too late in life. If they are not caught by death that separates them at the height of their joy, irresolvable commitments keep them apart...”

“But my marriage isn’t an irresolvable commitment,” the young man interrupted, somewhat disturbed. “Helen would extricate herself from me like someone ridding herself of a burden.”

The young woman, however, although calm, said sorrowfully:

“But the weight isn’t just on one side of the scale. I, too, am married...”

Tacianus felt a cold wave chill his heart, but he remained steady, listening.

“When my father mentioned the troubles we faced in Massilia, he was referring to my unsettling personal problem.”

Livia paused briefly, as if she were rousing her memory, and went on:

“Nearly two years ago, there was a wild party in Massilia, a tribute to the patrician Aulus Sergius Tulianus, who was passing through the city. Urged by friends, my father allowed me to perform several musical numbers on that night of great public rejoicing. There, I met Marcellus Volusianus, a young man who at once was interested in my company and who became my husband

within a few months. My father had insisted that we should check his background before approving the marriage, but since he was feeling old and ill, he chose to satisfy my girlish desires because I had no doubts about the correctness of the young man who had awakened me to the joys of love. He claimed to have come from a noble family, with sufficient resources to guarantee him numerous business opportunities, and he seemed to be so financially well off that I didn't hesitate to accept everything he told us as the pure truth. However, soon after the marriage, Marcellus turned out to be irresponsible and cruel. All the aristocratic manners of a friend of Aulus Sergius had disappeared. Besides being a veritable tyrant, he was an inveterate gambler at the arena and was deeply involved in suspicious activities. At first, my father and I tried everything to rid him of the addiction that had overpowered him, and to that end I didn't hesitate to work as a paid harpist at parties. I thought I was helping him pay off his numerous debts, but I soon found out that he was using my artistic skills to attract important relationships that involved him in vast financial exploits, whose extent I never discovered."

The young woman sighed, saddened by painful memories, and continued:

"If the problem had been limited to material troubles, we would probably still be in Massilia, trying to work things out. But despite my loving dedication, Marcellus seemed bored with my love after six months of living together. He fell in love with Sublicia Marcina, a clever poetess and renowned dancer, and went to live with her, although he didn't officially leave home. We witnessed so many disheartening spectacles that my father decided we should move here and try to start over..."

"And what do you think of that scoundrel now?" interrupted Tacianus impulsively.

"Like every woman," explained Livia, whose philosophical depth, coupled with the freshness of youth, were very striking at that moment, "I suffered a lot at first, but with heaven's help, my jealousy turned into pity. I think Marcellus was too miserable for me to condemn him. I don't think he could enjoy the tranquility of a decent life."

Tacianus looked at her with admiration and sadness, and said affectionately:

“Why do you think that? Such an attitude in a girl not yet twenty isn’t common!... Are you perhaps not a woman like other women?”

Livia smiled a bit sadly and remarked:

“I didn’t have a mother who wanted me. I owe my understanding to the father who took me in! Early on, I got used to following his philosophical digressions and to interpreting life according to the realities that the world offers us. At a time when nearly all girls are caught up in illusions, I was had to be responsible and work. In Massilia, everything cost us a great deal of personal effort, and so I learned that we don’t find peace unless we forgive other people’s mistakes, which in other circumstances could be our own.”

“But don’t you miss the man you loved? Wouldn’t you fight to get him back?”

“Why?” Livia asked serenely. “The longing that I might feel mustn’t stop heaven from showing me the best path. It would be nice if I could share happiness with my husband, but if our living together would cause me to commit a crime against my conscience, wouldn’t the benefit of my absence be fairer? As for fighting for the attentions and affections of others, I don’t believe that love can be auctioned off. Love, trust and tenderness should be as spontaneous as the crystalline waters of a spring.”

“But don’t you believe that happiness can survive in other forms?” And lowering his tone of voice to make it gentler, Tacianus asked: “Don’t you think you and I could build a new home in a new realm of understanding and happiness?”

Livia, extremely flushed, gave him an unforgettable look and agreed:

“Yes, I do! Your noble, calm dedication is like a beautiful, safe shore that would protect the boat of my destiny from all storms. I love you so much! I realized this the moment we first saw each other! I understand now that Marcellus brought me a little girl’s enchantments, whereas in your company I feel the longings of a woman... I couldn’t aspire for a higher glory as a woman than to share your sentiments; however, we no longer belong to ourselves.”

Noting her last phrase, marked by disappointment and sorrow, Varrus’s son interrupted impulsively:

“If you want me and I want you so much, why should we bind ourselves to those who despise us? We’ll renew our fortunes; we’ll be happy; your

father will agree.”

Livia burst into the tears of emotion overcoming her heart and spoke in a faltering voice:

“You have a wife who bears your name. She has given you the gift of two little girls.”

“My wife?” mused Tacianus uneasily. “And what if I told you that she didn’t find the man she had hoped for in me? And if I stated, with clear evidence, that she is devoted to someone else’s love?”

“I do not doubt what you’re saying; however, time and an attitude of sacrifice could change the situation.”

And nodding toward the little girl who was playing some ways away, she added resolutely:

“Blandina is someone dear to us who trusts us. If we behave just like those who hurt us, we might poison her heart forever. What good would it do us to snatch her from her mother’s arms? She is tied in spirit to these branches of her early childhood... Separation would make her see her mother as an unforgettable heroine whom we threw away with a disdainful gesture, and the pure and simple devotion we’d like to receive from her would probably be turned into distrust and pain... If she has to taste the gall of the truth someday, let the cup of anguish be given to her by other hands.”

Tacianus gazed at the little girl in the distance and fell silent, his voice choked with emotion.

“We will be together!” said the young woman. “Love above all else is understanding, affection, communion and trust, an expression of the soul that can endure without material commitment... We’ll find each other in Blandina. She will be our loving reference point. The days will pass over us like waves of beauty and hope, and... Who knows the future? Perhaps time...”

Before she could finish, the little girl ran up to them with a beautiful smile and offered them a magnificent bouquet of red geraniums.

Her father took refuge in silence and the little one dominated the conversation, talking about her lovely adventures.

A few moments later, they went back the way they had come.

In the vestibule of the modest house where he was now living, Basilius was waiting for them, obviously impatiently.

He told them in a few words what was bothering him.

Marcellus had turned up unexpectedly.

Livia grew pale and diplomatically tried to prevent an encounter between the two men; however, Tacianus, looking somber, decided to go in and meet him.

The young man looked to be around thirty years old. He was tall with an elegant build. Beautiful hair framed the darting eyes in his enigmatic face.

He hugged his wife joyfully, as if nothing serious had happened between them, and greeted Tacianus so effusively that the latter felt disconcerted. He even seemed pleased to see his wife in the company of a new friend, as if relieved of a burden on his conscience.

Within minutes, he told them the purpose of his trip.

He had come to Lyon with some famous singers who were scheduled for major artistic presentations.

However – he added, perhaps to indirectly avoid his wife – he could not stay long.

Several of his friends were waiting for his return to Vienna. A lovely party at the home of Titus Fulvius, a wealthy patrician among his acquaintances, was compelling him to return immediately.

Blandina's father saw in the newcomer an entirely different character from the duo he had become attached to.

Marcellus was tempestuous, flamboyant, talkative.

He gave the impression of an intelligent boy playing at life. In his wordy speech, he did not utter a single phrase that showed any maturity of thought.

He revealed a mind in love with the affairs of the arena, of which he was an inveterate frequenter. He knew the number of beasts held in the cages in Massilia, how many gladiators could excel in the arena and how many dancers worthy of public applause lived in the city. But he did not know the name of the person governing the prosperous Narbonne Gaul where he lived, and was completely ignorant of its industries and traditions.

Tacianus listened with veiled rancor at first, but quickly recognized his conceit and began to examine him more calmly and less severely.

But inwardly, he felt annoyed.

This unexpected visitor was a stumbling block in his way. If he could, he would exile him to the ends of the earth.

The idea of eliminating him in a well-planned ambush came to mind; however, he was not a born killer and so he expelled the temptation that was insinuating itself into his thoughts.

Nevertheless, he would not hesitate to mobilize all his efforts to drive him away.

While Marcellus went on verbosely describing his own feats, Varrus's son pondered the best way to engage his friends in removing the intruder.

Absolutely detached from the conversation, he imagined banishing Livia's husband to some remote spot.

He could not stand him.

He would get him out of the way at any price.

That was when Marcellus himself gave him the opportunity he wanted, saying he planned to return to Rome.

He was feeling suffocated by financial problems.

Only the great metropolis would provide him with easy money to meet his needs.

Tacianus found the opening he was looking for.

With a radiant expression on his face, he offered to introduce him to Claudius Licius, the nephew of old Eustatius whom death had taken away. Licius was highly thought of in Rome in the way he organized and managed the games at the circus. He had grown up in Lyon, from where he had left for adventures crowned with success. He had become well-liked by many politicians who would not deny him cooperation and support. Marcellus, of course, would find excellent placement for his intellectual gifts in managing various artists.

There was so much confidence in his new friend's words that Basilius's son-in-law enthusiastically accepted his offer without hesitation.

A letter of introduction was written.

Tacianus asked the friend of his youth to place Marcellus in some profitable and decent position.

After he read the letter, Marcellus broke into bombastic expressions of thanks, and with no consideration for his wife or father-in-law, he decided to travel to Vienna that very day. He promised to return soon to discuss the future with his family. He referred to his spouse's virtues, as if he needed to feed her love with praise, and reiterated a thousand assurances of friendship and admiration to the old man.

And like a restless bird glad to be free, he left noisily for the next city with his friends.

And so a beautiful period of harmony and renewal began for the Veturius villa.

Three nights a week, the palace was enhanced with exquisite music and intelligent conversation. While Livia and Blandina sang to the sound of harps and lutes, Tacianus and Basilius discussed Hermes and Pythagoras, Virgil and Ulpian in invaluable tournaments of knowledge.

Weeks and weeks of happiness were passing by quickly when Theodulus returned, bringing news.

Helen had written her husband a long letter, telling him of her decision to stay in Rome for a few more months, not only to care for her ailing father but also to solve her daughter's problem. Galba had tired of pleasures and seemed willing to marry Lucila. It was merely a matter of time.

Tacianus paid no more attention to the issue and began to give Opilius's agent the cold shoulder.

Theodulus noticed this icy treatment and vowed to get even.

Crafty and malicious, Theodulus realized that there were deep ties of affection between Helen's husband and Basilius's daughter, and according to the dark thoughts he was nurturing, he imagined they were having an even more intimate relationship.

He refrained from any personal visit to the philosopher, but aware that the old man and the young woman left the house one night per week for an unknown place, he subtly followed them one night and found out that they were both Christians, quietly frequenting the despised cult. He kept the secret to himself and became very reserved and isolated, only communicating to Tacianus that he was bringing orders from Veturius to travel between Lyon and Rome as many times as seemed necessary while Helen was at her father's home.

Life went on with no surprises or unexpected events.

Tacianus, happy again, did not even suspect that sorrow was stalking his destiny with unrelenting cruelty.

3

Souls in Darkness

Not far from the Baths of Trajan, in the heart of ancient Rome, a large villa is having a celebration.

The matron Julia Cembra is welcoming her closest friends.

The air is perfumed with a heady aroma.

To the sound of engaging music, skillful dancers are performing strange, erotic dances in the center of a manicured garden where the guests, amidst shrubberies and flowers, are watching with lust and delight.

The hostess was the widow of a famed military leader who died on one of Maximinus's campaigns. He had left her a large amount of money, many slaves and the palatial villa, where he had had the pleasure of growing plants and flowers from the Orient. Hence, the property was decorated with the finest taste. Between large, well-planned flower beds in the shape of crescents, bushes, fountains and marble benches portrayed a picture of regal beauty.

The childless widow seemed interested in defying nature, which had pitilessly begun to wrinkle her face, and she struggled to conserve her youth with well-paid pleasures. She surrounded herself with young pleasure-seekers, perhaps to give others the impression of the ongoing victory of a nonconformist woman facing old age.

Amongst whispered phrases and merry laughter, ignited by the plentiful wine, served during breaks between the various musical numbers, we notice an attractive young woman enjoying the soiree in the company of some female friends.

It is Lucila who, experiencing the desire for freedom in the flowering of her early youthful dreams, is intoxicated by a thirst for adventure with the

Roman society of her time. She knows that her mother has promised her in marriage to her vice-ridden uncle. She is not emotionally attracted to him, but she feels incapable of escaping the decisions of her grandfather, who is demanding that she sacrifice herself so that he can preserve his own fortune. Consequently, foolishly and futilely, she has surrendered to debauchery in an effort to escape from herself.

Just yesterday she had met the charming Marcellus Volusianus, who, when he mentioned Gaul, had immediately caught her attention. The moment she had been introduced to him by an old friend in the arena, she was completely distracted from what was happening. All her attention was focused on him. There was so much affinity between them that the young woman did not hesitate to invite him to Julia's party, mobilizing her own friendships for that purpose.

Marcellus was completely oblivious of the ties that bound him to his distant family and yielded to the temptation of a new adventure.

Lucila's sweet voice and enticing gestures, her sonorous words in the accent of Romans accustomed to the Gallic world, captivated his heart.

Delighted, he had obtained access to the Cembria villa. Sitting next to Veturius's granddaughter on a bench surrounded by Syrian pomegranate trees, he spoke as she listened, captivated:

"I have traveled the most impressive landscapes of the Rhone, but I never imagined that I would find the most beautiful flower of Latin youth right here in Rome. Sweet Lucila, how may I throw myself at your feet and worship you? With what words can I express the emotion and happiness that have overcome me?"

As the joy-enraptured woman surrendered to his affections, gazing at him languidly, the bold seducer continued with an enchanting inflection of tenderness:

"Why shouldn't we get more intimate with each other, if since yesterday we've been feeling enveloped in the same impulse of trust and affection? Life is just a moment of happiness that we live between the shadows of the past and the shadows of the future... Everything is always the wonderful 'now!' My heavenly diva, don't turn a deaf ear to the miraculous call of love!"

Faced with the young man's pleading eyes, she stammered, between joy and nervousness:

“I understand your yearning; I feel the same way... You’ve brought me something that I’ve been eagerly hoping for! But Marcellus, wouldn’t it be a good idea to take our time?”

“Ah! Old Chronos!” the young man sighed, annoyed. “My passion doesn’t want to hear it! You wouldn’t have even said that if you had found in me the same fascination that I have found in you.”

“Don’t talk like that! I welcome you as the hero of my first love. But I beg you! Let’s take it slow! Let’s not be rash! Let’s turn to the inspiration of the gods to guide our destinies!”

“The gods?” said the adventurer, after sipping from a new glass of wine. “The gods are the natural benefactors of our happiness... Apollo is the renewer of nature; he will bless our dreams! And could there be more joy to the eyes of Venus than contemplating a nymph like you, to rival her in beauty? Love me, divine one! Appease my thirst for affection! I have sojourned for a long time looking for eyes like yours that speak of distant stars... Don’t shut the door of the love that is warming your heart; don’t shut the door to this weary traveler, who has come from so far away!”

He entwined her in a serpentine embrace and Lucila trembled at the kiss searching for her eager, smiling lips.

The next night and on several thereafter, they had secret trysts in an isolated spot in one of Veturius’s gardens.

After four months, during which the young woman seemed to have changed profoundly, Anacleta, at Helen’s request, discovered the nightly encounters and found out who the young man was.

She also found out that he was a lucky gambler at the circus and was the private ward of Claudius Licius.

In her mistress’s name, in whose home she had always been a faithful governess, she tried to meet with Claudius to get an explanation, but he was away with his family on a trip through Spain.

Alarmed, Helen waited for her daughter one evening in her private rooms, and hearing her arrive in the dead of night, she questioned her severely and rebuked her incomprehensible behavior.

She had been promised to Galba, she knew her responsibilities within the family circle, and she was fully aware of the reason for her long stay in

Rome; so how could she have lowered herself to the obscure level of a dishonorable woman? How could she have trusted a stranger like Marcellus, someone who could have come from the taverns or even a prison?

Her mother expected that the girl, with her womanly pride wounded, would try to justify her rebelliousness but would comply with her rebuke; however, she was astonished to see that her daughter was reeling. She threw herself at her mother's feet.

Anacleta heard the loud voices and entered the room, obviously wanting to help.

"Mother! Dear mother!" sobbed Lucila in dismay. "Help me! I'm sick... Don't abandon me! Marcellus and I love each other; we belong to each other... Please, don't condemn me to a marriage that I couldn't bear! The gods know that I couldn't."

Helen and her old friend exchanged a meaningful look, as if they were recalling their far off youth.

"You couldn't?" shouted her mother indignantly. "I'll not permit any interference of your capricious will in my father's plans. I'm going to send a message to Campania asking your uncle to come home immediately. We will hold the wedding and I will explain to Tacianus that you had to get married quickly, right here!"

The girl hugged her around the waist in a touching gesture, and exclaimed in anguish:

"Please, don't blame me if I have done anything wrong! Forgive me for the love of our ancestors! But It's not just me anymore... I'm going to be a mother..."

"You wretch!" cried Helen, as if possessed by a demon of blindness and despair.

She raised her arm to strike the girl, but Anacleta stopped her, saying:

"Calm down, dear! We are women ourselves and should understand..."

She looked at Helen with mixed austerity and gentleness, as if she wished to impress kindness on her for the young woman, and continued:

"How many Roman households are faced with problems just like this one? Are we the only ones undergoing this misfortune? We cannot resolve any serious issue without calmly talking it over."

Helen fell into the governess's arms, weeping convulsively:

“What will become of us? I feel ashamed, defeated... So much sacrifice in raising a daughter, so many struggles to be a good mother! So much effort to end in such a bleak result! I will take revenge without mercy!”

But before her words became even crueler, Anacleta pleaded lovingly:

“Helen, compose yourself.”

And changing her tone of voice, as if asking her to recall her own past, she advised: “Who among us has not taken dangerous detours in life? Let's calm down. Don't make your aging and ill father come in here! Harsh words will never correct our errors. If you wish to support your daughter, you have to be patient. No one helps by being angry. If you can't help our Lucila today, then don't say anything. Talk with yourself, and let's await the passage of time. Tomorrow may bring us the help we need.”

In tears, Helen took her advice and left, morally crushed, while the elderly servant helped the dejected woman into bed, and kindly and devotedly stayed with her. Anacleta seemed to have a premonition.

On the following morning, Theodulus arrived from Lyon.

Helen was greatly relieved.

This was the confidant who could give her unwavering support.

Without wasting any time, the two engaged in lengthy conversation in an isolated room. However, after she had wept a great deal and had told her friend about the current situation at home, the thunderstruck matron listed as he described what was going on in the province.

Making his personal version of the facts as animated as possible, Veturius's agent informed her that he had no doubt about Tacianus's marital infidelity and he assured her that her husband and Livia were hopelessly in love with each other. He painted a picture of his life being dominated by this new woman who had won over not only her husband's heart but her daughter's as well, because Blandina was living in her home as her subservient pupil. He said that the old philosopher had to be a conspirator in disguise and was exploiting the girl's talents, because he, Theodulus, was convinced that the clever old man was receiving large sums from Tacianus's funds to keep quiet and go along with the deplorable situation, which proved

even more that father and daughter were nothing more than charlatans from the Nazarene sect.

Helen absorbed this information with the expression of a wounded lioness.

She raised her arms in the air and invoked the curse of the gods on everyone who was disturbing her domestic peace; but somehow controlling herself because of the affection her friend was showing her, she begged Opilius's steward to guide her decisions.

"First," he said, "it would be wise to thoroughly investigate Lucila's seducer. Is he married? Is he wealthy? Is he in a position to compete with Galba in this matchup? This is a very sensitive matter, so I propose that I observe him myself. I'll start before the day is over. I have friends in the arena. Finding him in person will not be so difficult. And when I find him, I'll try to gain his trust, because after the trust, wine will do the rest... Of course, he'll tell me his whole story as needed. Then, we'll see if it's desirable to marry him to Lucila."

"But what if he's an outcast, which I believe he is? What if he's a villain disguised as a gentleman?"

"In that case, what would you like to have done?" Theodulus asked with a broad smile.

Helen rolled her pretty cat-like eyes and answered frankly:

"My revenge is his destruction. Death is the remedy for hopeless situations. I won't hesitate. I have enough poison to clean things up."

They both began to study the various details of the dark plan, and with sinister expectations, the matron's unconditional friend visited the arena under the pretext of watching the gladiators practice.

He had no difficulty in meeting up with former friends, among them Septimus Sabinus, an old gambler who was tactfully led to disclose the fact that he knew Marcellus. He promised to introduce him later that same day.

The young man would be at a soiree at the home of Aprigia, an infamous dancer who knew how to gather many men together at the same time around her beauty.

Indeed, that evening Sabinus and Theodulus were chatting in a lighted hall at the home of that unusual woman who had settled at the mouth of the

Tiber, when Volusianus entered with a gloomy face.

He seemed sad and restless.

Septimus wanted to accommodate Theodulus, so he wasted no time. With a welcoming smile, he lured him to a seat at their table.

Theodulus and the newcomer began a lively conversation about gladiators and arenas, and seeing their spontaneous intimacy, Sabinus withdrew just as the first glasses of wine began to appear, fresh and plentiful.

Alone with the young man, and after they had been drinking for a while, Helen's envoy, guessing his suffering, feigned great enthusiasm for the wine and said:

“What would become of the world if the gods gave us nothing to drink? To alter your soul in a glass, that's the secret of happiness! Let us absorb the wine so the wine will absorb us!”

Marcellus found this funny and forced a smile, saying:

“That's the honest truth. On a dark night like this, drinking is like escaping, disconnecting, forgetting...”

He lifted the full cup to his lips, and seeing his eyes glazed over, Theodulus ventured a subtle probing:

“I, too, try to get away from myself... There's nothing more painful than an unhappy love...”

“An unhappy love!” said Marcellus, taken by surprise. “Nothing can be unhappier than mine... I'm in a dark labyrinth, struggling alone, all alone.”

And disguising the eagerness that gripped him, Theodulus asked:

“Well, what can I do to help? Have you lived in Rome for long?”

Far from feeling that he was being examined, Volusianus, perhaps in his unrestrained desire to bring someone else into the problems that tortured him, bared his soul:

“I'm from Rome originally, but I've been away for a long time. I crossed the Mediterranean in several directions and then came back here from Narbonne Gaul a few months ago. I came for the purpose of finding a new direction in my life, but the gods have not allowed me the transformation that I was hoping for.”

Marcellus took another swallow of wine and continued:

“An irresistible beauty stole my heart. I had no strength and loved her deliriously... But my diva lives so high, so high that even now, in spite of how long I’ve waited for her, she has failed to come down to warm my cold arms.”

“Is she really such a rare Venus?”

“Oh, yes,” the young man sighed, approaching drunkenness. “She’s a beauty that befuddles my mind and consumes my heart.”

“Is she from here?”

“Oh! Who can know the exact origin of a goddess? She’s a timid dove. She barely speaks of herself, probably for fear that someone will destroy our happiness. I only know that she usually lives in Lyon, but is here on an extended rest with her grandfather.”

“Ah!” said Theodulus, slyly. “She’s from Lyon? I’m from there too. I’m here on business.”

Volusianus, somewhat startled, his eyes still glowing with a few shreds of lucidity, said, restraining his spontaneity:

“What a coincidence! I was in Lyon for a few hours before returning to Rome.” And since he thought he might be in the presence of someone who could trace his past steps, he felt a desire to prepare to defend himself against any eventuality and said:

“Can you imagine, bad luck is like a black wing hovering over my days. In Massilia I was engaged to a young woman who had moved there from the Rhone. She then settled in Lyon with her elderly father. When I began to miss her, I went to see her, but to my astonishment I discovered she was involved with someone else. Some rogue named Tacianus had won her over completely.”

Theodulus, who was unaware of Livia’s marital situation, took Marcellus’s lies for truth, and with the lust of a hunter after his prey, said in a tone of admiration:

“Tacianus? I know him very well. And from what you’re telling me, I can identify your beautiful Gallic fiancée as the lovely Livia who is currently occupying his free time.”

He smiled with the look of a caring friend and added:

“Ours is such a small world! Wherever we are, we’re connected to each other.”

Marcellus was startled and wanted to withdraw from the conversation, but fearing the consequences of an untimely departure, he said, disappointed:

“Yes, that’s the one. So, you know the woman to whom I devoted my utmost trust?”

“Only superficially. I observed the two of them on endless walks and conversations.”

Recognizing a valuable opportunity for inquiries, Theodulus asked abruptly:

“And that weird philosopher was almost your father-in-law? Is he Greek, Egyptian, Roman?”

“I have no idea!” replied the young man, on his guard. “I only know that he’s a former freedman from the house of Jubelius Carpus, and that he still owes him a lot of money. One day he bored me with the story of his life, which was uninteresting and soporific, and that’s the only detail I remember.”

Noticing that Marcellus was starting to withdraw into himself, his friend lessened the pressure of his investigation and said:

“My young friend, let’s forget the past! Let’s drink to the present! Since our paths crossed yesterday, maybe I can help you in some way today?”

The distrust that had been bothering the young man seemed to lessen and he sighed:

“Don’t I wish! I had the misfortune of falling in love with the granddaughter of the wealthy Veturius.”

“Opilius Veturius?” interrupted Theodulus, pretending to be puzzled.

“That’s the one.”

Appearing to be enthusiastically joyful, Theodulus said:

“I know him as well. You mean, of course, the lovely Lucila.”

Delighted with this unexpected revelation, Marcellus opened his heart in a long conversation, and explained that he had been meeting the girl every day in a small arbor in the garden; however, without his knowing why, Lucila

had not come down to talk with him as usual that night. This was why he was feeling discouraged and distressed.

Theodulus said some reassuring words to him and advised him to try again the following night.

Wasn't he old Veturius's friend from childhood? And revealing that he enjoyed a certain closeness with Helen, he offered to find some way to help him.

He promised to speak with the girl's family the next day and told Marcellus to wait in the garden at the usual time. He would be there in person to give him the good news.

Volusianus was beside himself with joy.

Deeply touched, he shook his friend's hand effusively and looked at him, enraptured, as if he were standing before a demigod.

Feeling quite content, the two of them watched some women performing exotic dances.

Then, they bid each other farewell with the cheerful laughter of old friends.

Early the next morning, Theodulus went to Helen to give her the news.

She listened to his report, both curiously and indignantly.

When he finished all the details, she said angrily:

"I can't believe he used to be engaged to the woman who is invading my home!... That miserable pair of born criminals! She steals my husband and he defiles my daughter. I'm glad I'm alive and well to prevent any new victims!"

An ironic smile appeared on her face and she asked her companion:

"What do you suggest?"

"Helen, the matter could have been settled yesterday. We crossed the Tiber together. He was drunk and could have fallen into the water to sleep forever. No one would have missed him. He's a scoundrel of no use to anyone. All the information I gathered at the arena was in agreement about him. He's irresponsible, lazy and a gambling crook. Nobody knows why he captured Claudius Licinius's interest. He has no name, no money, no background, so how could he compete with our Galba in such an important marriage? But I didn't want to do anything before consulting you. I

encouraged him to meet me tonight regarding any decision that has been made. Of course, I will act according to your wishes.”

She thought and thought, and after a long pause said resolutely:

“You did well. I’m overjoyed with the assurance of your loyalty. I’ve just thought of a plan, in which Tacianus will be called to account with the elimination of our enemies. A sordid old man like that Basilius shouldn’t require much consideration from us, but to move forward with no impediments, we’ll ask Carpus about him. But first things first. Volusianus will die in the gazebo before the day is over. I have just the thing to put in his glass, and you can greet him with it when he arrives.”

“And the girl?” Theodulus asked, impressed with the daring plan.

“Well, now,” explained the matron shamelessly, “the carriage doesn’t choose the passenger. Lucila, for now, is nothing more than a naive doll. She’ll drop her crazy behavior, accept reality, and thank us later. Marriage, above all, is a business. I refuse to believe that she would prefer an idler to a gentleman of my brother’s caliber. I married in obedience to my father. Now, I think I have reached the point when I should be obeyed.”

Theodulus was silent.

It would be useless to argue with that iron will.

While Anacleta was helping the sick young woman, Helen and her friend spent the day plotting the event they had planned for that night.

Marcellus kept his word. Right on time, elegant and well-dressed, he arrived in the garden and found his supposed benefactor from the day before waiting for him in the secluded green sanctuary, where he and Lucila used to dream together.

Theodulus embraced him, unabashed.

“My heart is about to jump out of my chest,” said the young man, trembling with eagerness. “So, have the gods favored me?”

“Why wouldn’t they? The immortals never disdain youth...”

“And Lucila?” the new arrival interrupted impatiently.

“She and her mom are going to meet us here. Her grandfather wants to examine the matter of marriage. No one will object as long as the lovebirds get along with each other and are happy.”

Marcellus jubilantly rubbed his hands together and exclaimed:

“Oh! Glory at last! Victorious love and a fat inheritance!”

“Yes, indeed,” said his friend, in an indefinable tone of voice. “Of course, you’ll receive a just inheritance.”

The young man stared at the lighted windows of the magnificent mansion, and turning to Theodulus, exclaimed delightedly:

“Oh! How slowly the time passes!... Theodulus, you shall be rewarded. I’ll give you some good horses and a full purse! You can count on me. I’m the luckiest man on earth!”

Pressed by Marcellus, who was overflowing with joy, Theodulus agreed very calmly:

“Yes, thanks to the gods, I can see that you’re right where you need to be.”

He asked the young man to wait a few minutes and went inside the house, saying he needed to speak with the ladies.

A few moments later, Theodulus reappeared with a silver platter holding two glasses of exquisite beauty and a graceful wine flask. He said to Volusianus:

“Let’s celebrate our victory! Mother and daughter won’t be long. In a few minutes, the torches will be lighted.”

The liquid foamed invitingly, and the young man accepted the cup Theodulus offered him.

“To Dionysus! Protector of wine, nature and happiness!” toasted Massilia’s adventurer, intoxicated with hope.

“To Dionysus!” repeated Helen’s agent without blinking.

Marcellus swallowed the drink to the last drop. When he tried to put the glass back on the tray, he felt an indescribable fire burning in his throat. He wanted to scream, but could not. For a few moments, he had the impression that his head was inexplicably spinning on his shoulders. He could no longer stay on his feet and fell helplessly onto the flowery marble floor, injuring his neck.

Theodulus leaned over and helped him lie on his back.

A hoarse groan escaped from his chest.

He fastened his bloodshot eyes on his poisoner, firing hatred and bitterness at him in the darkness, trying to expel the bloody drool dripping from his mouth. He asked in a weak voice:

“Why kill me... you coward?”

“You hoped for the protection of the gods,” Theodulus replied cynically, “and death is the legacy that the immortals reserve for men of your sort.”

“Bastards!... Bastards!”

Those were his final words. His limbs began to stiffen and his face turned into a ghastly mask.

The killer quickly walked away to meet someone who was watching from behind a leafy linden tree.

It was Helen, who smiled happily when she learned that everything had been accomplished.

She accompanied her friend to the tiny vine-covered pavilion, and in the dim light of a torch, she looked at the still-warm corpse.

“He was a handsome man!” she remarked insensitively. “He could have been loved and happy if he had been able to stay on the level where he was born.” She exchanged an unforgettable look with the executor of her decisions, as if they were sealing, without words, yet another dark moral pact, and walked away. As it grew later, Theodulus himself, dressed in the typical clothing of the slaves of Veturius’s house, left the garden pushing a burden in a large hand cart usually used for cleaning services.

He walked along cautiously, avoiding contact with late passers-by, and looking quite calm, went down a long road until he reached the river bank.

The breezes that blew from the Tiber soothed his tormented mind.

There he rested, worried and brooding.

The waning moon looked like a lantern that had stopped in the sky to peer at his guilty conscience.

He reflected thoughtfully, staring despondently at the small bundle of flesh that used to be Volusianus.

The mysteries of life and death tormented his thought. Did life end in the grave? Hours earlier, he had seen Marcellus dazzled by the joy of living. But those hands that he had seen nervous and hot were now cold and lifeless. His chattering mouth had become rigid. Could a few drops of poison eliminate a man forever?

A distressing uneasiness was growing in his soul.

Was there justice in annihilating our neighbor without giving it a further thought?

Were he and Helen in a position to condemn anyone?

He sought the remorse that was gnawing at his thought, and yet he resisted.

Wanting to escape from himself, he walked to the Tiber, focused his attention on the moving body of water for several minutes and waited at length for an opportunity to dispose of his burden.

When a large mass of clouds covered the fading moon, thickening the darkness all around, he stood up, uncovered the corpse and threw it into the watery current.

Feeling relieved, he headed back home.

The victim's body was found the next day. However, in the arena, where he had left numerous friends in the wings, everyone recalled that Marcellus had lived a life of wine and adventure. His death was therefore judged to be an accident with no other implications, particularly because his remains were collected not far from the home of Aprigia, of whose youth and attractions he had become a fervent admirer.

The news spread quickly and soon arrived at Veturius's home. Lucila was overcome with unspeakable grief.

Helen had been expecting the effects of the event and isolated her daughter in a private room, where the girl, distraught and adrift, gave in to deep depression.

For three days, supported by her mother and Anacleta, she lingered in absolute unconsciousness, on the verge of death.

Gradually, however, she emerged from her prostration.

Her youthful vigor had overcome her inner despondency.

Although she felt sad and disenchanted, Lucila started to eat again and recovered the healthy color that had graced her face.

And seeing these positive improvements, Helen got on with her life and the gradual implementation of the plan that had darkened her implacable mind.

Pretending she had to fulfill various requests from friends in Gaul, she told Opilius of her decision to pay some visits, and asked him for information about Jubelius Carpus.

The old man seemed disappointed.

He told her that Carpus was a former landowner, whose house had been standing solidly for many years on Pinciana Way.

He had known him when they were younger, but had lost contact with him. He was unaware of his situation and thought his daughter should give up such a search.

Helen, however, was too determined to give up. And taking a carriage in Theodulus's company, she found the house according to the directions given her.

The visitors were graciously welcomed and were led by a clean-shaven young man to an enormous room where the head of the family received them cordially.

Theodulus explained the purpose that had brought them there. He spoke of the great generosity of Jubelius, who had been the benefactor of a friend, and he interspersed his presentation with respectful questions.

Their host, who had the reddish face of a man who had used and abused wine for a long time, listened to him amiably and then explained:

“I must tell you, first of all, that my parents died more than ten years ago. I am Saturninus, the firstborn, and am currently responsible for the family's affairs.”

Responding to Theodulus's hasty observation, extolling his parents' goodness, he said sarcastically:

“My parents were actually champions of libertinism. If they had ever been called to govern, they would have driven the Roman Empire into bankruptcy. In fact, they were accused several times of being Nazarenes because their benevolence was like a kind of madness.”

The recent arrivals understood right away what sort of businessman they were dealing with.

Theodulus ventured a question about the old tuner in Lyon, and Saturninus quickly answered:

“According to our records, I know that Basilius used to be a slave here, but was relieved of his obligations, as were a few other servants whose whereabouts are unknown.”

And he added with an enigmatic smile:

“Our interests were vilely exploited. For over ten years, I have been trying to correct major errors and put a stop to egregious usurpations.”

In her sweetest voice, Helen remarked very calmly:

“I can see that we will have no difficulty in coming to a good understanding. It just so happens that Basilius is now an old man and is our invaluable collaborator in Lyon. We owed him for so many services, and he was so distressed about his past debts, that we promised to pay them off personally.”

Saturninus’s eyes lit up.

Showing clear signs of ambition and joy, he responded enthusiastically:

“By Jove! Honesty still exists on the earth! This is the first time I’ve found a debtor willing to help us. I won’t put any embargo on the transaction. Basilius will be released for good.”

He asked to be excused for a few moments and then returned with the documents.

The visitors did not haggle.

Saturninus added significant interest to the principle, and Theodulus, on a signal from Helen, paid it without blinking.

With the corroborative evidence of the ransom in their possession, the two left. Along the way, Helen turned to her companion and said:

“Now the old scoundrel is ours. He and his daughter won’t escape from us. My plan is progressing nicely. Let’s move on to the next phase. I’ll plan with my father for your immediate return to the colony. You’ll be the emissary of a letter from me to Tacianus, imploring him to come to Rome right away with Blandina. I’ll use Lucila’s illness as a pretext, and you’ll

suggest to him that she's slowly dying. I'm convinced that my husband will respond. We'll calculate the time we need to get back to Lyon before he can cross the water. He won't find us when he gets here, since I will have instructed my father to explain our hasty return as being the doctor's advice in a final attempt to save the ailing girl. And so we'll find ourselves in Lyon, sufficiently unencumbered to do our punitive work. I'll get some important letters to encourage persecution of the Nazarenes, and we can present the tuner as a runaway slave and a dangerous revolutionary. We'll stir up the government authorities. With this documentation, the philosopher and his daughter will of course be eliminated."

She mused, her head down, for a few moments and concluded:

"So, when Tacianus and Blandina get back home, they'll discover that the deed has already been done."

Her friend, astonished, quickly agreed.

"Exactly, the plan is perfect."

Helen fell silent.

Theodulus rested his eyes on her in amazement, not knowing whether he felt admiration or fear.

In a few moments, the carriage stopped in front of Veturius's gardens.

Night was falling...

The twilight was covered with a heavy mist like the moral fog enveloping those souls in darkness.

4

Sacrifice

Life went along peacefully in Lyon.

Helen had been away for more than twelve months, but to Tacianus's surprise, he felt cheerful and happy.

Significant events had changed the face of the Empire. Decius had died and the imperial scepter was now wielded by Gallus, who began to rule the Roman world with appalling spectacles of recklessness and debauchery. Leaders and judges, soldiers and politicians seemed dominated by the moral decay that was spreading, destroying everything.

A terrible epidemic began to spread throughout the provinces.

The plague had appeared at a festival in Neocaesarea and it was proclaimed everywhere that the malignancy was the fruit of Christian sorcery.

Availing themselves of the opportunity, priests of the Olympic deities sought to spread the superstition that the gods were punishing the people, fighting the steadily-growing Nazarene mystification.

As a result, collective prayers were held at the shrines day and night. Numerous temples were opened to charity to receive the sick and the dying.

The priests of Jupiter, Cybele and Apollo gathered in prayer, imploring the assistance and relief of Aesculapius, on whose altars large numbers of cocks and snakes were offered for votive sacrifices.

Along with the unification of the various cults and believers around the god of medicine, hatred of Christianity was on the upswing.

Buildings for Christian worship were stoned and set on fire once again. More than ever, the followers of Jesus were stoned, imprisoned, banished or exterminated without mercy.

Tacianus had never changed his spiritual orientation – although to honor the memory of his father, he kept silent about the Gospel – and inwardly considered the new persecution to be just.

While the philosopher and his daughter hid the pain of their bleeding hearts, Tacianus intentionally disregarded what was happening outside the walls of his home and divided his soul between his little daughter and his two friends, considering himself the happiest of mortals.

He felt renewed and seemed to find in that love a blessed source of energy and invigoration.

He was reflecting on how convenient it was for his wife to linger indefinitely in Rome, thereby guaranteeing the happiness of both of them, when Theodulus arrived from the imperial city, visibly anxious, bringing him the letter in which his spouse requested his immediate presence.

Helen seemed to pour out her heart in the long letter.

She told Tacianus that although she was anxious to return home, Lucila had come down with the plague and the doctors believed she was close to death. She was growing worse every day. That was why she, Helen, was imploring him to come to her and bring Blandina with him. She movingly described her efforts as a mother. She was doing all she could on her own. Galba – uncle and fiancé – was in Campania, attending to private interests, and Anaclea was suffering from exhaustion. Even Veturius was exhausted and depressed, and was begging him to forget any unpleasantness of the past. He was waiting for him with open arms not as a father-in-law but as a father.

Tacianus felt too distant from Helen and Veturius to feel too sorry for them; however, the prospect of losing his sick child made his heart ache.

Tears filled his eyes as he thought about that first flower of his ideals of fatherhood.

What had he done as a father responsible for the dying young woman? Lucila had grown up absorbed in her mother's whims. Indeed, he had never been inclined to devote much attention to her, so wouldn't it be reasonable to make up for that now with some show of love and affection?

However, the hope of any reconciliation with his father-in-law was repugnant to him, and Helen's possible return did not bring him the least bit of pleasure.

Theodulus waited in vain for his answer.

After waiting some time for Tacianus to answer, he said with disappointment:

“I’m bringing some unflattering news regarding young Lucila and...”

“I know,” Tacianus interrupted brusquely.

Opilius’s agent turned and left, and Tacianus went to his private office, where he thought for a while without finding a solution to the enigma that was tormenting him.

At dusk, in his younger daughter’s company, he went to the tuner’s house to discuss the matter.

The letter was carefully read.

Livia turned pale, but tried to resist any unconstructive display of emotion.

The message from Rome troubled her soul.

Those words from that far-off woman had imposed the painful conviction on her that Tacianus’s love really could never belong to her. An inadvertent grief overtook her inner world, as if she had been warned of some approaching misfortune. She wanted to weep convulsively, but her father’s serenity and the self-assured civility of the man she loved helped her keep her equilibrium.

Tacianus commented offhandedly about the difficulties he was experiencing with regard to reconnecting with his father-in-law.

Moreover, he had not seen Rome since his youth and would prefer not to go back there.

Mightn’t it be better just to ignore the request?

What good would his presence do his ailing daughter if the wealthy Opilius could surround her with doctors, nurses and servants?

Blandina listened to his comments, clearly upset and clinging to her unhappy governess’s waist.

The old man, however, listened to his words with fatherly tenderness.

Perceiving his uncertainty and feeling urged to speak, he counseled him calmly:

“But son, there are core obligations in the area of common duties in our lives. The obligations related to parenting are essential and foremost. Don’t hesitate. If your old father-in-law offended your pride, forgive and forget. Younger people should understand the older ones and support them. I fervently hope that heaven will favor us with the healing of your daughter, but if death should visit her without the support of your love, don’t think you’ll be free from the shadow of remorse that will follow you like a subtle tormenter.”

The patrician did not reply. He was immersed in the thoughts that possessed his undecided soul.

Livia, however, tried to defend his unwillingness to make the trip:

“But Papa, what if Tacianus is being inspired by forces of a higher order. What if he really shouldn’t go... Shouldn’t he trust his intuition? What if he met with some tragedy on the road? What if he caught the plague?”

The old man shook his head and replied:

“Daughter, when it comes to doing what is right, I think we have to follow it through to the end. Even if wickedness tears us to shreds, even if ignorance betrays us, I believe that duty demands our personal effort in the smallest aspects of our lives. Tacianus’s daughter is sick and her mother says that she is on the verge of death. Both of them are in dire need of his assistance. What right does he have to ignore them?”

From the experience that the years had given him, Basilus added after a brief pause:

“If you were the grief-racked wife, would you excuse his absence?”

The young woman gave up arguing, but Blandina offered her charm to the intimate scene:

“Papa, why couldn’t we take Grandpa Basilus and Livia with us? Couldn’t the four of us travel together?”

The old man stroked her dark, velvety hair and said cheerfully:

“No, Blandina! Such a long journey isn’t meant for all four of us. We’ll be here waiting for you. When you come back, we’ll have some new songs ready. Maybe you’ll come back with a new harp. Your mamma will, of course, see your artistic progress and will reward your efforts with a new instrument... Who knows?”

The girl smiled proudly.

Sweet melodies wove the dreams of those four kindred souls, who, if they had their own way, would never be separated.

Tacianus asked Livia to sing the hymn to the stars they had heard during their first meeting, and the young woman granted his wish, repeating the song with emotion and beauty.

A sense of wonder hung in the air, although it was mingled with infinite sorrow...

Except for Blandina, whose easy laugh showed her childlike unconcern, the others wore a mask of tranquility on their faces that was completely contrary to the troubling forebodings that had invaded their hearts.

Veturius's son-in-law had never been so sentimental about saying goodbye.

He promised Livia he would return soon.

He wouldn't be gone long.

Since the journey was necessary and unavoidable, he would be leaving the next day solely for the purpose of fulfilling his strictly essential obligations.

There was no need for her to be afraid. He was planning to look into an honorable separation with his wife. Even though he and Livia could not yet enjoy nuptial bliss, he wanted to devote himself to her welfare and that of Basilius, whom he considered a father.

A pleasant place close by would be best for now.

He was sure that Helen would prefer the Rome in Theodulus's company as soon as Lucila's marriage took place – if the ailing girl managed to recover – whereas he, Tacianus, was determined to change his family situation.

He would give the estate back to his father-in-law and would move with Blandina to the new place, where they could all live together.

He was still young and strong.

He could work harder.

Because he exercised regularly with the house slaves, some of whom were skillful gladiators, he had never lost his excellent physique.

Why fear the future, when everything was favoring his desires?

While the disheartened Livia listened to his plans, Blandina followed the conversation with shining eyes. She believed that no power on earth could counter her father's decisions.

Embraces and warm wishes were exchanged.

But when Livia saw Tacianus with his arm around his daughter, disappearing in the shadows of the nearby trees, hot, copious tears flooded her eyes... Irrepressible anguish choked her heart, as if she were being condemned to be away from them forever and never see them again.

Days passed amid longings and hopes in the flower-adorned estate in Lyon, when to everyone's great surprise, Helen arrived with her daughter and brother, accompanied by Anacleta and a small retinue of servants.

Lucila had almost fully recovered. Galba, the now matured fiancé, was showering her with attention.

This unexpected event was also received with great surprise at Basilius's house.

Helen had come to town in the entourage of Octavius Egnatius Valerianus and his wife Clymene Augusta, who would be staying in Gaul on official business.

Valerianus was a brave and skillful soldier. He had distinguished himself in Moesia, where he had lost four fingers in a battle with the Goths. He had been specially delegated to inspect the city and free it of subversive elements.

Trebonianus Gallus's government had sent envoys of this sort in every direction.

The most important cities in Gaul welcomed their presence.

They would arrive amid the flattery of the local rulers, who lavished personal gifts on them in exchange for political favors, starting with spectacular galas and ending with deplorable extortions. They would undertake lengthy investigations, claiming they were sifting the Empire for revolutionary infiltrations, but keeping hidden their purpose of persecuting Christians and depriving them of their savings.

Consequently, the faith of the sons and daughters of the Gospel was sorely tested. Many who were still attached to their possessions forsook the Good News, paid a hefty price for their safety and moved away. But the

poorer ones, or those who reaffirmed their trust in Jesus, either surrendered to death or went to prison, losing all their private property.

Delegates of this type began to accumulate mountains of wealth, enriching themselves with money they received from making accusations or exiling, from condemning or silencing. Thus, they made themselves the natural focus of hatred and intrigue, perversity and denunciation.

Gallus had chosen this as a way to unscrupulously reward his personal friends for their military campaigns, since the exhausted coffers in Rome offered no prospects for easy booty.

The citizens of Lyons realized this, and fearing trouble with the emperor, gathered en masse to praise his representative.

Several days of celebration commemorated Valerianus's arrival, and Helen, who had befriended Clymene during the trip, was the first woman of the city to offer a sumptuous banquet to the illustrious couple.

The halls of the aristocratic residence were opened, brightly lighted as in the past. The banquet was a great success.

Basilus was worried and could not explain the unfolding events.

Why had Tacianus's wife written a letter that seemed to be contradicted by them?

The old man and his daughter searched for the key to the puzzle in vain.

Relegated to the background since Blandina and her father had left, they nevertheless did not abandon their habit of kindness, and when the festivities at the palace were over, they attempted to pay a respectful and courteous visit to Helen.

She refused to receive them.

Theodulus was somewhat disconcerted and apologized for her, saying that he would visit them personally the next day for a private conversation.

The tuner and the girl went home, puzzled by the unsettling disappointment.

What had they done to deserve such disregard?

They had always remembered Blandina's mother as a person worthy of the highest consideration. They had never injured her name, not even in thought.

Why had she been so incomprehensively hostile?

The next morning, however, the philosopher and his daughter were even more painfully surprised.

Opilius's administrator came to see them and showed them the documentation for the purchased debt. He alleged that the Carpus family was related to the Veturius family, and that Helen, who knew that little Blandina had taken lessons in the tuner's home, had not hesitated to pay the enormous debt and satisfy the complaints of family members. However, she was demanding immediate repayment.

Basilius paled.

This was either an invitation to subservience or a condemnation to slavery all over again.

What were the struggles of his long life worth now? Why had he lived so many years believing he was free; why had he been so dedicated to the daughter that heaven had entrusted to him, only to encounter the ghoul of slavery on the verge of the grave?

He had racked his brain, trying to find in his honest conscience the best way to establish a balance with the world and with life.

He had suffered countless hardships and difficulties over the course of his long earthly pilgrimage, but none so distressing as this moment of supreme humiliation.

Now he understood everything.

Helen must hate their presence.

She had probably heard in Rome that Tacianus and his daughter had become fond of his humble home, and she perhaps felt that Tacianus's love had been stolen from her.

He raised his hand to his wildly beating heart while tears streamed down his deep wrinkles.

Livia saw how upset he was and rushed to help him.

The old man held her in silence, and then humbly begged Theodulus to give him some time.

He wanted to wait for Tacianus's return so that he could speak with him about the matter.

But Helen's messenger was adamant.

The problem could not be postponed for more than a week. The determined courier had to return to the imperial city with the money that Opilius Veturius had paid.

Desperate, the old man insisted that Helen grant him the favor of an audience, but the administrator crushed his hopes.

Helen would not stoop to any meetings with plebeians, servants or debtors.

Not knowing what to do, Basilius finally said that he would visit some prestigious friends to look into this unexpected demand and promised to find a solution as quickly as possible.

Alone with his daughter, he painfully examined the problem that fate had brought him.

He knew that he was broke.

He could never come up with enough money to pay the debt.

As much as Livia tried to console him with loving, encouraging words, he could not escape the despondency that had overcome him.

Convinced that the only benefactors who could help him through this obstacle were his Christian companions, that same night he went to the simple home of Lucanus Vestinus, a former presbyter who was living in a hovel where a prayer group held meetings.

Basilius and Livia had no idea that Theodulus was secretly following them. When he discovered the hovel where the Christians congregated, the administrator went back to the estate to devise a plan to start an inquiry.

The gospel meeting in Vestinus's home was filled with unspeakable apprehension.

Only twenty people were in attendance.

Several families supposedly devoted to the Gospel had fled, fearing Valerianus's presence.

The church of Lyon, which had been through so many bitter trials, knew the extent of Roman violence.

Among the converts who had not deserted, manifestations of apostasy began to emerge.

As a result, only the minds that were strongest in the faith were roused to confront the new persecution that was relentlessly taking shape.

Vestinus stood up, said a heartfelt prayer and read the sublime word of the Lord from his sacred notes:

“Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.”¹⁶

Pondering the verse, he lifted his voice and said, ablaze with confidence:

“My friends, we believe that this is a most significant time for our spiritual family.

“Government officials who are sympathizers of our cause have warned us that cruel oppression is about to break out.

“Our faith, so often sealed with the blood of our forerunners, will most likely demand the testimony of death from us also!

“Let us look at life from a higher perspective!

“When the Master invited us to his fortress, he warned us about the tribulations that would beset us in time.

“The children of ignorance and the devotees of bloody deities, who accept offerings of living flesh, may enjoy the earthly realm... They may enjoy gold and purple carriages and be drunk with pleasure like madmen who mindlessly rejoice over piles of corpses, but they will awaken later on under the fiery rod of truth, which will strike them in death.

“But could we, servants who have been invited by the Lord to till the rocky soil of human misery, hope for rest?

“Ever since the day the cross was set up on Calvary for the Heavenly Messenger, no other path to resurrection has been reserved for us.

“Before Christ came, the barbarian gods possessed the world. The temples were places of doing business with infernal genii. A sacrificed dove, a slain sheep or the hot entrails of a bull were offered in exchange for material favors.

“With Jesus, however, we are called to build the glorious kingdom of the spirit. Heaven has come down to us; the shackles that used to limit our minds

to the narrow circle of inferior animality have been broken and the dignity of the human soul has been revealed to be divine, showing us its eternal beauty!

“Let us not believe that Christianity is on the verge of ending its earthly ministry.

“Christ does not entail exclusivity.

“As long as there is the cry of a suffering child on earth, the Lord’s work will impel us to service and selflessness!

“That is why, as long as our weaker brothers and sisters flee the testimony of reality, and as long as the less-convinced ones fall into the unfortunate deception of disbelief and doubt, we will march on fearlessly, confident that the world is waiting for our concourse of sweat and suffering to restore it to its sublime foundation.

“We have wept and suffered for over two centuries.

“Our predecessors were snatched from their families with the treacherous blows of betrayal, slander, beatings and death.

“We are heirs of the undying faith of the venerable apostles, who conveyed it to us with their own blood and their own tears! Why feel unworthy of their trust and imagine that we have been forsaken?

“‘Let not your hearts be troubled,’ the Lord said. ‘You believe in God; believe also in me.’

“We are at peace because we believe! Fear does not trouble us because we believe! Spiritual victory will be ours because we believe!”

The inspired words of the old preacher fell silent.

The cramped room seemed suddenly aflame with light, and to Vestinus’s spiritual eyes, it was as if the walls were crumbling down.

The six women and fourteen men looked at one another, amazed and overjoyed. United in a common destiny, they felt a joy attainable only by those who are able to overcome and forget everything for their love of a holy ideal.

Basilus was squeezing Livia’s little hand in his with the paternal bliss of grand affections that know nothing of death.

Next to them, the widow Cesidia and her daughters Lucina and Prisca looked at each other blissfully.

Hilarinus and Marciana, Tiburtius and Escribonia, two elderly couples who had given up everything for the Lord, embraced each other joyfully.

Livia looked at the enraptured faces around her and lost the fear that had threatened her at first. She remembered Tacianus and Blandina, the only close friends she had left, and felt supreme peace in her heart.

How deeply she loved them!

Tacianus had a wife and a home, and Blandina, of course, had a beautiful life ahead of her.

What was there to do but resign herself to the Will of God? Wasn't it her place to rejoice in the opportunity to console the selfless father who had lovingly taken her into his life? Shouldn't she feel infinitely blessed at finding herself among the faithful followers of Christ, and honored for the chance to prove her faith?

She focused her attention on the calm face of Basilius, whose eyes were sparkling with joy and hope...

Her adoptive father had never seemed so handsome, with his white hair reflecting bluish rays of light.

For the first time, she thought about the afflictions and struggles that the old philosopher had gone through. She could imagine the longings that must have accompanied him ever since his far-off youth. She considered the love he had devoted to her ever since she had been abandoned at birth in the heath, and she felt a higher and purer, a renewed and different daughterly love for that man bent over by old age.

Something had been sublimated in her spirit.

Instinctively, she removed her hand from the wrinkled one that had been holding it and she embraced him with a tenderness that she had never known before.

She felt his heart beating in his tired breast, and kissing his cheek tenderly, she whispered:

“My father!” Touched by a mysterious joy, Basilius let a few tears fall and stammered: “Are you happy, my daughter?”

“Very happy.”

He kissed her dark, wavy hair, covered by a golden net, and whispered again:

“Let not your heart be troubled!... Those who love each other in Christ live above separation and death.”

At that moment, however, Vestinus raised his serene face, suffused with traces of a happiness unknown on earth, and began speaking again:

“Our sanctuary is being gloriously visited by the martyrs that came before us...”

And with a voice almost choked by tears, born of the joy that was blooming in his heart, he went on:

“They are dazzling my eyes with the blessed light enveloping them! The first to enter was Irenaeus, our unforgettable pastor, holding a resplendent scroll in his hands... Following him through our door with smiles of love were other spirit friends, glorified in the Kingdom! I can see them all... I have known them from my early youth! They are old comrades who were martyred during the reigns of the emperors Septimus Severus and Caracalla!¹⁷ Ferreol and Ferrutius are here, with radiant halos originating in their mouths: a reminder of the torture of having their tongues torn out!... Andeolus, the valiant subdeacon, is wearing a diadem on his brow made of four stars, a reminder of his head being beaten and broken into four parts by soldiers... Felix, whose beating heart was torn from his chest, is wearing a radiant star on his breast! Valentiniana and Dinocrata, the virgins who endured appalling abuse from the legionaries, are wearing snow white peploses!... Lorenzo, Aurelius and Sophronius, three boys I played with in my childhood, who were pierced by wooden swords, are carrying palm lilies! Others are arriving and greeting us victoriously... Irenaeus is approaching me and removing one of the fragments from the scroll of light... He has asked me to read it out loud!”

Vestinus paused momentarily and then exclaimed in surprise:

“Ah! It’s Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians!”

With his voice choked with emotion, he read:

“In everything, we are beset with troubles but not crushed; perplexed but not discouraged, persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed, always carrying everywhere the death of Jesus in our body so that his glorious life may be expressed in us...”¹⁸

After a brief pause, he said:

“Our beloved founder is telling us that our time to bear witness is near. He is asking us to be calm, to have courage, faithfulness and love... None of us will be forsaken... Some will have their death postponed, but we shall all drink from the cup of sacrifice.”

After another brief pause he said that the spirit visitors were singing a hymn of thanksgiving in praise of the Dearly Beloved Master.

The preacher was silent for a long time, as if he were listening to a melody inaccessible to his friends’ perception.

Streams of tears ran down his aged face.

Before adjourning the memorable meeting, Lucanus said:

“My brothers and sisters, we a little flock who trusts in Heaven! Many of our comrades protected by their wealth have left the city by paying hefty tributes to Caesar’s envoy. I believe that few of those living in affluence are prepared for victory over the coming tribulation... We have been spit up into various groups of faith in the poor neighborhoods as we wait for Divine Goodness... We do not have money enough to cause us concern. The Lord has freed us from unsettling commitments to the earth’s gold... Why not meet here in our sanctuary of trust every night for a time? This hovel can be our prayer refuge, and prayer is the only weapon we can wield in dealing with our persecutors.”

Everyone joyfully applauded this idea and a moving prayer marked the end of the meeting.

Fraternal conversations were begun.

The friends all came to an agreement.

They would return every night for a worship service.

While some fruit was being served with bowls of weak wine, each believer testified to a personal experience.

When it was Basilius’s turn, he spoke of the problem he was facing. He was a freedman buried under a troubling, burdensome debt and was being forced to pay it off immediately.

The brothers and sisters looked at each other helplessly.

No one there had enough money to help him.

When asked, Lucanus said that the relief box was empty.

The last funds had been used up the previous day to help three widows in dire need of assistance.

However, Vestinus invited the philosopher and his daughter to stay with him for as long as they wished.

Several people could fit into their simple little house.

The old man received Livia's consent and agreed.

He did not trust Theodulus and feared an attack against the dignity of his home. Even though they would continue to suffer, if they were among friends they would be able to share their pain with them. Livia would not be left by herself. The friends in the group would strengthen her heart.

They promised to return the following day, and feeling more comforted, they spent the night edified in their faith.

The next morning, Basilius went to see Theodulus to offer his home as collateral.

He had given it a lot of thought and had concluded that this would be the wisest thing to do. If they held on to the house, they would probably be the victims of violence since they did not have any funds to pay off the debt; on the other hand, if they entrusted their dwelling to the administrator, perhaps he would waive that demand. Furthermore, considering the possibility of being arrested because of their religion, their humble home would lose nothing of its more intimate features, because when he returned from the Empire's capital, Tacianus would become aware of the situation and would surely save the manuscripts that constituted his only wealth.

Theodulus listened impassively to the humble tuner.

Basilius planned to be away for a few days and begged permission to leave the residence untouched as a partial guarantee of the amount he owed to Opilius Veturius.

He had not forgotten his commitment.

Faced with this unexpected request, Theodulus was intrigued and asked the philosopher to wait there for a few moments.

He could not give him an answer without consulting Helen first.

He found the old man's humility disarming.

Should he distrust him? the shrewd steward asked himself. But with no prestige or money, where could Basilius go except to Lucan Vestinus's miserable hut? The request was being offered without any hidden agenda. The old man obviously knew that Theodulus had people who would follow him secretly and report back on his new whereabouts.

With this in mind, he went to tell Helen, who listened to the news with delight. She did not seem to be harboring the same concerns. On the contrary, she seemed satisfied and at ease about it.

Pleased and malicious, she said to her bewildered friend:

"Everything is proceeding just as I envisaged it. Don't worry. The issue of the debt was the key factor that was needed to dislodge those squatters. If we can catch them like unwary birds in an illegal act, so much the better. If they are arrested and executed as Christians, they'll be out of Tacianus's and Blandina's lives for good and they won't cause us any more problems. My husband hates the Nazarenes. When he is told that his friends had to leave because of the purge, he may suffer but he'll know enough to restrain himself."

Theodulus smiled in amazement and asked:

"So, what about the house? Will it be ours?"

"Of course it will," Helen replied resolutely. Basilius himself is handing it to us. It's a solid way for us to win Tacianus's sympathy for our explanations. We'll tell him that the old man was counting our friendship and had come to ask us for moral support and had put his house in our care; that we did everything we could to save him but it was useless, and finally, that we'll keep his house without altering anything so that our absent friends will find it in the same condition they left it... This will be a demonstration of our sincerity and will make Tacianus resign himself before the facts."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the administrator, thinking that he had found a happy solution to the touchy problem.

In good humor, he went back to Basilius and told him that his suggestion had been approved. His residence would be well cared for until his return.

Carpus's freedman smiled, relieved.

This approval ensured his freedom.

Now he could go to Lucanus's home with his daughter, without fear or coercion.

The philosopher and Livia got busy getting files and objects of art in order and then left the same day at dusk.

To avoid focusing on the mental pain of their departure, they walked arm in arm, commenting on how beautiful the sky was, where a few solitary clouds were passing by, tinted by the setting sun, and speaking of the heady fragrance of the flowers.

They gazed fondly at the landscape, each caught up in his and her heart's sweetest memories. So that neither would be tormented by words of regret, they pretended to be distracted and at peace with nature, not knowing that Theodulus was following them.

When she was told where the tuner had taken refuge, Helen requested an audience with Egnatius Valerianus the next day, stating that she needed to speak to him right away.

The high-ranking dignitary received her without reservation.

Alone with the legate, she explained the issue without any preliminaries.

The families with the highest status in the city — she said with an inflection of wounded pride in her voice — were struggling with insurmountable obstacles to maintain domestic order. By preaching impractical fraternity, Christianity was troubling the best minds and was perverting slaves and servants. Lack of discipline was becoming widespread. Discord was being fomented. Able-bodied men and women were neglecting their duties after coming into contact with the teachings of the crucified prophet, who had basically made himself a formidable enemy of the Empire. Traditions were being disrespected and the Roman household was being shaken from its most legitimate foundations.

The legate listened attentively and then asked reverently:

“Could you perhaps offer some suggestions on how to proceed? Investigations have been going on methodically since my arrival. We were able to warn a large number of patrician converts, and they were willing to leave.”

And alluding to the extortion that had been going on, he added:

“I have been extremely patient because I know that a representative like myself cannot neglect his responsibilities without causing harm. With that in mind, I decided that all supporters of the detested cause were to receive an audience... I had the pleasure of recording their reaffirmations of loyalty to the gods and Caesar, and I received generous offerings to our magnanimous emperor from nearly all of them. The measure had favorable results crowning the investigation with complete success. Now, I think it is time to sift out the lower classes of our social structure. Justice will not be delayed.”

“We are very eager for that!” Helen assured him gleefully. “We have never witnessed such manifestations of rebelliousness and degradation! Some of our people know of the existence of several groups of anti-imperial conspirators in the poorer neighborhoods. Our administrator, for example, knows of one place where vile people are conspiring against us. Our own home has a slave that ran off to that cave of human bats with his daughter. They are plotting in secret against the very lives of the patricians and landowners. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was an uprising of blood and death at any moment.”

Before her listener could ask any further questions, she added significantly:

“I have the documented proof right here.”

Puzzled, Valerianus scratched his head and said:

“This accusation is very serious. Will the administrator of the Veturius Villa cooperate with the authorities?”

“Completely.”

“Then we will begin the purge immediately. Can I expect his cooperation tonight?”

“Theodulus will be there,” Helen said resolutely.

Indeed, that very night Opilius’s administrator visited the barracks. He was introduced to Liberatus Numitius, the chief cohort, who, at Valerianus’s suggestion, was appointed by the propraetorship to start the punitive movement.

The two immediately took to each other because of the sentiments they shared.

Theodulus told his new friend that he would point out Vestinus's house, but without exposing himself. He alleged that the Nazarene rebellion was going on in several groups that were united in their actions, and since he knew of other centers of the conspiracy, he could be more valuable as collaborator in the repression if he stayed out of sight.

Liberatus agreed wholeheartedly, and after happily downing several glasses of wine, they got down to business.

Commanding a small expedition of soldiers and agents, Numitius, under the guidance of Theodulus, surrounded the Christians' hovel just as its owner was uttering the last words of the prayer taught by the Master:

"...Do not let us fall into temptation, but deliver us from evil... For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. So be it!"

Lucanus opened his eyes, and they looked so serene that it seemed as if he had awakened from some heavenly vision. Just then the half-drunk emissary of the persecution shouted to his henchmen:

"Let's go in. This is the place. The foxes are in their lair!"

The armed agents entered the room noisily.

Numitius remarked sarcastically:

"I've seen groups like this before. There's never been as cowardly a bunch as the followers of the Crucified Jew. They take blows to the head. They hand their women over and go to jail to die from torture. They never ever try to fight back! Loathsome bastards!"

He spat out a few curses, and looking around at the group, asked arrogantly:

"Who's the ringleader of this gang?"

No one answered, so he rephrased his question and asked again:

"Who here is the head of the house?"

Lucanus rose with dignity and introduced himself:

"The head of the house is Jesus but I am responsible for it."

"Jesus? Well, well..." Numitius shouted, laughing. "It's always the same fools!"

He rolled his eyes at Vestinus and went on:

“Detestable old man... let’s hear about your idea of responsibility. If you have a brain in your head, you’ll renounce your sorcery! Worship the gods and affirm your loyalty to the emperor. If you do, tonight’s scenario could play out differently.”

“I cannot!” said the apostle serenely.” I am a Christian. I have no other God than our Heavenly Father, whose greatness and love were manifested on earth by our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Renounce your sorcery!” cried Liberatus, his cheeks flushed. “Renounce it or bear the weight of my orders!”

“I cannot change my faith,” Lucanus replied humbly and calmly.

Liberatus’s struck him in the face with his fist.

Vestinus staggered, but bolstered by two brothers who rushed to help him, he recomposed his appearance and wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth.

Livia, Lucina and Prisca, the youngest women in the room, burst into tears, but the old man spoke again and comforted them:

“Daughters, let us not weep for ourselves! Let us weep for our persecutors and pray for them... Could there be any greater misfortune for someone than to trust himself to the deception of power only to awaken in the terrible arms of death?”

He looked compassionately at his attacker and explained:

“The man who is beating us is Liberatus Numitius, head of a Roman cohort. I have seen his hands twice before, whipping the wards of the Gospel... Our poor brother! He believes he is the master of his life, whereas criminal pleasures are actually in control of his soul! He struggles uselessly against the attacks of the illnesses and infirmities of old age that currently hover over his body... Tomorrow, forced into the deep valley of meditation because he has fallen into political disfavor, perhaps he will be inclined to Jesus, seeking justice and moral support!”

Numitius’s companions listened, stupefied.

He tried to respond, but intangible forces immobilized his throat. Lucanus, his face illuminated by faith, continued in a strong voice:

“It is most likely that our persecutors are going to impose death upon us. It is most likely that we are about to be submitted to the most dreadful

ordeals!”

He paused momentarily and then continued, turning to his friends:

“But let us not fear martyrdom! We have all been called to follow our Lord with a heavy cross on our aching shoulders. Calvary has been mounted; the cross has been raised; the flagellation continues... Let us rejoice in our status as Cyrenians of the Eternal Friend! It is an honor to die for the Good in a world where evil reigns victorious... We would be ashamed of happiness alongside so many hearts buried in poverty, slavery and suffering! Everything passes! Puffed up with the pomp of triumph, the emperors who humiliate us have never reflected on the nightmare that awaits them in the grave! Today our adversaries reduce our flesh to bloody clay, but the Spirit of the Lord, renewing the world for eternal happiness, will scatter our ashes over the field where, misguided and ill-fated, they pointlessly wage war! Now they are dominators set on the throne of the illusion that subjugates them, but afterwards they will beg for peace, bearing the wounds of penury in the midst of God’s house! Poor wretches! For them, the earthly struggle means being immersed in the gold of the clay... They trample each other, vying for the tomb, where their dreams of grandeur will be reduced to a few handfuls of dust. They kill each other in their hatred. They tear one another to pieces in blood sports, making themselves part of the ruin of their dark days! So, let us weep for them! Let us grieve for them! How much time will they waste before they are able to warm their souls in the sunshine of faith?”

Then, amid the heavy silence, Vestinus defied Numitius’s intimidating look and exclaimed to him:

“Give your helpers some work to do! If it is your mission to open the dungeon’s doors for us, get on with it! The spirit of the Gospel shines above the prison.”

Seeing that Lucanus was bravely extending his wizened hands, Liberatus said a few ceremonial words on behalf of the State, and bound his wrists.

His helpers followed suit and handcuffed the others. Some of the soldiers cast lustful glances at the trembling girls, but the presence of Vestinus, whose words had unleashed so many truths in their faces, forced an imposed respect on them.

The journey was made in silence.

The Christians, like patient animals, did not react but upheld one another with fervent prayer. However, when they entered the prison yard, they looked at each other anxiously.

Then, something completely unexpected happened.

In a curt voice, Numitius ordered a halt, and Livia, Lucina and Prisca were roughly separated from the group.

There was an old law that forbade the death of virgins in the arenas. Under this pretext, it was customary to separate the youngest women from the rest so that the cruel executioners could deprive them of their bodily purity before any harsher interrogations were made.

The old tuner embraced Livia, whose eyes were veiled in tears that did not quite fall, and said emotionally:

“Goodbye, my child! I do not think we will see each other again in this mortal life. But I shall wait for you in eternity... If you are delayed on earth, do not feel that you are far from my footsteps. We will be together in spirit... Only the flesh lives in the shadow of the tomb... If you are abused, forgive... The progress of the world is achieved through the sweat of those who suffer, and human justice is a shrine raised by the pain of the conquered... Do not be dismayed, and do not think that you are being forsaken!”

He lifted his eyes to Heaven, as if indicating that it was their ultimate homeland, and concluded:

“One day we will meet again in the home that has neither tears nor death!”

There was a sad smile on his face.

The young woman lovingly wound her arms around him and kissed his pale face without saying a word. An irrepressible emotion constricted her chest.

Liberatus shouted against the delay, while two legionaries shoved the young women forward.

They let themselves be taken away without resistance.

As they left, the three walked along, anxious and hesitant, but Cesidia, a widow and mother, cried after them in a moving tone of voice:

“Daughters of my heart! Let us not give in to evil... Let us bravely seek the will of Christ! God helps us and the truth guides us... Better death with freedom than life with slavery! Let us go forward resolutely! The beasts in the arena are our benefactors! Farewell! Goodbye!”

Prisca and Lucina, their faces awash in tears, but without desperation, followed the path ahead while throwing kisses to their friends who had stayed behind.

The other prisoners resumed their march.

When they arrived at the prison, the older women were forced into different cells, while the fourteen men, downcast but firm in their faith, were taken to a dark, damp room.

Some torches were being lit.

A repulsive looking legionary approached the chief and asked in a low voice for the cell where the three girls were being held. Numitius chuckled ironically and said: “Don’t you dare! We know they’re all virgins, so the legate is entitled to first choice. Valerianus will see them tomorrow. When he’s done, then...”

And he added carelessly and disrespectfully:

“We’ll draw lots.”

There were muffled snickers among the imperial justice’s servants.

A few moments later, Egnatius Valerianus solemnly entered the room. Gallus’s messenger urged giving the utmost importance to the endeavor. There was widespread talk of a likely rebellion by the lower classes, and a rapid gathering of the insurgent groups was feared.

Because of this, he was beset with threatening complaints.

Wealthy homes were asking him for drastic, preventative measures, and the Christians that had been reported by Theodulus were only the first to be arrested in the vast network of coercion he planned to implement.

Followed by several aides, Valerianus addressed the humble prisoners in a proud, arrogant voice:

“Plebeians!” he said harshly. “In this city I have practiced justice and tolerance in obedience to the traditions of our ancestors; however, upright and respectable patricians are complaining that your posture has recently become

a serious threat to our citizens. You have been accused not only of fostering the sorcery of the nefarious Nazarenes, but also of conspiring against the State for the purpose of usurping the position and assets of the elects of Augustus who lead you. Consequently, I cannot postpone the reprimand demanded by our community. This purge is necessary.”

He paused, scanning the humiliated assembly with his glittering eyes, and asked:

“Which of you will cooperate with us by disclosing the centers of disobedience? In our generosity, we will release of all those who cooperate with our praiseworthy enterprise.”

The Christians remained mute.

Exasperated by the silence, which he took as disrespect for his authority, Valerianus turned to Vestinus and Basilius, the oldest members of the group, and said:

“In Rome we expect our elders to speak from experience; thus we should always hear what they have to say first.”

He riveted his attention on Vestinus and asked him directly:

“What can you tell us about the plans for this subversive activity?”

Lucanus replied without hesitation:

“Venerable ambassador of Caesar, we are not informants.”

The imperial delegate frowned with displeasure, and gazing at Basilius he asked:

“Well, what about you?”

The grey-haired freedman met his penetrating gaze and replied serenely:

“Illustrious legate, we are in the service of Christ, who said that we should abstain from making careless judgments so that we will not be carelessly judged in turn. The Gospel does not condone revolution.”

“What insolence!” shouted the former warrior of Moesia. “These old men are mocking me! They were obliged to answer clearly, but they used the opportunity to boast of their virtues and promote the Jewish agitator at the same time! But they are seriously mistaken!”

He told Liberatus to open a large adjacent room, and ordered:

“To the racks!”

With characteristic passivity, the followers of the Crucified One entered the gloomy room.

Several instruments of torture were lined up.

Obedying orders, Numitius’s aids tied both old men to two large wooden horses and bound their arms and legs with rough leather cords that stretched their bodies to the point of pulling their bones out of joint.

In light of their dire situation, Vestinus humbly told his companions:

“Brothers, do not grieve for us! Grief and despair are not part of the plan that the Master traced out for us. At our age, dying for Jesus will be an honorable mercy. Besides, he urged us not to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Help us with your prayers! The ears of the Lord are heedful everywhere.” Egnatius ordered silence.

And with the two old men tied by their arms, head and feet to the racks, he told the soldiers to be ready to move the pulleys to gradually intensify the torture, if necessary.

Lucanus and Basilius looked at each other anxiously.

They knew that their exhausted bodies would be unable to withstand the torture.

This was undoubtedly the end.

They were taking refuge in prayer, imploring divine help, when Valerianus shouted:

“Wretches! Confess! Where are the Christian troublemakers hiding?”

“Christianity and troublemaking have nothing to do with each other,” Vestinus replied calmly.

“We have nothing to say,” added Basilius, resigned.

“You pack of vultures!” thundered Egnatius, as if possessed. “By all the infernal deities! Start talking or you’ll pay dearly for your impudence!”

He gave an imperious signal and the ropes were tightened.

The two apostles felt their chest and head being separated and their arms being pulled from their body.

They moaned, nearly asphyxiated, but their good spirits were not dampened.

“Confess! Confess!” repeated the Roman dignitary, contorted with anger.

But because the disclosure was not forthcoming, he ordered the ropes to be tightened more and more.

The tortured men’s chests were heaving painfully. Both fixed their gaze on the ceiling, as if they were looking for Heaven in vain.

Clammy sweat ran down their broken bodies.

At one point, Basilius let out an unforgettable cry:

“Jesus!”

The supplication escaped from the depths of his soul, a mixture of inexpressible pain, sorrow, distress and faith.

The old tuner’s eyes widened in their sockets. Vestinus showed similar signs of anguish.

With the base of their skulls and several veins ruptured, along with broken bones and torn flesh, the blood was gushing from their mouths.

Death came quickly.

A strange peacefulness came over their faces.

The exasperation of the wicked ones and the mute heroism of the sons of the Gospel stunned everyone in the room.

Lucius Aurelius, the youngest of the Christians, with the beardless face of a boy, walked over to the blood-drenched racks, and to the amazement of the executioners, prayed aloud:

“O Lord, receive your servants, our unforgettable friends, with love! Uphold them in the glory of your Kingdom! They were our guides in our problems, our courage on sad days, our light in the darkness! O Master, enable us to follow their example of virtue and courage with the same boldness of faith! Vestinus! Basilius! Our wonderful benefactors! Wherever you may be, do not forsake us! Continue to teach us that only through sacrifice will we be able to build a better world with Jesus!”

Lucius fell silent.

His appeal died in his throat, drowned by the tears that stung his heart.

Breaking the heavy silence, Valerianus cried angrily:

“To the dungeon! Take these men to the dungeon! I don’t want one Nazarene sorcerer left. On with the hunt! Arrest is mandatory for everyone involved... Mobilize every resource available! I’ve run out of patience; I’ve waited too long!”

The followers of the Good News took a last look at the bloody remains and left for their filthy cells.

The persecution was relentless.

That same night, other groups were imprisoned.

The guard was mostly made up of the lowest types; hence cruelty and savagery began to dominate.

Early the next day, Gallus’s representative arrived to make an inspection.

He issued numerous orders, drew up plans and wrote reports to send to the imperial city to confirm his role as a true defender of the state and a faithful friend of the emperor. To do this, Egnatius visited dozens of prisoners and prepared skilled interrogations.

For his last task of the morning, at Liberatus’s request, he went down to the chamber where ten distressed and frightened young women were huddled together. Valerianus looked at them with the malice of the head wolf of the pack, and stopping to look Livia over, he asked the officer:

“Where does this remarkable beauty come from?”

Liberatus answered in a low voice:

“She is the daughter of one of the old men who was tortured yesterday.”

“Oh?! Why wasn’t I advised of this?” asked Egnatius, scratching his head, intrigued. “She’s worth more than a whole bunch of old men.”

He focused his attention on the young woman – who felt uncomfortable with such a privilege – and ordered her to be transferred to a more comfortable cell not far from his private office.

A few hours later, an anxious and downcast Livia found herself in a large, pleasantly furnished room. Gallus’s representative came that evening to inspect her up close.

Livia received his visit in dread.

“My beautiful Gaul,” he began, strangely emotional. “You know that an imperial dignitary doesn’t have to ask. However, I gladly set aside my titles and offer myself to you as an ordinary man.”

She looked up at him with pleading eyes, her veiled tears about to fall.

Valerianus felt a new sentiment within himself. He noticed that unexpected compassion was toning down his masculine cruelty. Surprised, he searched his memory in vain to recall where he might have seen this young woman before.

He realized that he was touched by memories that he could not pinpoint.

“Your name?” he asked with an inflection approaching tenderness.

“Livia, sir.”

“Livia,” he continued, in an almost familiar tone, “do you know me from somewhere?”

“I do not recall, sir.”

“Can you understand a man’s sudden passion? Are you aware of the kind of sentiment you arouse in me? Would you be willing to agree to my proposals for happiness and love?”

“I am married, sir.”

Egnatius, somewhat disturbed, said:

“Marriage may keep our excesses in check, but it is never an insurmountable barrier to true love.”

He walked nervously back and forth, and asked:

“Where is the lucky one who owns you?”

“My husband is not here.”

“So much the better,” said the legate, calm once again. “From today on, our love can blossom into a beautiful romance, if you wish. Do you understand my invitation?”

“Sir, I am not only married, but I am also a Christian.”

“Ah! Christianity is a madness from Jerusalem that strives to stifle the health and happiness of Rome. You are young enough to renounce that

plague! I have the means to support you. A palace surrounded by gardens and filled with slaves will be the rich and well-deserved environment with which I shall enhance your beauty.”

Seeing that his splendid promise had not altered the prisoner’s facial expression, he added cruelly:

“Can you imagine a young woman killed in the arena? Her clothes torn, her body disemboweled, her breasts turned into bloody cesspools, her hair dragged across the ground, her teeth broken, her face trampled by beasts!... And worst of all, the brutal hands of drunken gladiators collecting her remains! Frankly, I can’t fathom the Nazarene families’ notions of shame. They avoid the glorious exaltation of the flesh, as if nature were cursed; they claim the importance of purity and preach the regeneration of morals, but they’re not ashamed of their nudity in the arena! Have you ever thought about such a contradiction?”

“Sir, I believe we must accept these spectacles as sacrifices that the ignorance of the world imposes on us.”

“But it seems to me,” ventured Egnatius ironically, “that in fleeing from the delights of a love well-lived under the pretext of keeping their virtue, the ‘Galilean’ women take pleasure in disrobing in the public square. I see this only as a vile mental disorder!”

“Sir,” Livia said fearfully but calmly, “Would it not be more honorable for a woman to expose herself to wild animals that will devour her body than for her to offer herself to the criminality of men at shameful banquets? In Massilia, I saw matrons and young women from the imperial city in humiliating exhibitions and I could not sense, even remotely, any high ideals in them. Forgive me for disagreeing with your point of view. I believe that in surrendering to torture for Jesus, the female heart is taking part in building a new humanity.”

Valerianus felt the force of her argument challenging him, but he did not give up.

He laughed with apparent good humor and said, smiling:

“What a tragedy! A charming woman suffering from the craze of the philosophers! Minerva is not the right counselor for someone your age. Listen to the inspiration of Venus and you’ll understand my words more clearly.”

The legate mused for a few moments and then remarked:

“Your father must have been a crazy old man.”

Eager to find out about her father’s fate, Livia said:

“My father is here too.”

Valerianus was uncomfortable with the confident way she spoke these words, and fearing the difficulties he would have to circumvent to explain himself, he thought it prudent to say good-bye and return the next day.

Night after night, Egnatius returned to the room that his trusted servant Sinesia carefully watched over.

Dolorous events were ravaging the Christian activities in the city. The shows at galas were marked by terrible floggings. Cruel interrogations ended with repulsive executions, egged on by endless public applause.

But Livia, isolated from everyone, had been spared.

Comments about the woman who had been detained for more than two weeks by the emperor’s emissary eventually reached his home circle. Clymene was jealous, and one night went into her husband’s office looking for clues. With the help of her maid, she stood listening behind closed curtains.

“Please, don’t say no!” Valerianus was saying passionately. “I do not want to force you to give in. The willing love of the woman we adore is like sweet nectar collected in the shell of miraculous dreams! Love me, Livia! Let’s be happy! You are ill because you have not yielded to life’s call. It will not be as bad as you imagine. I too am married, yes, but my wife does not take part in my business. I’m free... I can give you a luxurious home wherever you want. A villa in Arelate,¹⁹ a palace in Rome, a country house in Campania, a vacation home in Sicily! You choose! We’ll be together as much as possible. My slavery to the state is only temporary. I hope to enjoy a long retirement very soon! If we have children, I will guarantee their future. You can forget the dangerous deceit of the Jews; you can adorn yourself like the most beautiful daughters of the seven hills and you can have a life worthy of your beauty and intellectual gifts... Can’t you see that I’m throwing myself at your feet?”

The girl’s convulsive weeping could be heard from a short way off.

“Why are you crying? You will lack nothing. Just say the word and you shall leave here as the queen of my happiness. Don’t deny yourself the

invitation of my love any longer! Get up and come with me! What are you planning to do to build your happiness?”

“Sir,” sobbed the girl, crestfallen, “from hearing Sinesia talking with the house servants, I know that my fellow believers are marching to their deaths every day... My father may have already given the ultimate testimony! So that I can bless his benevolence with my eternal gratitude, please give me the gift of dying with my people...”

“Never!” Egnatius’s voice thundered angrily. “You shall not leave here until you have renounced that disgraceful religion! I shall not rest until my eyes are immersed in yours like a thirsty man drowning in pure spring water! I love your mysterious eyes. They have awakened something hidden in me, strange and deep sentiments that I cannot explain. You shall be mine, truly mine! I will change your convictions; I will rid you of your incomprehensible pride!”

Clymene could not stand it any longer.

Choking back the sobs bursting from her breast, the matron quickly walked away. At home, however, although her husband had returned to their marriage bed, she could not fall asleep.

Numerous images of revolt and despair ran through her tormented mind.

Irritable and upset, she remembered Helen, thinking to find in her the only friend whose experience she could trust.

And so, as soon as the new day broke, she went to Veturius’s villa, where in tears she gave her friend all the details.

Tacianus’s wife listened attentively and then remarked:

“That woman is a home-wrecker. I know her by name. She gave us a lot of trouble some time ago. She has a habit of sniffing out choice husbands. I think it time to get rid of her, once and for all. What if we were to get her included in some shipment of slaves to the arena?”

“No, not that!” objected Clymene, frightened. “Valerianus would never forgive me. Such a measure would mean losing him forever. You know his vengeful temperament. I’ve noticed his wild passion for this hateful plebeian. He said he was fascinated by her eyes, and that he even wanted to raise her to the status of a veritable queen!”

“Ah! He mentioned her eyes?” asked Helen maliciously.

“Yes, and he swore that she’s the only love of his life, and he wasn’t ashamed to reduce me to loathsome inferiority!”

Her feline eyes gleaming cruelly, Veturius’s daughter said with a smile:

“We used to have a trustworthy friend in Rome. Her name was Sabiniana Portia. She had dedicated herself to our family ever since my father’s boyhood. Sabiniana was married to Belisarius Dorian, who never resigned himself to having just one woman. Well, this restless husband began to extol the beauty of Eulice’s teeth. She was a Greek slave whose physical endowments had hopelessly attracted him. Our friend calmly listened to his ardent remarks, and at dinner the next day, a round silver tray appeared with her beautiful teeth on it. Sabiniana reasoned that if her teeth were the cause of his passion, the least she could do was serve them to her husband!”

A raucous laugh brought her story to an end.

In front of her astonished friend, she ran her hand over her hair, adorned with a delicate gold net, and said:

“Remembering Portia has given me some excellent ideas.”

She thought... and thought... and then said:

“Let’s call Theodulus for a meeting. He’s the only person who is capable of helping us effectively.”

The administrator obediently appeared.

He listened to Clymene’s story in Helen’s moving words and then said:

“I’m ready to help. There are women who have a deadly influence on respectable men. This girl is one of them. She has a magic wand to make others unhappy.”

Helen resumed control of the conversation and explained herself in a low voice. She had a caustic substance in the house capable of producing irreversible blindness. Egnatius Valerianus had fallen in love with Livia’s eyes; thus, it was crucial to destroy them. To this end, Clymene would buy the complicity of Sinesia, who would put the girl to sleep in a few minutes with a narcotic. Then, the maid would apply a compress of the corrosive substance to Livia’s eyes. The girl would wake up blind... Sinesia would play the role of her benefactor and apply a soothing balm. In the evening, Clymene herself would visit the prison, taking her own clothes to disguise the young woman. Clymene would wait in her husband’s office while Sinesia changed the

prisoner's clothes and led her outside discreetly. The guards would of course take her for Clymene herself, with her arms around the prison housekeeper. Theodulus would be waiting for Livia to take her far from Lyon... He would go down to Massilia with her and promise to reunite her with her elderly father and Tacianus, but would actually banish her to the coast of Gaul.

Clymene and Theodulus listened to her in amazement, astonished by the fertility of her mind, surprising in its evil schemes.

"That's quite a plan," Clymene said, somewhat relieved. "However, the coast of Gaul isn't that far from here."

Helen nodded towards her companion, who was listening to them, perplexed, and said:

"Then Theodulus can take her to some other coast."

And flashing her keen eyes at him:

"For example, a blind woman would have a hard time finding her way back from Africa."

And she said, smiling:

"There's no time to lose. If this woman dominates men with her eyes, it's only just that she lose them."

"I'm afraid something might go wrong," Clymene sighed, hesitantly. "If Valerianus finds out, I will pay very dearly."

"Don't waver!" ordered her friend authoritatively. "Doubt in carrying out what is in our best interest is always a blow against ourselves."

Egnatius's wife agreed and did what she was told.

Helen went home with her.

Sinesia willingly went along with everything and took the drugs to the prison.

She gave Livia the narcotic in pure water and watched her fall quickly asleep. And while the young woman was sleeping, she applied the compress to her eyes.

When she awoke, her eyes were completely bloodshot.

She felt around on the bed, anxious to regain her sight, but it was useless...

“Sinesia! Sinesia!” she screamed in terror.

Hearing the housekeeper’s gentle voice, she asked in distress:

“Has night come so suddenly?”

“Yes,” replied Sinesia. “It’s nighttime already.”

“Where have I been? Have I gone mad?”

“You fainted,” the servant said, feigning concern.

“My eyes are on fire. Light a torch; I’m afraid.”

Although she sympathized with the victim, Sinesia knelt beside her, and according to Helen’s suggestions, spoke in her ear:

“Livia, compose yourself. Have courage and patience!... Your father has died on the rack!”

The girl gave a muffled cry, followed by convulsive sobs.

“There have been a lot of executions. I’m afraid that none of your Christian friends made it. But there’s some good news. The patrician Tacianus is interested in your fate. I’m not sure where he is, but I’ve been told that he sent a message to Mr. Theodulus, asking him to accompany you on a trip to bring you to him... Some are saying that little Blandina is sick and in need of care.”

An inexplicable expression came over the girl’s face, whose eyes were now immersed in thick darkness.

“We need to get you away from the cruelty of Valerianus. He plans to enslave and possess you at any price,” continued Sinesia astutely. “He seems crazier than ever and will probably violate your feminine sentiments since he always gets drunk before going to his room. It pains me to see you so exposed to the attacks of an unscrupulous man. So, Mr. Theodulus and I have a plan to get you out of here... Within a few hours, I expect to get the clothes you will need to leave with no problems. Theodulus will be waiting for us outside to take you to your new destination.”

Noting the heavy silence between them, Sinesia asked:

“Well, aren’t you happy? Don’t the promises of a new life make your heart glad?”

But Livia, who had sunken into sorrowful reflections, said sadly:

“If it were not for my father’s death, I would be happy... Besides that, I’m sick and defeated.”

“But Mr. Theodulus believes that Tacianus and Blandina are your friends.”

“Yes, I know, but Tacianus’s wife hates us. Mr. Theodulus knows that.”

She stretched her hands out in front of her, as if wandering in the darkness, and asked:

“Why isn’t there any light?”

“We need it to be dark in order to get you out of here.”

The ailing girl became quiet, but when she passed her hand over her swollen eyes she exclaimed in a painful outburst:

“Ah! Sinesia, you’re the only person I can live with in this prison! I’m a Christian, while you still cling to the worship of the ancient divinities; but basically we’re both women with the same types of problems! My father’s death has opened up a void in me that nothing on earth could ever fill! I’m all alone in the world! Alone! Early on I got used to the path of afflictions! I have never rebelled against the designs of Heaven, but now I feel unguided and unhappy!... What sin have I committed so that God may spare me? Have mercy on my fate! I fear everything!”

The inflection with which she spoke those words touched the servant’s sensibility to the depths of her being.

Profound remorse suddenly afflicted her.

Livia’s sobbing had broken through the crust of her conscience. She wanted to save the girl, to send her back into the free world, to unlock the prison doors to a blessed destiny, but it was too late. Livia was blind. Sinesia could never change her situation, and among Valerianus’s group and Clymene’s friends, she would remain stuck in imminent danger. Hence, all Sinesia could do was weep in regret.

The young woman heard her sobs and was comforted. She assumed that the housekeeper was feeling sorry for her, and this thought eased her inner torment. She did not feel so all alone. Someone understood her moral suffering and shared her gall.

That evening, Clymene arrived and gave her personal clothing to Sinesia.

The Gallic governess, despite the awful remorse that was tormenting her, revived the young woman and carefully dressed her.

A few minutes later, they both left without any trouble.

Since she was wearing one of Clymene's usual peploses and was about the same height, the guards thought she was Valerianus's wife out for a walk.

Not far from there they met Theodulus, who was waiting for them.

Sinesia was feeling distraught and excused herself by saying she needed to return to her post. Before Livia could express her sorrow at having to say goodbye to her companion, Theodulus kindly tried to dispel whatever doubts were afflicting her soul.

"I'm pleased to confirm the good news that you may already be aware of. Our friend Tacianus has been unable to return to Lyon as soon as he would like because of his daughter's insidious disease. He is asking for your comforting presence."

And he slyly recounted all of Helen's instructions, saying that they would be making a voyage at sea.

When Tacianus returned to Lyon — he said deceitfully — Blandina suddenly became ill. They had no one to help them, since Helen had been called back to Rome to look after her ailing father. Advised by a doctor on board, Tacianus had disembarked in the middle of his trip and sent a message, asking Basilius to bring Livia and meet him. He had asked the old tuner to accompany his daughter, unaware of the fact that the philosopher had died. Therefore he, Theodulus, stood ready to accompany her.

Livia listened to his information, clutching her heart with a trembling hand.

She reflected for a moment, touched her terribly inflamed eyes, and said sadly:

"Mr. Theodulus, I am deeply grateful for your kindness. My memory of Tacianus is fading away. Even though he is requesting my humble assistance, I don't think I can make the trip. Something has happened to my eyes... A few hours ago, I lost my sight... I can hear your voice but I can't see you. I have a terrible headache. I would be useless to our friends. Wouldn't it be better just to stay right here and resign myself to the circumstances? Tacianus wrote, asking my father to bring me. But my father is dead... As for me, I am sick

and alone. What could I do? I would be a heavy burden for you on such a long journey... Wouldn't it be better for you to just forget about me?!"

"Absolutely not!" said Theodulus in blatant hypocrisy. "It's my duty not to abandon you in any way. We have fine doctors to care for illnesses. You will receive all the medical attention you need. Instead of being a hindrance, your affliction is a strong reason for greater care on the part of those who are our real friends. Besides..." Theodulus whispered, as if he wanted to awaken his companion's fear:

"The legate is inconsequential. I'm pretty sure the entire city believes that he separated you from the other young Nazarene women by using his clout. Sinesia told me about your dreadful ordeal in the prison. Now that your father is no longer alive, I realize that my single most important duty is to help you. If your sacrifice were a concession to your ideals, I might understand why you would want to remain in Lyon, but to stay here to satisfy the sexual desires of a man would be, in my view, sheer madness."

His argument convinced her.

The young woman did not hesitate any longer.

She accepted his arm and they found shelter in a simple suburban hostel on the way. From there they started out at dawn on the road to their new destination.

In Vienna, Theodulus sought the assistance of a doctor, who prescribed complex ointments for Livia's eyes.

Bitter days unfolded around a disheartened Livia...

Theodulus noticed her physical prostration and recalled Helen's suggestion that he facilitate the girl's death by means of some suitably prepared dish or a plunge into the waters... Pity, however, had invaded his mind.

Livia's resignation in accepting her misfortune touched him deeply.

He was indeed anxious to relieve himself of her, like someone unloading a burden, but now he found the idea of killing her repulsive.

At the port of Massilia, they found the only vessel capable of taking them overseas. It was a stately Roman galley that was taking advantage of the favorable winds to sail to Syracuse.

Helen's representative did not hesitate.

After examining all the possibilities with the time he had available, he told the young woman that according to the news he had received, Tacianus would be in Sicily waiting for them; thus, they set sail.

Livia was patient with the blindness that tormented her, but she did not give up hope for a cure. Consequently, nothing distracted her on the trip. She was self-absorbed and limited her conversations with Theodulus to times when he came to her. She was focused on a single thought — to be reunited with her friends and rest.

That is why, on a superb, sunny morning when her travel companion told her of their arrival at Drepano,²⁰ her heart was excited and bursting with joy.

All seemed well as they disembarked.

Theodulus, claiming that he knew the area, stirred her heart with hope. Surely, he said deceitfully, she would soon be hugging little Blandina and recalling her blissful days at the villa. Tacianus would undoubtedly provide appropriate treatment to restore her ailing eyes, and before she knew it she would be completely healed, contented and happy.

The girl, walking and leaning on his arm, was smiling, overjoyed.

Yes, what other friends did she have left in the world?

The town was surrounded by vineyards and was caressed by a fresh breeze blowing in from the sea. It exhaled the festive, balmy peace of nature.

Here and there, silvery voices floated through the air.

Fruit and vegetable venders hawked their goods on the plazas. The laughter of youths and the shouts of children reached the ears of the blind woman. She would have given anything to immerse herself in the vision of the landscape that she imagined to be so enchanting.

In one of the busiest spots in the village, at the portico of a small shrine dedicated to Minerva, Theodulus, with his soothing voice, helped her sit on a narrow stone bench and asked her to wait there. He would be back in a few minutes.

He was going to find a friend to make sure he had Tacianus's right address.

Livia happily agreed, but as soon as Theodulus saw he was free, he disappeared.

At first, the ailing girl waited trustingly and patiently, but as it got later, she could feel her distress increasing, slowly suffocating her heart.

She did not believe that Theodulus was capable of abandoning her for good. Perhaps her traveling companion had become seriously ill or some problem had come up.

After noon she felt beset by hunger and thirst, but was afraid to move.

Theodulus could return at any moment.

She overcame her hesitation and asked several passersby for information about Tacianus, but no one offered the slightest hint. She was also unable to find out any news about Theodulus.

She was outside on the public road for hours, the sun and wind beating down on her.

In the evening, she lost all hope of Theodulus's return and fell into deep despondency.

She could tell that the sun was setting, that the late afternoon breezes were colder, and she was reminded that fate had condemned her a second time...

Every now and then, she heard the insults of shameless men saying obscene things to her, and anxious, she wondered what to do.

She was all alone here in Sicily, just as she had been when she was found at birth in the heath on Cyprus...

Why had she come into the world with such a destiny? she wondered in torment. Was her mother still alive somewhere? What family did she actually belong to? What tragedy of passion had preceded her birth? As a newborn, she could feel no sense of abandonment, but now... a conscious woman with so many broken dreams, she felt extreme moral suffering.

Where could she go?

If she could at least find work...

But she realized that she was useless and blind.

How would her future unfold?

She gave thanks to God because she could weep freely... Ever since her separation from Basilius she had not remembered his love as intensely as she

was remembering it at that moment.

The old philosopher had taught her that there is no death, that souls live beyond earth in spheres compatible with their moral growth. She had not doubted his smallest lessons. Surely, her loving protector was still alive somewhere... But was he aware of her pain?

She remembered the evangelical meetings at Vestinus's house and tried to lean on her faith.

Surely, the friends who had gone to their death before her had not forgotten her and relegated her to loneliness.

She let the tears roll down her face, against which the evening wind lashed mercilessly. She pleaded in thought:

“Dear father, please do not abandon me! From wherever you are, cast your benevolent eyes on me... Remember the day when you pulled me from that heath, and shelter me again in your love! I'm a foundling once again... I do not know why this adverse fate is weighing on my soul, but I believe, as you taught me, that Jesus watches over us from Heaven! Now that I'm shattered and blind, please do not let me lose the inner light of hope. Help me regain my spirits! You often told me that suffering purifies us and lifts us up to God! Enable me to understand this reality more powerfully so that sorrow cannot lead me to the brink of rebelliousness! You always told me that our life doesn't end with death, that our soul rises to the heights of eternity, where peace reigns! You believed that the dead are more alive than people wrapped in flesh, and you also believed that our loved ones beyond the grave can help and protect us! How, then, could I forget you, who were my continual friend and the benefactor of all my days! How happy I would have been to have followed in your steps! But I could not enjoy the privilege of dying for Jesus in the torture of the arena. Oh father, why wasn't I granted the grace to go with our friends? Why did fate separate me from my fellow believers who were blessed with martyrdom? Have mercy on me! Explain life to me like you used to! Guide me through this labyrinth! Remember that I'm still just a child in the darkness of the human wilderness and be my guardian again! I was brought here with the promise of being reunited with my friends, but I don't know where they are! I will probably never clasp their hands again in this world. On earth, separation is always colder because of the barriers that keep us from seeing our loved ones, but in the spirit world, the heart must have different resources to strengthen and rescue love!”

Livia wanted to shout the words that were forming in her mind, hoping that the wind would carry them to Heaven, but the pedestrians passing by compelled her to be prudent.

She was still weeping in prayer when, like a miraculous dream, she saw a light-filled pathway appear in the darkness obscuring her sight, and on it she saw Basilius coming to meet her.

Ecstatic, she tried to call out his name, but the unexpected joy seemed to have paralyzed her vocal cords.

Her old father was enveloped in an inexpressible light that made him look younger. He faced her, put his hands on her shoulders as he used to do, and counseled her:

“Daughter, like Jesus himself, his followers know loneliness, but never abandonment! Do not lament the fog in which Heaven is testing your faith!... The stars shine brightest on the darkest nights... Our hopes shine with greatest intensity in the winter of greatest suffering. Take heart and believe in the exalted power of our Father.”

The spirit of Basilius paused momentarily, caressed her windblown hair and continued:

“Indeed, we did go before you on the inevitable journey of the tomb!... For us, the struggle in the flesh was temporarily suspended, and as you rightly said, we were granted the privilege to suffer a bit for the spread of the Gospel in the world... But you mustn’t believe that you have been excluded from bearing witness and from flagellation. The torment of your eyes is a sign that you have not been forgotten... Rest assured, those who guide us from the higher planes have entrusted you with faithfulness to some particular service in the world, a service that is above and beyond ours! The Lord does not give certain kinds of responsibilities to souls that are still too weak, just as he does not hang fruit on the tender stem of a newly-sprouted tree... Have courage! Sometimes we have to be submerged in darkness to help those who sit in darkness... You will rejoin us soon! Lean on the staff of faith and don’t give up! We will follow your endeavor every step of the way... When your suffering seems most painful and bitter, thank Jesus for the opportunity of such an invaluable struggle! If there is one thing in the world that can express our serving God, it is the fulfillment of the ennobling task that life has set before us. And because the effort of renunciation is not available to everyone at the same time, you are receiving the gradual sacrifice of yourself as a

blessing from Above. Do not wonder why you were made blind! Do not feel wronged! Life is a miraculous tapestry of the Divine Wisdom. Sometimes affliction foreshadows happiness, just as pleasure often produces pain... Never forget that the Messenger recommended that we forgive seventy times seven for each offense, which has led us to love our enemies and to pray for our persecutors... The passage of our spirit through the quagmire of earthly life is brief... Pain is the opposite of joy, just as darkness is the opposite of light... But in the economy of eternal truths, only joy and light never die. Darkness and suffering are states of our imperfect state before the Almighty... So dedicate yourself to the good fight calmly and fearlessly. We will be with you, guiding you along the thorn-strewn way!”

Basilus paused and tenderly embraced his jubilant daughter.

Livia returned his loving gesture, as if she wanted to hold him to her heart. Nevertheless, although she felt encouraged and blessed, she thought about the immediacy of the world.

What would become of her when she was alone again?

Night had fallen... Where would she find shelter?

Was she condemned to freeze to death on the public road?

Her spirit mentor read her thoughts and replied:

“Do not be afraid! The Father who feeds the birds each morning would never forget us. Help will not be long in coming... You will be rescued soon... Do not bar kindness and trust from your heart, so that the Lord will have no difficulty in helping you. Blindness of the eyes does not mean uselessness of the soul... Remember our arduous poverty. Wasn’t music our reason for living?”

Just then, Livia heard a child’s voice singing not far away, accompanied by a badly played lute:

We are poor, poor little ones...

We live from door to door,

But we are happy

Because of the gifts that come from Heaven...

My sick mama,

*Tired of so much pain,
Through my little voice
Asks for alms of love...*

A little seven-year old, sturdy but poorly dressed, stopped beside her, followed by a skeletal tubercular woman.

They were obviously beggars.

The little musician who played and sang at the same time was known by the public there, because several people called him by name:

“Celsus, sing some more!”

“Celsus, play a little more!”

The boy happily obliged them, collecting a few coins and giving them to the ailing woman.

Livia could no longer see her father’s figure, which had perhaps dispersed due to the new emotions filling her mind, but she could still hear his words saying to her softly:

“Open your heart, my daughter! Look! A humble child resorting to the kindness of the streets... Help so that you can be helped in turn; show yourself to others so that they can show themselves to you...”

The girl noticed that a new strength had sprung up in her soul.

The little one finished one of the regional songs he had learned, and instinctively Livia called out:

“Celsus! Celsus, let me play your lute.”

The child quickly acquiesced.

With the lute in her hands, the blind girl turned her thoughts to her old home.

She forgot the fact that she was a foreigner in a land she did not know. She sang with all her soul, as if she were enjoying one of her happiest moments with her elderly father.

A profound silence accompanied her beautiful Roman songs.

More passersby gathered in the small atrium of Minerva, and at the end of each number, the child received contributions from deeply moved ladies and gentlemen, filling his threadbare bag.

The sight of a blind woman performing, a tubercular woman out in the open, and a raggedy little child caused many to become teary-eyed.

After a lengthy repertoire, in which they had been careful to select melodies that would not offend the sensibilities of their audience, which was composed of worshipers of Jesus and worshipers of the ancient deities, Livia grew silent.

Several women, deeply impressed, complemented her as they left.

The atrium emptied, bit by bit.

Celsus, however, climbed onto Livia's lap.

"What's your name?" he asked, with simplicity and candor.

"Livia. What's yours, my clever singer?"

"Quintus Celsus."

"Are you by yourself?"

"No, my mother is here with me."

He introduced them, and they embraced.

Hortensia Vipsania, Celsus's mother, told her story in short sentences.

She was the widow of Tertius Avelinus, a soldier who had died without honor, leaving his only son in her arms. He had died in Syracuse, where they had lived since his transfer from Rome. However, her life had become so distressing in the big city that, weakened and defeated, she had decided to try living in Drepano, where it would be easier for her to support herself. She had fought valiantly, making sweets to sell, but she had caught the stubborn disease that was slowly destroying her... Besieged by poverty, she had taught her son how to play the lute so that they could appeal to public charity.

But she was completely exhausted. She was afraid she would die at any moment. Twice she had suffered alarming bouts of hemoptysis²¹ and she lived in constant fear...

Livia tried to comfort her with fraternal words, stroking the boy's head as he embraced her sweetly. When asked about her own life, she told about

the difficult experience she was going through. She had lost her father in Lyonese Gaul, and being blind, she had been brought to Trinacria²² by a guide to search for old friends. She had been unable to find them, and being a stranger in the area, she didn't know what would become of her. And with no one to help, she did not know what steps to take...

The little boy, who seemed extremely interested in the conversation, interrupted:

“Mama, couldn't Livia be one of us?”

And perhaps excited by the songs she had played, he spontaneously added:

“We'll leave together and you can get some rest.”

His poor mother smiled disconsolately and said:

“Celsus's wishes are my wishes. However, my daughter, we live in a cubicle where we barely fit. Even so, if you want to, you can come with us.”

In a burst of joyful gratitude, Livia took her hand and kissed it in tears.

She saw the offer as a blessing from Heaven.

She had not lost hope of rejoining Tacianus and Blandina, but while she was looking for them, she would accept their help.

Right there, they made plans.

Celsus would be her guide on the public streets, but in turn she would help him by teaching him the rudiments of education and art to prepare him for the future.

Hortensia's home was a tiny shack that had been donated to her by the charity of a patrician family. There, the poor widow cooked and slept in the same space.

But that night there was a celebration in the shack.

From the money they had collected, the ailing woman gave most of it to her son to buy some food.

He returned with bread and meat cakes, as well as the usual supply of goat's milk, eager to be of help...

And silently giving thanks to Heaven for the joy resonating in their souls, the three shared a simple meal, feeling happier than the lucky courtiers

in the houses of earthly kings.

Wanting to protect her child's health, Hortensia isolated him in a corner of the room on a straw bed. Livia settled down beside him.

Before falling asleep, Celsus, with a child's pure sincerity, turned happily to his mother and asked:

"Mama, what about our prayer? Aren't we going to ask for Jesus' blessing tonight?"

Livia understood the constraint of her benefactor, who had perhaps remained silent out of respect for different beliefs Livia might have. She immediately offered:

"I'll say the prayer tonight. Praise God, I too am a Christian."

And responding to mother and son's expressions of endearment, she prayed with feeling:

"Lord Jesus, bless the faith with which we wait for you! ... We thank you for the happiness of our meeting and the treasure of friendship that now binds us together. We praise you for the aid we receive from our friends and for the lessons we receive from our enemies! Teach us to find your will on the dark pathway of our trials... Give us resignation when faced with suffering, and the certainty that the darkness will lead us to the true light! O Lord, grant us the humility of your example and the resurrection of your cross! Amen!"

Hortensia and her son were overcome with inexpressible hope with the presence of that young woman who, alone and blind, had found the inner resources to encourage them. They repeated "Amen" and went peacefully to sleep.

A new life began for the trio the following day.

Greatly comforted in that household sanctuary, Livia did all she could to contribute to everyone's peace-of-mind. She took on small chores and cheered the place up with the blessed lessons she contributed from having lived with her father. Although blind, she willingly shared in the housecleaning, and in the evening, she left Hortensia to rest and went with the boy to the public street, where they replenished their resources with their music.

Although she was less concerned about her son than before, the hapless widow seemed more focused on her own illness, which was manifesting

disturbing changes. She was bothered by variations in her temperature, and her suffering became more and more acute. At night, she was troubled by labored breathing, and during the day, long and alarming fits of coughing exhausted her strength.

With a child's amazing intuition, Quintus Celsus realized that all of his mama's ailments had worsened, and he redoubled his efforts to revive her and make her happy. Joining Livia, as if he had found a new mother in her, he surrounded the ailing woman with unsurpassed care.

Since their daily take was increasing, Livia visited the shack's owner with Celsus and asked about the possibility of moving to another place.

The widow needed more room and cleaner air, and she could now afford to rent a modest house.

The owner agreed to help. He had a humble place that he would let out for a small amount.

Within a short time, the three had settled into a simple four-room house, not far from some health-giving trees, where the sick woman was able to prolong her stay in her body.

They began to receive visits from Exuperious Gratus, an elderly Christian evangelist who, at the ailing woman's request, came whenever possible to read the sacred texts and say prayers.

The close friendship between Livia and Celsus became stronger and sweeter. Day after day, night after night, they talked, studied, worked and contemplated the future.

Early one morning, however, Hortensia woke up wide-eyed, as if she were staring at far-away visions.

The hemoptysis had gotten worse and she had weakened considerably.

Livia lit a candle and Hortensia asked her to open the window. The fresh, soothing breeze perfumed by orange trees blew in.

Although Livia was concerned, she could not notice any change, but the intelligent and observant boy was startled when he saw how his mother had deteriorated. The ailing woman looked as if she had a thin wax mask covering her haggard face. Her eyes seemed almost out of their sockets, but there was an angelic expression of joy on her face.

Celsus was deeply shaken and asked anxiously:

“Mama, what’s wrong?”

The poor woman stroked his little head and spoke with effort:

“My son, that was the last night we’ll ever spend together on earth!... But I’m not leaving you alone... Jesus has brought Livia into our home... Welcome her as your new mother!... She has been a precious sister to me as I have prepared to go away.”

The young woman understood the tone of farewell in her voice and fell to her knees in tears.

“No, Mama! Stay with us!” the boy sobbed in despair. “We’ll work to make you happy! I’ll grow up fast! I’ll be a man and we’ll have a big house just for us! Don’t go, Mama! Don’t go!”

Unrestrained tears fell from the dying woman’s eyes. Hortensia smoothed her son’s tousled hair and said:

“Don’t cry! Where’s your faith, my son?”

“I have faith, Mama! I had faith when the neighbor’s dog was hanging around our door; I had faith that night when we got caught in a storm in the street. But today I’m afraid... You can’t leave me like this!”

“Please, compose yourself!” pleaded his mother, worried. “I have very little time left... I’m handing you over to our Livia in the name of Jesus... Don’t try to keep me here... Since you’re unable to reason like a grown-up, you can’t see the depth of sentiment with which I’m speaking to your soul... Nevertheless, my son, remember this moment well! Later, when the world calls you to greater struggles, remember our poverty! Be good and hardworking! If you are driven to evil by someone, remember this scene today: your mother, dying, confident, certain of your worth... Grow up in Jesus, in the ideal of goodness that he, our Divine Master, taught us.”

And casting her immensely lucid eyes on her blind friend, she humbly asked:

“Livia, Quintus Celsus will be my own heart, beating next to you!... If you find the friends you’re looking for, have mercy on my son and don’t abandon him.”

Livia wiped her own tears and said anxiously:

“My sister, don’t worry! Go back to sleep!... I can tell that you’re tired.”

Hortensia smiled sadly and replied:

“No, my friend!... Don’t be fooled.... I can see Tertius here with us... He’s as robust as he was in his finest days... He’s telling me that we will be together... before the day is over... We are going to be reunited in the Great Home... Why should I go on, trapped in this body, when Celsus has found secure support in your devotion?... I feel happy, happy...”

Hortensia suddenly fell silent.

Overcome by profound exhaustion from the flow of blood from her mouth, she lingered, gasping for breath for a few hours until, warmed by the first rays of the morning sun, she gathered her energy to sleep the big sleep...

Livia and Celsus realized that they were alone now. The pious hands of their brothers and sisters in faith helped them offer their final homage to the deceased.

After Exuperius finished praying beside her simple grave as twilight fell in crimson splendor, Celsus embraced Livia and wept copiously.

“Leave your mother in peace, dear!” said his companion, filled with emotion. “The dead attach themselves to our tears! Don’t trouble the one to whom we owe so much! You will not be alone! I will be your mother from now on.”

And the young woman fulfilled her promise.

She carefully assessed their situation and realized that their artistic performances in the public plazas no longer suited them.

Celsus should be raised with solid ideas of responsibility. He needed education and preparation to face life. Although she was blind, she decided to work to help form his character for the future.

She went to Exuperius, the only friend who could advise her, and explained to him the plan she had in mind.

Mightn’t it be possible to find some gainful employment in Drepano to support the boy?

The venerable old man was pleased and asked her for some time. Her plan was reasonable, but Drepano was too poor for her to succeed right away.

In the meantime, she would await the visit of fellow Christians from other lands.

He was convinced that her plan would meet with an excellent opportunity somewhere else.

Livia was hopeful as she left, her heart nourished by strong faith.

A few weeks had gone by with no word, when the venerable reader of the Gospels brought her important news.

A well-known friend from Neapolis²³ was passing through: the baker Lucius Agrippa. He was willing to listen to her and help her however he could.

Exuperius took Livia to meet her benefactor, whose countenance revealed the moral beauty of the great Christians of antiquity. Peaceful eyes shone from his wrinkled face, framed by silvery white hair. After listening to what she had to say, Agrippa said unaffectedly:

“Daughter, I think I should explain our domestic situation. Although we used to have many slaves, we were not happy. But after Domitia and I accepted Jesus as our Master, our customs had to change. We released our slaves and simplified our habits. A fortune in money left our house but peace began to dwell there like a heavenly gift. Nowadays we are as poor as those who help us in our bakery, but if you accept our frugal life, we will be able to take you in with the child. I know that you want to work, and you won’t be idle. You can share the daily work at the mill with Ponciana, our old blind employee. Not being able to see lends greater concentration to that type of work, since our millstone runs on human power. I must tell you, though, that we can offer only a paltry salary, just enough to pay for the boy’s education.”

With a broad smile, the kind man concluded:

“You’ll be able to share in our home activities, though. We say our prayers in peace and joy. Neapolis – thanks be to God – hasn’t been the target of persecution.”

Livia did not know how to express her joy.

“Oh, sir! That is everything I could want! I will gladly serve in your home. I’ll enjoy the peace I need there and Celsus will have the discipline he needs to grow up honorably.”

The baker was a simple and helpful man. He liked to talk about music and was thrilled to learn that he would be bringing to his home not only an employee for menial tasks, but also an expert harpist.

And after a few days, Livia and Celsus went by sea to the new city.

When they arrived, the boy cried out in amazement, overcome with joy.

The splendid gulf, the beach houses and the constant spectacle of Vesuvius with its plume of smoke vanishing in the sky were all reasons for his long, detailed questions.

Livia, despite her physical blindness, was filled with hope. Domitia, her benefactor's wife, welcomed her with an open heart, and after a week of recovering her strength, Livia got down to work in good form.

The property stood on a busy, tree-lined street and was the object of great public interest.

As in almost all the ancient cities, raw wheat arrived on the premises and was conveniently turned into flour right there to make bread.

At Ponciana's side, Livia was put to work on the millstone. The work was too heavy for her at first, but giving thanks to Jesus for having found something to occupy her troubled mind, she tried to adapt to this new sort of obligation by singing.

The first night she collapsed, exhausted, in the simple room that Domitia had set aside for her and the boy. By now, Celsus felt like he actually was her son. Consequently, he was vexed to see her so worn out, and asked her about this new kind of struggle:

"Mama, why work so hard? Wouldn't it be better to take our lute and earn money from the people in the streets?"

"No, my son, toil is the only way to manifest the riches of our heart in the exaltation of life. Don't you love Jesus and want to serve him?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well then, it's essential to know how to cooperate with him by struggling for the satisfaction of doing the hardest things. If everyone has their eyes set on the joy of the harvest, who will be responsible for the hard work of the sowing?"

However, showing that his child's mind was far from such philosophical questions, Celsus went on to ask:

"Where is Jesus, Mama?"

“He is following us step by step, my son. He knows when we’re striving to imitate him and he knows our faults and weaknesses. Just as the sun sends its light from the sky and is always present on our path, the Lord is the divine sun of our souls, enlightening us from within, awakening us to the good and guiding us to life eternal.”

“My mama Hortensia said that he was children’s best friend.”

“He was, still is and always will be,” said Livia affectionately. “Jesus relies on children and wants them to grow for the glory of goodness and peace so the world can become the Kingdom of God.”

Quintus Celsus hugged his spiritual mother more tenderly, then sat down and recited a short prayer of praise and gratitude to the Divine Master. Then, holding Livia’s hand, he slept as carefree as a happy bird.

After tucking the boy in by touch, Livia continued watching over him all night long.

By what unfathomable plan had she come to live in that house with a child who did not belong to her by blood ties? By what mysterious decisions of the Lord had she been brought to Sicily and from Sicily to Neapolis, where an entirely new life had opened up to her? Where were Tacianus and Blandina, whom she believed she might never see again?

One by one, Livia recalled the difficult days she had gone through since she had been separated from her elderly father, and gave thanks to Jesus for having found this resting place of comfort and peace.

She caressed the peacefully sleeping boy’s hair and prayed for the blessing of Heaven for both of them. She felt almost happy, but was unaware that living with Hortensia had planted the seeds of new suffering that would slowly lead her to her death.

¹⁶ John 14:1. - Emmanuel

¹⁷ This refers to Vestinus’s words to various Christian martyrs from France, some of whom are inscribed in the history of the saints. — Emmanuel

¹⁸ 2 Cor. 4:8-10 - Emmanuel

¹⁹ Arles, France – Emmanuel

²⁰ Today, Trapani. – Emmanuel

²¹ The expectoration of blood. – Tr.

²² Also a former name for Sicily. – Emmanuel

²³ In Campania (Italy), today Naples. – Emmanuel.

5

Expiation

The return of Tacianus and his daughter to Lyon was on a morning radiant with light.

He had been told by his father-in-law – whose presence he had borne with difficulty – that the doctors had recommended that Lucila return to the provincial climate as soon as possible, so he had decided to head straight home.

However, the return trip had been slow because of the headwinds passing over the Mediterranean.

Our travelers were vexed by the delay, anxious as they were to recuperate in peace in the countryside.

The patrician felt more at ease about his sick daughter. If his wife had resolved to make the trip on the advice of the physicians, it was a sure sign that Lucila was not in such a precarious condition after all.

Lucila would surely recover at the Veturius Villa. The family would not suffer any major crises.

Thus he allowed himself to indulge in a single desire: to see the old philosopher and his daughter again. Their friendship would be a blessed stimulus for him to gather his strength to live.

In anticipation of a long and happy embrace on their return, He and Blandina spent many hours talking about music or planning walks in the countryside...

However, an awful disappointment was waiting for them.

True, they did find Lucila strong and healthy, preparing enthusiastically for her marriage to her uncle, but they were dismayed to receive unfortunate news from the city.

The tuner and his daughter had suffered what was considered lawful persecution.

The imperial envoy had instigated an official inquest and the Nazarenes had experienced the harshness of the law. Many were on the run; others had been martyred.

Tacianus listened despondently to the servants' hurried reports.

A few hours after he arrived at the villa, Helen had a private meeting with him. She riddled him with questions about her father's health and explained why she had suddenly left Rome.

She had been anxiously waiting for him when her trusted doctor advised her to return immediately to the Gallic climate. Lucila was fragile, like a wilting flower. Therefore, she had not hesitated to return.

Her husband listened but was distracted, mentally elsewhere.

Helen knew why. Blandina was distraught and tearful when her mother had left her in her private quarters, and judging from her daughter's attitude, she could not ignore the fact that her husband was at that moment a spiritually troubled man.

She looked at him more attentively and spoke in a tone of voice that sounded both sorrowful and insolent:

"Tacianus, I cannot silence the revolt looming in my mind because of all of this disillusionment dampening our home. I was sincerely waiting for your return, not only as a wife waiting for her husband, but also as a mother anxious for the reunion with her daughter... Those two disgraced Christians merely suffered from a necessary adjustment in the laws, but their absence has left you with a terrible mask of alarm and grief. The situation has been made even worse because you allowed Blandina to come under the spell of those sorcerers. She is sick and hurt because of your negligence. My lengthy sacrifice for Lucila was made pointless when you handed Blandina over to their superstitions and follies because I don't think she is immune to the Galilean madness. Even if we were dealing with respectable people..."

"Helen!" Tacianus broke in, visibly annoyed. "Be careful about what you say! Basilius and his daughter were our dear friends. If they adopted Christianity as a rule of faith, they never mentioned it. Our friendship was always dignified."

“Well, it sure doesn’t look like it,” said his wife ironically. “Your reaction speaks clearly of your sentiments. When I was on my way back here, I was duly informed that that Livia had plans for taking my place. Under such a woman’s influence, any unwary man would obviously see nothing.”

“That’s a lie!” cried Tacianus, starting to become exasperated. “Livia was married and wouldn’t even think of breaking her vows.”

The patrician wanted to throw in her face everything he knew about her own actions in her affair with Theodulus, but he thought better of it.

After a brief pause he went on:

“Only just recently, I had a casual conversation with Claudius Licius in Rome. I had recommended his friendship to her husband. He told me that she had become a widow... Doesn’t the misfortune of a poor defenseless woman break your heart?”

“Ah! So she *was* married?”

“Yes, she was. I even befriended her husband, Marcellus Volusianus. He wanted to try life in Rome, but wound up dead in the waters of the Tiber. I hoped to see Livia again to tell her the news, but...”

Helen paled, suddenly realizing that Lucila’s seducer had lied to the end.

She began to reflect on the dark machinations of her family group’s destinies, but since her main interest was to restore her own peace-of-mind, she tried to forget everything. Her lovely face softened, and feigning wounded dignity, she said:

“Dear, let’s talk without becoming angry. Of course I could not see our home invaded by an outside influence and not react in some way. But I did everything I did to be worthy of your trust regarding your personal circle of friends. The old tuner and his daughter were arrested during a meeting of the forbidden cult in the dilapidated house of a crazy old man named Lucanus Vestinus. Egnatius Valerianus and his wife are Romans from an excellent family line. Although they are no longer here, they traveled here in my company and we formed a close bond. When I realized the two detainees were in peril, plus the fact that the young woman had acted as our daughter’s governess, I followed Theodulus’s recommendations and petitioned the authorities for both of them to be released... But Theodulus made it clear to our household that Basilius had been so uncommonly impudent in insulting our traditions and laws that, much to my chagrin, he felt obliged to have him

tortured. But we can assume that he died from fear, since he wasn't tortured after all. I continued to work to free the young woman, but all my efforts were frustrated because Theodulus, as everyone knows, fell in love with her and separated her from the other female prisoners. According to what I was told, Livia was living in an isolated room, where Valerianus went to see her every day. From what I've heard, Clymene, Egnatius's wife, was jealous, and had a maid named Sinesia put a corrosive on her eyes. No one knows how or who helped her, but she managed to escape shortly afterwards by availing herself of the night's darkness. I couldn't find out if the poor thing left unharmed or if her eyes had become the victims of Clymene's wickedness. I went to find the only person with reliable information, the servant Sinesia; however, when Egnatius found out that Livia had escaped, he was stricken with a strange dementia. He began screaming for the woman he loved, and then, after he savagely beat the maid trying to force a confession from her, he had her put in chains for interrogation on the following day. But at dawn the poor thing's body was found in the prison, stiff and cold. Sinesia had been murdered by someone who knew how to hide in the webs of impenetrable mystery."

"This all just hurts too much!" Tacianus lamented, looking gloomy.

Helen noticed the change and went on in a more affectionate tone:

"Since I anticipated how these events would upset you, I made provisions so that Basilius's little house would be guarded by a horseman from any disrespect by the authorities. I hope you'll find his humble residence in the same condition that the old man left it: with nothing changed..."

And facing her grief-ridden spouse, she completed her deceitful version of the facts:

"But I didn't concern myself only with that aspect of the situation. Since I was sure you would arrive at any moment, I sent Theodulus to the port of Massilia, hoping to gather any information about the young woman's possible departure for some place."

Tacianus uttered a few words of acknowledgement. His wife's supposed benevolence had in some way redeemed her in his eyes.

At dusk, he went to the simple dwelling.

Alone in the cramped place, he surrendered to the emotion that was flowing from his soul.

He looked at the now silent harp. He sat in the familiar chair, and far from the eyes of others, cried his heart out.

He remembered Basilius, white-haired and self-assured. He saw Livia again in his imagination, and as he reviewed the night of their farewells, he did not know whether he was weeping out of love or compassion.

He stumbled to the small room where the old man usually studied, and after he had read a few passages, he found some of the tuner's evangelical notes that revealed his religious leanings.

There was a pile of informative autobiographical notes.

Basilius had not been a Christian for very long.

In Cyprus he had devoted himself to the cult of Serapis, the healer.

Only in Massilia, a few months before moving to Lyon, had he come to know the Gospel and to love Jesus.

Prescriptions and instructions for the sick from the time when he had worshiped the ancient Egyptian god – then transformed into a companion of Aesculapius – were mixed in with precious notes alluding to the New Testament. Poems of praise to the ancient deities and apostolic notes of burgeoning Christianity were lying there, revealing his spiritual journey.

Finally, Tacianus paused to admire a curious work by Basilius entitled “From Serapis to Christ,” which marked his final transition.

Tacianus examined the document with a respect he had never given to any subject having to do with the Galilean Messiah.

Then, he immersed himself in heavy musings...

Why was he always haunted by Christ like this everywhere he went?

He remembered his first contact with his father, enraptured by martyrdom in his ultimate testimony of faith.

He recalled the gala long ago at the Veturius Villa when little Silvanus had lost his life...

He remembered the death of Rufus, the slave who was unwavering and faithful to his own ideal. And in tears, he reflected on the final days of his mother, cut off in her own home.

Memories of Subrius's hanging passed vividly through his imagination... Nevertheless, he still hated the Nazarene principles.

He could not conceive of a world where masters and slaves were equals; he rejected the theory of unconditional forgiveness, and he would never agree with solidarity between patricians and plebeians.

The ancient gods, the Roman epics, the achievements of the emperors and the words of the philosophers who had constructed the laws of the Republic and the Empire ruled his heart with too much vigor for him to detach himself easily from the moral world on which his own reason for being had been based since his distant childhood.

He had been consecrated to Cybele and carried in his breast the ardent seal of faith that had guided his ancestors. He planned to die in that faith.

How could Apollo, the triumphant patron of nature, be threatened with Jesus, a poor Jewish man who had been crucified between criminals? Why would he leave a cult of joy and abundance to subject himself to the sinister blood feasts of the circuses? Why had Basilius and Livia joined a movement that seemed to be a detestable ideology of infernal spirits?

Yet, he still loved them, even though they were Christians.

He had found the emotional life of a paternal soul in the old freedman and had found an affinity with the young woman that could make him happy, either as a spouse or a sister.

Caressed by the chilly wind at dusk, the patrician stood in one of the windows, thinking... thinking...

It was almost dark when, as he was heading back, Blandina suddenly appeared in front of him.

The little girl was worried and had been looking for him in every corner of the estate. She hugged him and wept copiously for a long time.

Her taciturn father took her back home in tears...

The following day, he went to talk with the owner of the hut that the tuner had been renting. Tacianus planned to keep it in homage of his own memories.

Would he ever see Livia again?

He had thought of meeting with Augustus's legate, but Egnatius Valerianus had returned to the seat of the Empire after a short stay in Aquitaine.

After acquiring the simple home that Basilius had lived in for such a short time, he would go there and spend whatever time he had left over from his usual duties. He was almost always accompanied by Blandina, who could not forget the missing pair.

Her tiny and fragile child's hands strummed the harp tentatively, trying to imitate her friend who had left for an unknown destination. She was applauded by her father, who distracted himself by watching her efforts. The more her mother forbade these visits, the more Blandina tried to evade the watchful eyes of the servants so she could meet her father amid his isolated reflections.

Her friendship with the philosopher and her tutor became more and more intense and alive in her child's imagination.

She often asked her father if Livia had been kidnapped by Pluto, and on other occasions, eyes closed, she swore that "grandpa" Basilius was there, smiling at her side, hugging her.

One night, when Tacianus was lingering at the hut longer than usual, Blandina was standing at the door looking up at the star-studded sky when she unexpectedly exclaimed with joy:

"Grandpa! Papa, look! Here comes Grandpa Basilius!"

She made a gesture as if she were embracing some loved one and added enthusiastically:

"Papa, Grandpa is next to you! Right next to you!"

Tacianus saw nothing, but his daughter's blissful expression echoed deeply in his soul.

He recalled old stories about the dead coming back to be with the living, and touched by his daughter's words, he believed that his friend's shade was really hovering there.

He had the impression that his beloved friend was there, invisible, as if he could feel his warm breath on his face.

His eyes shining, enlivened by the flame of inexpressible sentiments, he asked the little girl:

“Blandina, if you really can see Grandpa, why couldn’t we ask him when we’ll see Livia again.”

She obeyed, and as if it were completely natural, she asked the resuscitated old man:

“Grandpa, did you hear Papa’s question?”

Moments of intense expectation went by in the cramped room.

“What did he say, dear?”

Blandina looked at her father tenderly and confidently and said:

“Grandpa said that we’ll all be together the next time we hear the Hymn to the Stars.”

Tacianus felt an indefinable anguish absorbing his voice and heart. He said nothing, but took the little girl’s hand and went home, where, alone in his private office, he became engulfed in haunting and distressing thoughts.

His life in Lyon went on as expected: routine and monotonous.

In the spring of 256, however, the Veturius Villa was decorated for the wedding of Galba and Lucila, with the typical grandeur of the wealthy families of that time.

The groom, prematurely aged, and his young companion, beautiful and frivolous, seemed to radiate optimism and happiness.

Opilius, though feeble and tired, repaid his son-in-law’s visit and accompanied him to the ceremony.

His return after so many years aroused great interest in Lyon. The luxurious rural palace had once again become an important center of political intrigue because of its splendid and joyful soirees.

Increasingly prosperous in worldly business, the old man made voluminous donations to the poor in homage of his first granddaughter’s marriage. Flamboyant events were organized for several days, particularly the fabulous *naumaquia*²⁴ in the estate’s gardens.

Opilius outdid himself in kindnesses to please Galba, but unlike Helen, who was untroubled and happy with the realization of the dream that had haunted her maternal ambitions, Tacianus was unable to hide the worry and sadness weighing on his mind.

Blandina was languishing for no apparent reason.

The girl was overcome by an incomprehensible melancholy and sometimes spent hours on end in her bedroom, thinking and thinking...

Neither advice nor medical opinions were of any use.

Pale and weakened, she gave the impression that she was living mentally far away from herself.

She went to the wedding ceremonies, clinging to her father's arm, despite the disapproval of Helen, who seeing her gaunt, colorless face, did not have the courage to openly object.

Grandfather Veturius noticed her weakness, and perhaps trying to please his children, as soon as the newlyweds had left for the Imperial capital, he suggested a temporary move for the family to Baiae on the wonderful Gulf of Neapolis, where he had a comfortable vacation home.

Southern Italy was known for working miracles and the mild climate would restore the ailing girl's strength. Trips to the nearby beaches and regular visits to the Isle of Capri would restore the rosy color to her cheeks.

They would leave the villa in Theodulus's charge since he, Veturius, would accompany his son-in-law and daughter. He was feeling bored with the city turmoil. He was thirsty for nature... He was so enthused with the idea that he asked that the trip not be delayed. He was convinced that his little granddaughter's health needed immediate attention.

For this reason, nothing came up that could delay the journey.

In a short time, a stately galley took the family to Baiae, at the time one of the most popular thermal spas in Italy.

It was smooth sailing all the way.

Tacianus and Blandina rejoiced in the sublime views of nature, but Helen, invariably involved in complications and useless pastimes, was surrounded by an entire retinue of maids, seamstresses, singers and dancers to chase away her boredom.

She claimed that the beauty of the Neapolitan coast was nothing more than boring quietude, and steeling herself for the sacrifice of satisfying her father's desires and her daughter's needs, she planned festivities and adventures to pass the time away.

Anacleta, now white-haired and visibly weary, tried to get Helen to relax. But it was futile. The matron, whose youthful charms were conserved with elixirs and ointments, laughed mockingly. She believed that the gods preserved the health and happiness of those who were willing to cultivate optimism and domination.

Life – she often repeated – belonged to the strongest. Happiness sanctioned those who trampled the weak and ignorant underfoot.

The travelers and their entourage reached the splendid gulf with no news of any note.

Veturius's residence in Baiae was admirably looked after by friendly hands. Facing the sea, it was a palace in miniature concealed by flowering creepers.

There, soul and body could find amazing resources for recovery. The spectacle of the blue waters and numerous boats with fisherman singing their melodious songs, which the gentle whispering breezes spread throughout the area, was miraculously refreshing.

While Tacianus arranged to have two small, comfortable boats for closer contact with nature, Helen took steps to ensure that the house's means of transportation were properly refurbished so she could get back to the former habits of her active social life.

The excursions turned into a series of enchantments for Opilius's son-in-law and Blandina. They lingered for hours on Capri near the superb and impressive palace of Tiberius (*Jovis Villa*), which time had ruthlessly destroyed. They went for long walks to the grottos, the summits of Anacapri, or to other beautiful villas built during the time of the famous emperor.

They were overjoyed as they visited all the towns along the bay, getting to know their customs and becoming part of their simple lifestyle.

Other times, they went around Cape Miseno and wandered up and down the coast, admiring the splendor of the sun setting over the sapphire waters, or the sparkling silvery moonlight on the beaches graced by lacy waves of foam.

On one occasion, thwarted by a strong wind, they approached another beach. The houses of Neapolis rose up before them.

Although the sky seemed calm and cloudless, Tacianus thought it would be wise to disembark.

It would soon be twilight.

He and Blandina would continue on foot.

The servant who had come along was told to take the boat back to a well-known spot as soon as the wind subsided, and father and daughter happily went to visit emporiums and plazas, monuments and gardens.

Their enjoyment of every moment slowed their pace, so they planned to rent a carriage for their return.

Stopping here and there, when the sun had already set in the west in a flood of golden rays, they came to Agrippa's bakery.

The pleasant aroma coming from the oven invited them as they passed by, and on Blandina's request, Tacianus agreed to enter the shop.

Various kinds of tidbits were lined up in abundant display.

And while Agrippa courteously waited on the two, they heard the sweet voice of a child not far away, breaking the evening silence, and singing to the sound of an impeccable harp:

O stars – nests of life

Set in the depths of space,

New homes, new worlds,

Covered by a thin veil...

Praises to your glory

Born in eternity.

You are gardens in the immensity

Suspended in the blue of the heavens.

You tell us that everything is beautiful,

You tell us that everything is holy,

Even when there is weeping,

In the dream that leads us.

You declare to the strange land

*Overcome with sadness,
That beauty reigns in everything,
Dressed in love and light.*

*When the night is colder
From the sorrow that seeks us
Break the dark chain
That binds our heart,
Lighting the dawn
In the countryside of a New Day,
Where happiness radiates
Eternal resurrection.*

*Give comfort to the pilgrim
Who follows at the mercy of fate,
Without a home, without peace, without direction,
Tormented, suffering...
Temples of the Infinite,
Reveal to Humanity
The blessing of the Divine One
In the blessings of your love.*

*O stars – nests of life
Set in the depths of space,
New homes, new worlds,
Covered by a thin veil...
Praises to your glory
Born in eternity,*

*You are gardens in the immensity
Suspended in the blue of the heavens.*

Tacianus and the little girl exchanged a silent look of unspeakable astonishment.

The hymn had undergone some changes, but it was the same hymn...

Ecstatic, they recalled that unforgettable sunset on the Rhone when they had entered Basilius's house for the first time.

Whose voice was it?

When the song ended, the pale patrician asked Lucius Agrippa:

"Please, my friend, can you tell me something about that music?"

The baker smiled kindly and explained:

"Honorable sir, it is the voice of a boy who sings for his poor dying mother."

"Who is she?" Tacianus asked anxiously.

"She is a blind servant who has lived in our home for three years and has been bedridden for months with a disease. Now she's at the end..."

With his face white as marble, the patrician took his daughter's little hand and asked if he could see the woman.

Agrippa did not hesitate before his pleading, supplicant look.

He led his visitors through rows of trees to a tiny room in the back.

The harmonious notes of a finely tuned instrument escaped through the open window.

Tacianus walked through the door with his heart pounding...

In a scene he would never forget, he saw Livia, emaciated and breathless, listening to a kindly, humble boy singing with velvety tenderness.

"Livia!" he cried, astonished.

"Livia! Livia!" Blandina repeated ardently.

This brought an inexpressible smile to the ailing woman's serene face; she reached out her hands, exclaiming in tears:

“At last... at last!”

The patrician looked in dismay at what was left of the woman he had loved with fraternal affection. Her sightless eyes revealed a sorrowful vagueness on her sad face, which now looked more like a delicate ivory mask, framed by a full mane of black hair that had not changed.

While Blandina leaned lovingly over the bed, he wanted to give vent to the outrage he felt in his heart, but a heavy cloud of pain constricted his throat.

Livia discerned his anguish, and having noticed Agrippa’s presence, she tried to make an introduction that would relieve the tension of the moment.

Mr. Agrippa,” she said, “these are the two friends I’ve been waiting for for so long... God didn’t let me die without embracing them for the last time... Quintus Celsus has just found a new family.”

The owner greeted Tacianus and Blandina, and seeing that the group wanted more privacy, he withdrew, promising to return with Domitia in a short time.

Tacianus began making a strange noise, as if there were a wild beast hidden in his chest, growling frightfully... Livia urged him to resign himself and be calm, but he exploded in a loud, pained voice:

“Why have I found you like this? Why have I found you in the terrible moment of farewell? Woe is me! I am a reprobate under the iron hand of evil spirits! I am like the passing storm, howling among the ruins... Everything has failed me. Why have I bound myself like this to the sinister gods? Instead of happiness I have found only smoldering remnants... I have tried to live with the fearlessness of my ancestors and to always act according to what the traditions have taught me to be most pure, but I have met only with trials, mocking my desires... I am a ghost of myself! I do not know who I am! Death has surrounded me at every step. I am vanquished and life has forced me to march among my own broken idols!”

He stopped, suffocated by the copious tears streaming down his face.

Taking advantage of his pause, Livia interrupted in a moving voice:

“Tacianus, why feed your heart’s torment in the face of life’s serenity?... You complain about the world... But wouldn’t it be more accurate to complain about ourselves?... How can you give in to blasphemy when you

have such a strong body? Why rebel when each day's activities can count on your free hands? I learned from Jesus that struggle is as vital for our soul as the chisel is for perfecting a statue! Our family scruples used to compel us to keep matters of faith out of our most intimate conversations... My father advised me not to offend other people's convictions... But today I'm no longer a woman that the world could make happy... I'm just a sister saying goodbye... A few months before you and we met on the banks of the Rhone, we met Jesus in Massilia... Our minds were changed... With him we learned that divine love presides over all human life... We are merely strangers on the earth! Our real home shines beyond it... We have to bravely overcome life's obstacles... It is true that I am blind. I also know that death is approaching; yet there is a light that illuminates me within my soul... Christ..."

Tacianus interrupted her faltering sentence and shouted:

"Always the shadow of this Christ crossing my path... I was still young when I found out that my father's love had been fully surrendered to the Jewish prophet! When I tried to help my mother recover her right mind, she could not speak of any other person and died longing for the influence of that intruder... When I went to see Basilius after I returned from Rome to remind him of the love that induced me to respect my father's memory, I discovered that my dear friend had been martyred for him... I have made every effort to find you again to regain your love, but now that I have found you, I see that you too have fallen into the invisible hands of this incomprehensible Savior... O infernal gods, what have you done to me?"

Livia turned even paler.

Blandina took her hands and was about to say something to her, but with the serenity of one who has found peace within herself, Livia said sadly:

"Your reaction is pointless! This bed is a liberating cross for me. On it, I have been reunited with the many loved ones who preceded me in death! My eyes have been burned forever, but a new sight enriches my inner life... My father is here beside us... He has embraced me with love every day... And he is asking for your silence before truths that you cannot yet grasp... He says that although your mind has improved over the centuries... your heart, although kind, is a pearl locked away in a bronze box... Too much intelligence has eclipsed your vision... You suffer, but as a demented man who refuses the remedy that will free him... Your tears of spiritual rebellion are gathering thick clouds of sorrow over your head! You are willingly trapped in illusions

that wound your soul... My father is imploring you to be calm and to reflect... He says that we are all in chains throughout our successive lives... We are each other's tormenters and benefactors... Only Christ's teachings well-lived by us can free us and remove the dark chains of hatred and vanity, selfishness and desperation that bind us... Be compassionate toward everyone... to superiors and inferiors alike, to those who help you and those who mock you, to the living and the dead... Do not return evil for evil... Always forgive... That is the only way you will have light within you so you can discern the truth... My father told me about my coming departure... I have been waiting for you so that I could hand to you the final duty that earth reserved for me... Today that mission will be accomplished... I feel happy with the gift of your presence, with Blandina by my side... Now my job is over."

Quintus Celsus, his eyes filled with tears, lay down his harp, forgot the visitors and embraced the dying woman.

Those words of farewell reminded him of the final scene with his deceased mother.

Frightened, he began to sob with grief.

While Livia soothed him with words of tenderness, Tacianus thought to himself that she had perhaps gone mad from her suffering.

But at the moment, he could not launch into a religious discussion that might end up with everyone getting hurt.

Any argument about Christ would not restore the least bit of physical health to the loved one whom fate had strangled.

He realized he was wrong.

He stroked her sweat-drenched forehead and begged her forgiveness.

Livia smiled and asked about Blandina's artistic progress. She asked her to play one of the old songs from the house in Lyon.

The little girl quickly complied.

The melody radiated like a blessed calm in the cramped room.

Peaceful tears rolled down the ailing woman's sallow cheeks. Without interrupting the evocative music, she touched Celsus's wet face and handed him to her friend, humbly and trustingly:

“Tacianus, this is the child of my heart. I entrust him into your care! His name is Quintus Celsus... he saved me in Trinacria. We sang together there in public... He is very brave... If life had entrusted me with a son, I would have wanted him to be like Celsus: a friend, devoted, hardworking... I know that he will be a valuable son for you on your way, as well as a selfless brother for Blandina.”

The boy looked at Tacianus strangely. The patrician was magnetized. He tried to remember where he had seen those eyes before in the kaleidoscope of his memories.

Was that not the gaze of a father looking at him in another time? Where did that child come from, that child who even bore the same name as the apostle that had given him life?

In his turn, the boy, who had been inwardly moved by an automatic impulse, broke away from Livia and threw himself into his arms.

Tacianus was startled, but gladly accepted his spontaneous gesture of love.

Celsus seemed like a little bird against his chest. He could even hear his frightened heart beating.

But the child was not content with the loving embrace. He kissed Tacianus’s graying head and stroked his brow, smoothing his hair.

Quintus Varrus’s son felt the most inexplicable emotion inwardly constricting him. He tried to say something to the boy but could not do anything except embrace him in silence.

It was then that Livia, in broken sentences, described for Tacianus and Blandina the struggle that had shattered their domestic peace. Despite Basilius’s persistence, Helen had never been able to welcome them in her home, and the collection of the Carpus’s debt by means of Veturius’s family had been her adoptive father’s undoing. They had moved to Lucanus Vestinus’s house out of dire necessity. After relating the grievous events of the persecutions, she spoke about her ordeal in prison, her sudden blindness and finally her escape, followed by her trip to Sicily with Theodulus, who had not kept his promises.

Her friend listened to her with unspeakable astonishment and anger.

The young woman's dolorous suffering in Lyon and Trinacria tore him to the core of his soul.

He caught a glimpse of the dark plot that had been instigated for her death.

He reaffirmed to her that he had had no knowledge of what had transpired.

He had never even been on the island. He had made regular trips to Rome as part of his established routine, and had returned as usual.

Helen, on the other hand, must have known about the events.

He would send for her.

Greatly troubled, he went out into the street, and although night had fallen, he sent a courier to the distant villa, asking his wife and the governess to meet him and Blandina at Agrippa's home for urgent health reasons.

He would demand an explanation from his wife in front of the poor creature who was lying there half-dead.

Some time later, Helen and Anaclea arrived in a light, showy carriage.

Tacianus met them, and after the questions they fired at him, he said nervously:

"Let's go in! It's a case of imminent death."

"Is it Blandina?" the matron asked, distressed.

"No, no. Let's go in!"

The group entered the small room.

Tacianus nodded towards the dying woman, whose dead eyes wandered expressionlessly in their sockets. Emotionally upset, he asked her:

"Helen, do you recognize this woman?"

She trembled, and because she made a silent negative gesture, her husband said forcefully:

"It is Livia, Basilius's daughter."

Lucius Agrippa and his wife had been in the room, but at this point they took the children to a different part of the house to put them to bed.

Only those four souls, imprisoned in their extraordinary common destiny, remained, face to face, as if summoned by unseen forces to a final encounter.

Helen and Anacleta seemed galvanized as they contemplated that face animated by an intense inner life.

The blind harpist, close to death, showed a resemblance in her face to Emilianus Secundinus, the lover whom time had not erased from the heart of Veturius's daughter.

"Livia," said Tacianus compassionately, "Let me introduce my wife and our friend Anacleta to you."

The hapless woman's face shone with profound happiness.

"I thank God for this moment," she humbly whispered. "I have always wanted to ask you both to forgive me for my bad impression on you... I have often wanted to tell you of my respect and friendship... however... circumstances have not allowed for it."

That voice resounded in Helen's mind with a strange resonance... Why hadn't she wanted to get to know this woman better?

Inexplicably, her behavior changed. Reminiscences from that dark period of her life were emerging in living color from the recesses of her memory. She had the impression that Emilianus was there in spirit, awakening her to the terrible reality of things... She forgot that Tacianus was there, and unconcerned about any personal decorum, she asked with an uneasy look:

"Where were you born?"

"In Cyprus, ma'am."

"Who was your mother?"

The dying woman smiled with effort and explained:

"I never had the good fortune of meeting my mother... I was found by my elderly adoptive father in the heath."

"And would you forgive the one who gave you life if you met her some day?"

"Oh, yes! I always paid loving respect to my mother... in my daily prayers..."

The matron paled, and trembling with dread, faced with the naked truth, she continued:

“And what if your mother stole your husband, your father and your very health, exposing you to public scorn?”

“Even then, it would be no different for me. Who of us in this world has the right to judge? My mother... although she wanted me with all her heart... might have been forced to abandon me... for my own good... I believe that... in everything... we should give thanks to God.”

Before Helen’s stunned silence, Anacleta went to the dying woman with fervent interest.

“Did your mother perhaps leave you some memento?” asked the governess in eager anticipation.

Livia thought for a few moments, as if seeking the strength to speak, and then confirmed:

“I think my mother... meant to find me... because she left a cameo in lace coverlets. My father taught me to wear it against my heart.”

In front of a stupefied Tacianus, Anacleta searched Livia’s chest and removed a piece of ivory jewelry, which held the shining, beautifully sculpted image of Cybele that Helen had always worn in her outings with Secundinus.

Helen’s pallor deepened.

She had found her own daughter, against whom she had wielded the cudgel of her feverish persecution. This was the withered flower of her earliest dreams... She heard, once more, in the miraculous sound of her memory, the words the unforgettable man of her feminine ideals had spoken to her for the first time... The two of them had planned the most beautiful life for the offspring of their hopes.

Why had the paradise they had imagined turned into a hell?

Immobilized by fear, her eyes wide, she noticed that her reminiscences were materializing her past in the essence of her soul.

The walls of the room disappeared from her sight.

She saw herself as a girl again, in the whirlwind of platitudes where Emilianus’s love had awakened her heart...

Her mind had clouded over.

Where was she?

In the midst of the shadows that surrounded her, she saw a man walking toward her... It was Secundinus, as in Orosius's former vision and as in the dream that had visited her on the island of Cyprus. He was still dressed in his military garb and held his hand on his bleeding chest. He cried out to her:

"Helen! Helen! What have you done to the daughter I gave you?"

These words, repeated over and over by the monsters of remorse in the deep abyss under her feet, tortured her.

She remembered that her abandoned daughter was right there; however, no matter how much she reached out her arms, she could not find her in the darkness thickening around her...

Only Emilianus's face was growing huge in front of her terrified vision and only his disturbing question was reaching her ears:

"Helen! Helen! What have you done to the daughter I gave you?"

In front of the thunderstruck Tacianus and Anacleta, the matron, with the wild look of the insane, let out a horrible laugh, turned on her heels and ran out into the street. She took the reins of the vehicle that had brought her and left at a gallop to return to the distant villa.

Helen's husband asked Agrippa to look after Livia, and isolating himself with the governess in a part of the garden, he listened to her dark secrets about the past and present for more than two hours.

Tacianus seemed drunk with rage.

When Anacleta had ended her bitter revelations, Tacianus, now aware of all the cruel truth, clenched his fists and shouted:

"Helen is unworthy to breathe among mortals. I'm going to strangle her with my own two hands... Before the day is over she will descend into Tartarus to receive her well-deserved punishment!"

"Tacianus! Tacianus!" sobbed his old friend, trying to keep him from leaving. "Wait! Wait! Time will help you think things through!"

The patrician was attempting to extricate himself when Lucius Agrippa, with a weary expression on his face, approached and said:

"My friends, our Livia is finally at rest."

With his heart doubly tortured, Tacianus ran to the simple room and looked at Livia's face, haggard and pale, under the halo of death.

An angelic serenity was written on her face. A mysterious smile, either from joy or from resignation, was on her lips as the final message of her short life to those who had remained behind.

The friend who had loved her so much leaned over her body and wept for a few moments. However, as if he were suddenly lifted up by a strange force, he began to wail savagely and to curse.

He asked Lucius for his help. He needed to get home right away.

In a few minutes, a work cart carried him home, accompanied by Anacleta.

They said nothing the whole way. Morning's light began to emerge in a beautiful dawn... Followed by the governess, who was concerned about preventing any acts of violence, the patrician called for his wife in the clamoring voice of a madman.

But Helen was not to be found as usual in her bedchamber.

After a few anxious moments of searching, he finally found her in a pool of blood in the bath house.

The wretched matron, tormented by the terrifying pictures of her guilty conscience, had slashed her wrists.

Anacleta cried out loudly.

All the servants came running to help, but it was too late.

It was then that old Opilius, trembling and anxious, came in. When he found the daughter who had always owned his heart lying dead, he wanted to scream but was unable to. His chest felt tight and his brain snapped like the breaking strings of a harp. The old man fell helplessly to the marble floor, groaning in grief.

The tragic night passed like a heartless, howling hurricane.

Due to the shock, Opilius Veturius, the man of power whom Rome had admired for so many years, was now bedridden, prostrate and partially paralyzed. He had lost his ability to speak. In spite of the immense efforts to help him recuperate, he was unable to emit more than guttural, animal-like sounds.

Day after day unfolded...

And as a superb trireme took him to Ostia under Anacleta's care, Tacianus and Blandina, accompanied by Quintus Celsus, returned to Lyon, filled with longing and sorrow...

Quintus Varrus's proud son, who since his youth had despised the common people and had only humbled himself superficially in worship of the gods of imperial victories, began to bow his head. With deep wrinkles disfiguring his face, now framed in quickly multiplying white hairs, and accompanied by the two children that from now on would be his reason for living, he only knew to search the horizon in silence, reflecting at length and weeping...

²⁴ Reenactment of a naval battle – Tr.

6

Loneliness and Readjustment

The autumn of 256 began amid struggles and expectations.

The empire was being ruled by Publius Aurelius Licinius Valerianus, who had risen to the height of power because of his brilliant military exploits. Decadence was rife...

Despite victories over the Goths, the Emperor could not halt the moral breakdown from expanding everywhere.

In Rome, decency was suffering from neglect and subversion.

Irresponsibility and discipline was growing in the provinces.

Tacianus, however, had accelerated his inner renewal too much to be overly concerned with the outside world.

He had distanced himself from vexing political and philosophical issues because he felt that life was calling on him to rearrange his personal achievements and values.

In Lyon once again, where life was unfolding with the necessary readjustments, he knew there would be no lack of unexpected annoyances from Rome.

He had been unable to explain the real causes of Helen's suicide and his father-in-law's illness to his friends, and this had created an atmosphere of antipathy and mistrust.

As a result, he found himself even more troubled, more alone.

He had arrived at the villa with one obsessive thought dominating his mind: revenge against Theodulus. He was going to pour out on him all the gall of indignation and contempt that was spilling from his soul. He was going to interrogate him ruthlessly and avenge himself mercilessly. However,

on the way back he had learned that Opilius's representative had been hurriedly called on by Galba and had gone to Rome two days before.

Of course, Veturius's health was in peril.

Nevertheless, he felt cruelly affronted to have to meet with his father-in-law.

He was accustomed to the ancient traditions of pride that had shaped his life, and he realized that the Veturius family, who had poisoned his life since the cradle, regarded him as an outsider. He would rather meet the family's disfavor and hostility in Leon, where he had worked since his younger days.

He feared Galba's intrusion, so he had had Basilius's old house remodeled and beautified. It was the only property he held in his own name, and he lived there with Blandina, Celsus and an old slave couple, Servulinus and Valeria, who were extremely devoted to him.

The longtime housekeeper was an efficient mainstay for the domestic chores and her husband had become a competent teacher for the two children.

In early childhood, Quintus Celsus had been introduced by Livia to the art of reading, and now, at age eleven, he had a prodigious memory and discernment. Openly Christian, he spent many hours with Blandina, telling her stories about the martyrs of the Gospel and showing her his ardent faith in Jesus.

Tacianus's daughter listened in amazement and found great comfort in these conversations.

Livia's suffering, Basilius's disappearance, Helen's death – with the pompous funeral that had followed – her grandfather's illness and her father's grave concerns had all had a profound psychological impact on Blandina. She wept for no reason, suffered inexplicably from insomnia, and often lay in her bed for days with severe heart palpitations.

For her, the trip to Neapolis had lost the fruits it seemed to have borne.

Every morning, she recited the customary prayer to Cybele with her father, but deep down she felt that her mind had begun to gravitate toward that loving, wise Christ who was at the center of all her adopted brother's remarks.

Since she was aware of her father's aversion to Christians, she carefully refrained from any comments in his presence that might offend his principles.

Little by little, Celsus's beliefs and comments won her simple and sensitive soul over to the new faith.

When the boy finished his studies and daily chores, he still found time for a quick reading from Basilus's archives, which Tacianus had respectfully preserved.

Hence Tacianus's amazement at the boy's judicious, sensible remarks during their usual conversations, whether on country walks, at meals or in the triclinium, during which Quintus Celsus also avoided the slightest direct reference to Christianity.

Servulinus always entreated the children to respect his master's convictions; thus, spiritual brother and sister shared the same idealism and the same hopes only with each other, cementing the faith that united their hearts.

Night after night, the inhabitants of the house in the woods enjoyed sweet and blessed hours of music and happiness.

As if he had long known Tacianus's psychological traits, Celsus had acquired special ways of guiding the conversation.

Once, the disenchanted patrician was complaining in sorrow and dismay about the tragic crimes of passion of his time. The boy replied subtly:

"But Father, don't you think that maybe the world needs a new idea? An idea that will reach people's sentiments and renew their way of thinking?"

Tacianus looked at him in amazement.

What could Celsus possibly understand about the problems of life?

Although surprised, he firmly replied:

"No, I don't think so, son. Our traditions and laws are all that is needed. We just have to adapt ourselves to them since the guidelines are already in place. Don't you believe that the Divinities are capable of governing our lives?"

"Yes, Papa," said the little boy pensively, "You're right... But the gods seem so far away! They say that Jupiter takes care of the world as a whole; that Ceres watches over the crops; that Minerva guides the wise; but don't you think we need someone who, on behalf of the gods, would come to the world in person, live with the people and experience their problems and suffering?... The Divinities help people according to the sacrifices offered to them in the temples. And so protection from heaven varies with a person's

status. Some can take bulls and birds, incense and coins to the sanctuaries, but most of a city's inhabitants are poor people, who only know sacrifice and servitude... Do you believe that slaves are disinherited by heaven? That the ones who work the hardest should be favored the least?"

Varrus's son received such words, spoken with humility and affection, as streams of inner light...

He himself had been well-born and had grown up blessed with the prestige of wealth, but the twists of fate had gradually robbed him of all his advantages and privileges.

The death of his wife and his kin's dislike for him had left him on the verge of total economic impoverishment.

He was waiting for the final blow from his brother-in-law and son-in-law.

It would not be long before he, too, would perhaps come to know the painful condition of people sentenced to subservience in dependency and darkness.

In this turn of events, the breath of adversity chilled his soul.

Would he have enough faith in the fast-approaching days of uncertainty?

His adopted son's comments awakened these harrowing thoughts in his soul.

He paled slightly and said:

"Yes, yes, your thoughts are indeed praiseworthy; still, we can't ignore the fact that our lives continue to be structured on a foundation of classes."

And recalling the wise commentaries of the ancient Romans, he added:

"Society is a body of which we are integral parts. The head sitting on our shoulders has the task of reasoning and decision-making. The hands and feet were made to serve the head. In the body of our political life, the patrician represents the senses such as vision, hearing and touch, which help the brain to examine and discern, while the plebeians are the members responsible for work and submission. We could never undo this order. Birth and status, name and achievement are the cornerstones of our equilibrium."

The boy smiled intelligently and replied, deeply inspired:

“But isn’t a pain in the feet just as unpleasant as a pain in the head? Wouldn’t a wound to the hands hurt just as much as a blow to the face? I know that each person lives and breathes in the place assigned by nature, but all people deserve respect, happiness and regard from each other. By accepting this fact, I believe that if faith could work within us to make us more like each other’s friends, brothers and sisters so that we ourselves could begin the work of kindness, with no constraints, the world’s harmony would be more perfect, because the fortunes of the wealthy would not be disturbed by the misfortunes of the poor, and the laughter of a few would not be harmed by the groans of many.”

Helen’s widower mused for a moment and concluded:

“Your remarks are interesting and valuable. Of course, to accomplish what you say, the Empire would need a great reformer... a man worthy of all our public dignities. Probably a philosopher who would take the reins of the government under the inspiration of goodness and uprightness; someone who would know how to understand our common needs.”

Celsus exchanged a look of inexpressible joy with Blandina and said:

“But Papa, don’t you believe that such a reformer has already come?”

Tacianus understood the veiled allusion to Jesus Christ, made a gesture of annoyance and changed the subject. However, alone in his solitude, he reflected on the arguments of the child whom Livia’s devotion had left to him, and who had gradually come to occupy his heart like a small but reliable guide.

Several weeks passed, when a trusted courier from Galba’s house brought disturbing news from Rome.

Lucila had deigned to write only to her sister so she could torment her father with all the malevolent gall spilling from her soul. She insisted that Blandina come to live with her in the Empire’s capital. She said that she had lost confidence in her father, who had been unable to prevent her mother’s suicide. She was convinced that Helen had ended it all because she was upset that Tacianus had withheld his love from her for so many years. She stated that her grandfather, bedridden and between illness and the grave, had decided to sell all their property in Gaul so that the family could let go of bitter memories; that in a few days the patrician Alcius Comunius would take possession of the villa; and that Theodulus would not be coming back. Consequently, she was advising Blandina to move to Rome as soon as

possible. Nevertheless, she would wait for a direct answer so that she could instruct Anacleta and the other servants to arrange the necessary traveling entourage. She asked for the return of her mother's jewelry and mementos for her sentimental collection, and in closing, she related the interests and benefits of the move and stated her hope that Blandina would discover a more varied life there that would cure her of all her incomprehensible sadness and despondency.

Tacianus could barely hold back the tears as he read the letter.

He would never have expected such disrespect.

His father-in-law's decision to divest himself of his lands would mean a severe drop in social standing, but the prospects of that hardship did not wound him nearly as much as his daughter's ungrateful attitude.

Lucila did not have the slightest reason to hurt him like that.

But he remembered Quintus Varrus, his diligent father who had given him everything and gotten nothing in return, and once more he realized how grievous his path had been in the world.

He wiped his tears, composed himself, and showed the letter to his daughter.

Blandina did not hide the disgust that this news aroused in her. She immediately replied to her sister that she had no intention of abandoning her father as long as she was alive.

Galba's emissary returned to the city taking the short missive and all of Helen's personal items. From then on an impenetrable silence prevailed over the family relations between Lucila and her father.

A few days later, Alcius took possession of the estate and sent for Servulinus and his wife, whose services were his by right of purchase. Tacianus had to hire a maid, but assumed the task of educating his children himself since they no longer had the material means to satisfy all their desires.

A harsh winter ensued.

The frost-covered trees, with their bare branches reaching upward, looked like wraiths pleading for the warmth of life.

Pensive, Tacianus observed nature in all its forlornness and thought of his own destiny.

The chill of adversity was besieging his heart.

Had it not been for Blandina and Celsus, those fragile buds of life who claimed his affection, he might have surrendered to his moral suffering until death visited him like a messenger of peace and liberation. But they followed his steps with such love and trust that they gave him new strength. He would fight the invisible monsters of fate so that he could give his two children a better life than his own. He would forego all pleasures so that they could continue to live freely and happily.

When spring finally returned to the Rhone landscape, he was faced with the need to be away so that he could secure more comfort for his home. And for the first time, as had happened with his own father in another time, he found out how hard it was for a man to find dignified employment.

The middle class was nothing more than a dark and dangerous corridor between the miserable lowlands of the slaves and the golden mountains of the masters.

Shaken by troubling emotions, he pondered the obstacles that stood between him and the life of his times.

Still, he could not go back.

He consulted several friends, but it was hard to place him in any advantageous position without the protection of the high dignitaries of the Court, and their support was now inaccessible to him.

His daughter's health needed constant care, which demanded an increase in his resources.

In his ongoing attempt to find decent work, occasions arose when he envied the lot of the humble blacksmiths and gladiators who could kiss their little children every night, proud and happy, amid the simplicity that showed the blessing of living.

Desperately caught between his domestic needs and the obstacles in his way, he decided to compete in chariot races for cash prizes.

He owned two light, solid chariots, as well as some excellent horses.

At his debut, he was smitten by the mocking glances of many who used to visit his home in times of his prosperity... Former friends proudly refused him their usual greetings when they saw him participating in such a plebeian

activity, but he showed so much ingenuity and skill in the races that he soon became the favorite of many betters.

Admired by a few and derided by many, Varrus's son had found something to focus on.

He hated the festive crowd cheering his name during the races and he felt an undisguised repugnance for the throngs of male and female pleasure seekers, but inwardly he was pleased with the opportunity to use his own efforts to earn money for his family, who were once again enjoying greater comfort.

He had hired a competent teacher for the children, and life went on at home in a blissful atmosphere of peace, disturbed only by the precarious health of Blandina, who was unable to recuperate fully. Ill and despondent, the girl watched time pass by under the unsurpassable care of Tacianus and Celsus, as if she were an ailing angel ready to take flight to paradise.

She was led by her father's selfless hand on frequent walks along the river or in the woods, but she never regained the rosy, healthy colors of her childhood. She was often caught by her family members in convulsive tears, and when they asked her about it, she would say that she had seen Helen's shade begging her for prayers.

Tacianus knew that his daughter's conversations with Celsus had converted her to Christianity, but her soul had changed too much for him to deprive her tormented adolescence of the only source of consolation able to give her peace and comfort, hope and joy.

Personally, he was the same devotee of Cybele that he had always been, an unwavering defender of the immortal gods; however, earthly sorrows had taught his heart that spiritual happiness was not the same for everyone.

Two years flew by...

Celsus, robust and good-tempered, was now his adoptive father's prized companion and helped with the work in the small stable. Blandina had grown much worse.

If the girl tried to play anything on the harp or sing, long bouts of coughing forced her to stop. Her anguished father spared no sacrifice to restore her health, but nature seemed to have condemned the ailing girl to endless suffering.

When a famed Gallic physician from Mediolanum²⁵ was passing through Lyon, he was called in to give his opinion. He advised Tacianus to take the girl to Mediolanum so he could give her the meticulous treatment that was his specialty. He felt that the temporary change would probably help to rebuild her strength.

Her loving, dedicated father did not hesitate.

Since he did not have the necessary funds, he took out a hefty loan and left with his children in the summer of 259.

The enormous debt notwithstanding, and in spite of all the sacrifices made during the healing process, the ailing girl returned home without having improved.

The father's struggles continued bitterly.

As the disquieting days unfolded, they were surprised by an unexpected visitor.

Anacleta, the loyal friend, had come to say goodbye.

Having lived for over a half century, she had come to the conclusion that she could no longer tolerate the busy demands of the imperial city.

She said she was just worn out.

Blandina and her father listened with consternation to the news she had brought.

Old Opilius, tormented by terrible nightmares, had died two winters ago, and Galba, perhaps bored with the excesses he had indulged in his whole life, had tried to move to Campania but was stopped by his wife, who had become increasingly greedy for thrills and adventures...

Ever since Helen's death, Lucila, after she had finally rid herself of the influence of her former home, seemed to be overcome by an incomprehensible hunger for pleasure. And so, while her husband retired to the country, she entrusted herself to the pernicious influence of Theodulus, who had settled into Veturius's palace as if he were a loving family member. He accompanied her to her many parties and indulged her illicit affections until one day, caught red-handed by Galba in a compromising position in the marital thalamus, he was mercilessly stabbed to death.

Once the crime had been committed, which like so many others went unnoticed by the well-bribed authorities, Helen's brother took to his bed, delirious...

Anacleta herself watched over him for a few days, but since she was tired, she heeded the instructions of the lady of the house, who recommended that she rest. However, on the first night that she was in her quarters, Galba died mysteriously. Some trusted slaves averred that their master had been poisoned by his own wife with an infusion she had prepared herself.

Tacianus and his daughter wept at these calamities.

Lucila's loss of morals horrified them.

They urged their old friend to stay, but the devoted servant confessed that she had become a Christian and wanted solitude to reconsider the paths she had taken. Thus, she had decided to return to the island of Cyprus at the loving request of her remaining relatives.

Accompanied by her two nephews, who gave her special care, Anacleta stayed for only one week, and then said farewell to her dear friends forever.

Perhaps struck by the distressing information from Rome, Blandina no longer rose from her bed.

Tacianus surrounded her with surprises and gestures of affections to no avail... Quintus Celsus told her current stories of heroes and martyrs, but that too was useless.

The ailing girl turned down any sort of food, and confined to her bed, she looked more like an angel sculpted from ivory, animated only by her dark eyes, which were still alive and bright.

One evening, right before the great spectacles in honor of illustrious patricians, where Tacianus would be entrusted with important responsibilities, Blandina called him and squeezed his hand affectionately.

Guessing that they would soon be saying goodbye, they exchanged an unforgettable look that expressed the immense pain troubling their minds.

"Father," she said wistfully, "It won't be long before I join our loved ones..."

Tacianus tried in vain to hold back the tears flooding his eyes.

He tried to speak to reassure her, but could not.

“We’ve always been together, Papa!” the girl went on sadly. “I’ve done never done anything without your approval... And so I’d like to ask your consent so that I can make a wish come true before I leave.”

And before her father could ask her what it was, she said:

“Would you allow me to die as a Christian?”

The patrician heard her question as if he had been stabbed in the subtle tissues of his soul. Unspeakable pain, mixed with longing and jealousy, bitterness and distress, made him bow his head in sadness.

“You too, my daughter?” he asked in tears. “My father was his; my mother embraced him; Basilius sacrificed himself for him; Livia died praising his name; Anacleta left us to seek him, and Quintus Celsus, the child that destiny entrusted to me, was born belonging to him... It’s always Christ!... Always this Christ searching for me, tormenting me, pursuing me! You were my only hope! I thought the Galilean carpenter would spare you!... But... you too... Oh, Blandina, why don’t you love your father the way your father loves you? Everyone has abandoned me... Why are you, too, leaving me? I’m troubled, defeated, alone...”

The girl raised her dry, pallid hands with difficulty and stroked the prematurely gray head leaning over her in convulsive sobbing.

“Don’t grieve, Papa!” she begged, resigned. “I do want Jesus, but you are all I have!... I’ve never found anything in life equal to your love... Your love is my wealth! I want to follow in your footsteps more than anything else... Can’t you see that we have always prayed the prayer of Cybele together in the morning? Everything for me will be according to your wishes...”

The girl stopped for a few moments, showing signs of inexplicable joy on her gaunt face, and then continued:

“Late this afternoon, Livia was here... She had an enormous harp, adorned with roses of light... She sang the Hymn to the Stars for me with the same voice as when we met her on the banks of the Rhone... She told me that we will all be together soon and that I shouldn’t fret if you don’t consent to my becoming a Christian now... She said that life is eternal and divine and that we have no reason to torment each other... She assured me that the love of Jesus glorifies our path, and that over time it will flourish everywhere... Besides, dear father, I would never go to a heaven where you were not there too.”

She gazed at the ceiling with her deep, sparkling eyes and said:

“Jesus is also the love that waits forever... There will be forgiveness for everyone.”

Tacianus looked at her sadly.

Was there really any reason to displease his dear daughter in her final hours? Could he, in good conscience, keep her from the faith that he had always despised? Why would he deny Blandina the comfort of his acquiescence in a purely spiritual matter? He was sorry for his outburst, and embracing the sickly girl, he said sincerely:

“Forgive me, my daughter! Forget what I said... Tell me what you plan to do... You are free to embrace Christianity... Our love isn’t a prison of suffering but communion in perfect joy! Go ahead, Blandina. I’ll go along with it!”

There were so much loyalty and love in those words that the ailing girl smiled in delight and contentment, and then humbly said:

“Papa, there’s an old man at St. John’s church named Ennius Pudens. I’d like you to ask him personally to come and pray with me, and... when I die, I’d be happy if you would place my body in the Christians’ tomb. I know that joy reigns there with the certainty of eternal life.”

Tacianus tried to dissuade her. Why such a preoccupation with death, when hope was unveiling a magnificent future ahead for them?

Trying to show calmness and self-assurance, he promised to fulfill her wish, and went on to talk about other things.

He mentioned the festival that the city was eagerly waiting for, and emphasized his plan of winning a significant prize.

He had bought two strong horses that had come from Cappadocia, and they seemed to have invisible wings on their feet.

Because of this, he was expecting a spectacular triumph.

He was convinced that his daughter, proud and beautiful, would attend the races very soon and brighten his victories.

Blandina smiled, happy and comforted.

She was calmer, and quieted down in anticipation of the following day.

With his mind in torment, Tacianus saw the morning arrive. And to keep his promise, he went discreetly to St. John's church, where he had no trouble finding the old man in question.

Ennius Pudens was around eighty years old by now, and was stooped and trembling. He was Quintus Varrus's friend when Pudens was indicated as Apius Corvinus's successor. He was still working. Although he had everyone's respect simply because of his status as the oldest worker in the community, he was also a living example of faith, service, diligence and selflessness.

He welcomed Tacianus with attention and kindness and placed himself at his disposal for anything he could do to help.

The simplicity of the environment gave Tacianus immense peace in his heart.

His soul was thirsting for peace-of-mind like the desert longs for the blessing of water.

When the patrician asked him about the past, Ennius told him that he had known both the older and the younger Corvinus. He seemed happy about such memories although he would never have guessed they concerned his visitor's unfortunate father.

Varrus's son looked at the quarters where his father had lived, devoted to charity and faith.

He contemplated the simple, lovingly-preserved bed and reflected on the bitterness that must certainly have besieged his father's heart there.

He would never have imagined that he, Tacianus, would ever knock on these doors asking for help for his sick daughter.

Immersed in deep alienation, he was aroused by the voice of Pudens telling him that he was ready to go with him.

They left and headed for the nest hidden amongst the trees. Blandina welcomed the disciple with joy and reverence.

The missionary had known about Tacianus for a long time. He knew he was a fierce opponent of the Gospel and an overt persecutor of the tormented church. However, the clean poverty in which he lived with his children, his moral courage in the setbacks he had faced and the good cheer with which he

confronted the blows of fate in the face of public opinion inspired sympathy and respect in Pudens' aged spirit.

Reticent at first, he gradually became more communicative. The girl's questions, Celsus's wise conversation and the respectful looks from the head of the house made him feel more at ease.

The elderly devotee reflected on just how great the afflictions must have been that had befallen this tenacious man who was listening intently. But aged by experience and pain, he kept his questions to himself so he could extend love, tolerance, kindness and understanding.

After an hour of wholesome conversation, the old man recited the Lord's Prayer out loud in answer to the ailing girl's pleas:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Do not let us fall into temptation, but deliver us from every evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. So be it.”

Tacianus was speechless and thrilled as he listened to the prayer, and he was touched by the sweet trust of his children, who repeated it word for word.

It was his first contact with some memento of that Christ whom he had never been able to understand.

Before that scene, consisting of an old man who expected nothing of the world but the peace of the tomb, of two children who were invested with the right of everything that awaited them on earth, and all three attuned to the same resonance of joy and faith, he could not hold back the tears that filled his eyes.

He listened with the greatest respect to all of his guest's remarks, and as Ennius was leaving, he politely begged him not to forget his children. Blandina and Celsus were devout Christians and he, as their parent, would not oppose their sentiments.

The ailing girl looked at him joyfully.

An inexpressible serenity enveloped their home on that unforgettable night. As if she had sipped a delicious sedative, Blandina slept peacefully. Tacianus, in turn, surrendered to a deep, dreamless sleep.

At dawn the next day, however, he woke up with an inexplicable inner sadness disturbing him.

He remembered that the day before, his daughter had made a moral commitment to her new faith; consequently, he went by himself to the image of Cybele in a private chapel next to Blandina's room.

For the first time in many years he repeated alone, to himself, his usual prayer to the Great Mother.

Never had he felt so immersed in such spiritual coldness. Never had he felt so agonizingly alone. He had the impression that he was the only worshiper alive in a temple of dead gods...

Even so, he would not give up the pure faith of his childhood.

He would love Cybele, worship Bacchus and put his hopes in Jupiter, the great lord.

He could not change.

He prayed in tears, and after hugging his children, he went to the circus, where he would prepare his chariot for the afternoon races.

Afterwards, he went home for a light meal, and although he saw that Blandina's suffering had increased, he returned to the city for the big race.

At early twilight, the place was teeming with people.

Lines of litters announced the aristocratic nature of the festivities. Bigas and quadrigas paraded hurriedly here and there... Musicians dressed as fauns played harps and trumpets, lutes and tambourines, rousing the crowd that never grew tired of roaring wildly. Wonderfully dressed courtesans and drunken revelers emitting unpleasant odors, matrons and virgins from Rome and Gaul, excited and half-naked, shouted the names of their favorites.

Tacianus was a very popular favorite.

As soon as he arrived at the starting line, he was cheered by hundreds of voices coming not only from the common people, but also from the balconies of honor where the proprætor was seated with his huge, ostentatious, showy entourage.

That day, however, the crowd's favorite was heedless and indifferent.

He was thinking about his beloved daughter struggling with death; hence he did not make the slightest gesture of recognition to the masses that greeted

him deliriously.

At the starting signal, he loosened the golden reins and the fiery horses took off. The favorite for victory, however, did not feel as sure of himself as he had at other times...

After a few minutes of unbridled galloping, he felt as if his head had become unbalanced on his shoulders. He struggled to regain command of the out-of-control chariot, but his vision suddenly clouded over. He no longer heard the shouts of the frenzied crowd, and he had the impression that there was a void forming in his brain. Unable to control himself, he leaned forward, helplessly clinging to the sides of the chariot.

The horses were completely disoriented and threw the vehicle against a huge column of one of the ornamental arches on the track, breaking the chariot to pieces.

Tacianus suffered a terrible fall and was thrown into the heap of twisted iron, wounding his face and seriously injuring his eyes.

The crowd went wild. He was quickly rescued by attendants and was pulled away, bleeding.

The valiant champion was unconscious. And while two trusted slaves carefully helped him home, the same voices that used to applaud him now jeered him with mocking, thankless remarks.

The wagers who had lost large bets turned in disappointment against yesterday's idol.

Tacianus was still unable to reason, although he could now groan. He was placed on his bed under Quintus Celsus's anxious eyes.

The boy did his best to hide the painful event from Blandina and did everything he could for his adoptive father. But realizing that he was totally alone to take care of him, he got on the horse he often used and went to the Christians' refuge for help.

Old Ennius listened to the news compassionately.

He sent Celsus home and took a carriage to assist the wounded man. Due to the circumstances, he was soon in charge of the little house in the woods.

He had brought all the healing ointments he had, and supplied with some linen cloths, he began to clean the still-bleeding scrapes. However, taken with dolorous apprehensions, he could see that Tacianus was blind. The proud

patrician whom life seemed to be slowly punishing, stripping him of all the privileges that had made him feared and respected, was now torn in his own body. He could never go back to the races in the arena, and it would be hard for him to find work to support himself with the effort of his own two hands...

With these thoughts in mind, he noticed that the wounded man was regaining consciousness. His muffled groans were becoming louder.

The old man spoke some encouraging words to him, explaining that the scrapes had been properly medicated. Tacianus recognized his benefactor's voice, thanked him and asked him for some light because he felt uncomfortable and anxious in the darkness.

The mantle of night had indeed fallen on that unfortunate day, but there were two torches burning brightly in the room.

"Sir," said the old man, deeply sorrowful, "the room is lighted, but your eyes..."

His words were lost in the silence.

An indescribable dread came over the wounded man's countenance.

He lifted his hands to his face and realized the extent of the damage.

Ennius and Celsus watched him anxiously, thinking that the unfortunate Roman might explode in a fit of exasperation and pain; but he became inexplicably quiet. Copious tears flowed from his ruined, bleeding eyes. As if he needed to tell his son and friend what had happened to him, he cried out in a moving voice:

"I'm blind! But the gods have still granted me the ability to weep!"

Then, groping and stumbling, he went to Blandina's bedroom, asking Ennius to leave her room in darkness before he went in.

He approached the child and stroked her hair.

The girl told him of the pain that was tormenting her, and making a supreme effort, her father comforted her, asking forgiveness for having come home so late...

Veiled by the darkness, he described the evening's festivities. He told her of the hundreds of women wearing garments of great beauty. The spectacle was magnificent. He made up amazing news to the delight of the girl, who was used to hearing his stories about the joyful spectators.

Blandina kissed his hands, said she was glad that Pudens was there, and settled down peacefully.

The old man and Celsus watched the scene, deeply moved.

Tacianus's moral strength impressed them.

And night after night, as if he were returning from his job at the circus, her father embraced her in the dark and spoke at length with her to give her the impression that everything was going along peacefully and securely.

This difficult situation lasted for around two weeks of worries and sorrows.

Not one of his old friends came to see him.

Not one admirer from the arena paid him a visit.

Only old Pudens steadily nourished their friendship. As if they were old friends, he and young Quintus Celsus found solutions for all the household needs, relieving Tacianus as much as they could.

The boy devoted himself to his adoptive father with admirable affection. He took his place in doing all the chores. He read him his favorite books, described the view to him, and surrounded him with loving care...

With Tacianus's consent, Ennius started sleeping at the simple home, alert to the condition of Blandina, who required careful assistance. That flower of kindness and gentleness was slowly wilting under the breath of death.

Indeed, one cold, cloudy night, she took a turn for the worse.

The old man knew that the end had come. He asked Tacianus to come quickly and embrace his daughter so that she would not miss the comfort of her father's presence in her final hour.

After Tacianus had gone blind, he thought he would not suffer as much with the loss of Blandina, whose love was a priceless treasure to him. He asked himself: Wouldn't it be better to be happy seeing her relieved of the burden of undergoing such harsh trials? Why keep her tied to an invalid like me? How could I be happy knowing that she would be enslaved to want and misery?

However, that appeal in the middle of the night struck him like a deadly dagger. Distressed and stumbling, he rushed to help.

He sat on the humble bed, and aided by Ennius, he comforted the dying girl, who could no longer hear his words of love calling her... He held her to him, wanting to bind her body to his; but as if she wanted nothing more than his comforting warmth, she finally rested with the serenity of a sleeping angel.

Tacianus wept inconsolably in his grief, blurting out bitter lamentations that were lost in the depths of the night...

The next day, the funeral services were conducted under Pudens' guidance as the young woman had wished.

Her poor father, now leaning on his adoptive son, despite his inner disagreement with the Christians, accompanied the girl's body and then remained on the church's premises, lacking the courage to return home.

In memory of his daughter, he had ordered a marble tombstone with two entwined hearts in high relief with the beautiful inscription: *Blandina Lives*.

Supported by Celsus, he wanted to help place the memento on the simple tomb, and at the end of the service, he fingered the meaningful inscription, made a gesture to embrace the tomb, and then pleaded on his knees:

“Blandina, dear daughter! Wherever you are, be my light again! Dear star, light your rays so I may continue on! I am all alone on the earth! If there is another life beyond this cold place implacably holding you, have mercy on me! Do not let the darkness envelop me! I have seen many depart for the strange labyrinth of death! But I have never felt so abandoned! Blessed daughter, do not leave me, ever! Free me from evil! Teach me to resist the monsters of rebelliousness and discouragement! Show me the blessed light of faith! If I have erred through the dark impulses of vanity and pride, help me find the truth! You adopted a faith that I was not prepared for... You chose a different path, but, my unforgettable daughter, you could not have been mistaken! If you have indeed found the Master you hoped for, renew my heart so I can find him, too! I do not know the gods – although I still believe in their existence – but I did have the joy of knowing you and I trust you completely! Uphold me! Uplift my dejected soul! Come back, Blandina! Can't you now see that your father is blind? As long as you were in the world, I believed that I was guiding you! But now I am a beggar for your help. Beloved daughter, live with me forever!”

His voice became silent in the small cemetery, muffled by a deluge of tears...

Celsus took him into his loving arms, kissed him with unspeakable affection and said confidently,

“Father, you will never be alone.”

Tacianus leaned on him, crushed by grief, and withdrew from the crypt, trembling and stumbling.

Not far away, a small congregation was singing Christian hymns for the afternoon prayers...

Even though the students of the Gospel had openly welcomed him, Tacianus realized that his life could not be included in that sanctuary of principles so different from his own. He concluded that his inexorable destiny was inviting him to move on.

²⁵ Mediolanum, today Evreux. - Emmanuel

7

The End of the Struggle

After several days of thinking things over in the church's facilities, Tacianus had a conversation with Ennius, who listened carefully to his ponderings.

Although he was blind, he did not want to be a burden on the institution's finances. He did not know how to thank Pudens for his devotion, and was indebted to him for his great kindness. If he could, he would stay there and serve him with devotion and respect to the end of the days that remained to him. However, he was not alone. He needed to care for Quintus Celsus's future, and thus he was unable to stay there any longer. However, despite his sadness, he did not want to go back to the little house in the woods. Memories of his daughter were tearing his heart apart. Blandina's absence had left him in a hopeless void.

Consequently, he had decided to entrust Basilius's precious archives to Ennius and sell the house, the chariots, carriages and horses. He would use the proceeds to pay his debts and move to Rome with his son.

His older daughter was there. Lucila had never fully understood him, but that was no reason for her to betray her own flesh and blood. She was wealthy and would surely have compassion on him for the situation he was in. Surely, she would not deny him protection when she saw his penury.

He was planning to place himself under her patronage with his adopted son, who needed attention at his age.

In Rome, with the relationships he believed he still had, he would place the boy in an honorable situation so he could await the future with dignity... Pudens listened to his plans and had no objections.

However, he reiterated his friendship and sympathy and offered him his assistance. Why the risk of such a long journey to start a new life? The church

could discreetly provide for Celsus's education, and Tacianus himself would not be without work. There were ill people to console, and a lot of work to be done.

Helen's widower, however, had not fully renounced his class pride. He had achieved a certain amount of tolerance, but he was still far from true self-denial. He would not expose Celsus to the scourge of periodic persecutions. He loved him too much to subject him to social offense. He would feel safer in the great metropolis.

He had not only his daughter in Rome, who would certainly ensure their livelihood, but also powerful friends with pronounced influence in the Court.

He would count on his connections from the past to lead his adopted son into public life.

Quintus Celsus possessed an exquisite intelligence. Tacianus was bound to him by the closest ties of love and trust. He prized him with an excess of dedication and tenderness... From the moment he had received him from Livia's hands as she was leaving for the realms of death, he had discovered in him a valuable gem for the living jewelry chest of his soul. He often reflected on the sublime, complete mystery of the communion in which they were intertwined. He felt like he had rediscovered a heavenly love that time had failed to erase. Listening to him, enraptured, he often felt times that he was in his father's company again.

That sensitivity of appreciating life, that polymorphic culture and ease of expression, characteristic of his adopted son's conversation, reminded him of his unforgettable talks with Quintus Varrus in the gardens of his stepfather's villa. The grace, logic, understanding and innate wisdom were the same. Inexplicably, in pressing moments of struggle, he had begun to reason through Celsus's head. He instinctively looked to him for the final word on serious matters and for suitable guidance on his thorn-covered path. He loved him with all the emotional resources of his obstinate and untamed, but loyal and sincere soul. Only because of him did he now want to live and compete in the painful struggles of the world.

So how could he relegate him to an uncertain fate in Lyon?

Ennius realized that he could not argue with this, because Christianity was still illegal. Political reprisals invariably fell unexpectedly on its courageous followers. It would not be right, then, to force a solution that would tend to favor his own point of view.

When Celsus was asked for his opinion, he assured them that he was only interested in his father's happiness. He would follow Tacianus with the same loyalty as ever.

Thus, the Tacianus put his plan into action.

He sold his house, vehicles and animals to the new master of the former Veturius Villa, but the money he received from Alcius was barely enough to pay off his debts. There was just enough left over for the trip to Rome.

Even so, he did not change his plan.

Lyon was smothering him.

His missing Blandina and his unexpected blindness weighed on his heart. He wanted to get away from there, to grow, to expel his own thoughts and forget everything.

The benevolent and cautious Pudens, however, spoke with Celsus and gave him a letter to a humble but sincere friend who lived on the road to Ostia. His adoptive father's opportunities were not like they used to be. Perhaps they could use someone's help before their first contact with Galba's widow. That way, if there were any problems, they could turn to Erato Marcellinus, an elderly Christian who had been abandoned by his family and had taken refuge in the faith, living selflessly and charitably.

The boy gladly accepted this suggestion. This way he would not be alone in overcoming any obstacles. In order not to offend his father, he carefully tucked the letter away. Emotional farewells were said.

After sailing from Massilia, a light galley left them in Ostia, which still boasted the beautiful monuments of the Port of Trajan.

The blind man, leaning on the boy, breathed the air of his fatherland with patent joy.

Their resources were meager. But as he listened to Celsus's enthusiastic remarks about the beautiful hexagonal bay that Trajan had built, Tacianus told him to take him to the home of Fulvius Esendius, a friend from his youth who, according to information he had received in Gaul, lived on a superb estate there.

Esendius would surely welcome them.

He remembered his imposing figure at the games and his spontaneous glee as he engaged in drinking after the well-won competitions.

It would be a valuable reunion.

Surely his friend would give him decent lodging and would provide adequate transportation to take them comfortably to Lucila...

While Tacianus was thinking and talking to himself, Celsus, guided by the directions of several bystanders, knocked on the door of the elegant villa, situated in the midst of a peaceful orchard.

A well-dressed slave came to the door.

Hopeful, Tacianus asked for his master, saying that he was a friend from the past who had not seen him in many years.

In a few moments, a patrician with an unpleasant face wasted by decadence appeared, limping and disheveled.

He looked at the visitors long and hard, and with a cold expression of disdain that chilled Quintus Celsus, he asked irritably:

“What do you want?”

“Ah! It’s the old same voice!” cried Varrus’s son, reaching his arms out instinctively. “Fulvius, my friend, don’t you recognize me? I’m Tacianus, your old ally from the races.”

The Roman drew back in annoyance and shouted:

“What insolence! I swear by Jupiter, I’ve never seen you before!... I don’t associate with scoundrels.”

Deluded by his own confidence, the visitor asked somewhat disappointedly:

“Don’t you remember how we used to practice at the home of Veturius, my stepfather and father-in-law? I can still see you wielding a shining sword or driving a light chariot that flew with the gallop of your beautiful white horses.”

“You’re nothing but a cheap imposter!” Esendius responded angrily. “Tacianus is a man of my status. He lives honorably in Gaul. He is a patrician. He would never come to me in such execrable misery. Gallic imbecile! You obviously took advantage of my old friend to extort information from him so you could invade my home and rob me!... Knave!... Tramp! You must be one of those misguided Nazarenes, bringing this young thief with you!... Out! Out!... Get out of here!... Out!”

Fulvius, possessed, pointed them toward the public square, while his ruined friend wiped away the copious tears flowing from his sightless eyes.

After the metal gate was slammed shut by the owner of the house, the disenchanted traveler returned to the same road by which he had come...

The boy guessed his pain and embraced him more tenderly, as if to reassure him that he was not alone.

Thankful, with a look of resignation and humility on his face, Blandina's poor father said:

"The truth is, son, you're my only friend now. Wealth and status usually suggest friendship where friendship doesn't actually exist. There's no way that Fulvius didn't recognize me... But today I'm just a shadow on the social scene. I've lost everything... money, youth, health and family reputation... Without them, I'm afraid my own daughter won't acknowledge me."

Hearing the sorrowful inflection in his voice, Celsus tried to assume a more optimistic, hopeful outlook.

His father need not worry. He, Celsus, was young and strong. He would work for both of them. They would lack nothing. As for temporary lodging, he had brought recommendations from Pudens to an old friend of his. According to what his benefactor had said in Lyon, Erato must live very close by. If Tacianus agreed, they would not have to resort to help from Lucila. The two of them could live simply. They would get a humble little house where they could start over again. Ennius's connections in Rome would surely help them out...

Tacianus nodded, comforted, and said that he would gladly go there with him, but that nothing should be settled definitively until he had had a proper conversation with Lucila regarding their new course.

It would not be right to estrange himself from his daughter.

If she welcomed them as he hoped she would, it would ease the hardships of their lot and Celsus would have the teachers he had idealized in his fatherly hopes. However, if she turned out to be hard and ungrateful, they would both surrender to the circumstances and begin their struggle again according to the afflictions that fate dictated.

As they talked, the boy led him down Via Ostia as if he had been familiar with it for a long time.

Celsus was eager to ease his hardships and tried to distract him by describing the magnificence of the sunset and all the interesting scenes surrounding them. Tacianus was smiling.

He felt like he was actually seeing the landscape again, bathed in twilight, though only through the eyes of his memory.

They had gone quite a ways down the road, when they came to a poor restored hovel.

Recalling Ennius's description, the boy was sure that it was where Erato lived. Somehow, he felt like he had been there before. The humble walls, the roof sloping toward the ground, the rustic door – everything looked familiar.

It was Lisipus of Alexandria's home, where Quintus Varrus had met Corvinus for the first time. Old Lisipus had also known the victory of martyrdom, having left like so many others to meet the Master of the Cross. But even though it had passed from Christian to Christian, the little building continued to be a blessed workshop of service to the faith.

In the past, Varrus had not been able to take his dear son to the evangelical meetings as he would have liked, because of Cynthia's maternal vigilance... He had suffered long years of longing and moral flagellation; he had experienced sacrifice and death itself, but he had known how to resign himself and wait.

Time was now rewarding his steadfastness...

By the Lord's mercy, Varrus had returned to corporeal existence in the flesh, and his eternal spirit, metamorphosed into Quintus Celsus, had resumed guiding Tacianus's destiny, leading him to Jesus according to his former ideal...

Some forty-four years had passed since Tacianus had been reborn... and the labor of love continued, diligently and sublimely.

Lisipus's shack, the turning point in his spiritual battle, was the same: simple as the unchangeable serenity of Christ, as welcoming as his doctrine of light...

Enraptured, Celsus described the pure loveliness of that humble nest to the blind man. Celsus seemed so affected that Tacianus thought he had found a tiny palace in that resting place, hidden under a canopy of flowering trees...

Inexplicably happy, Celsus knocked on the door. An old man with a peaceful countenance opened it. Celsus made a silent signal, letting him know that he was a follower of the Gospel, and the man's face broke into a broad, bright smile. He embraced the new arrivals with words of caring, kindly welcome. And while Celsus was telling him Ennius Pudens' news, Tacianus sat on a simple chair, feeling himself enveloped in a calm that he had not known for a long time.

The cool breeze blowing in through the windows felt like a caressing message from nature.

Erato's two nephews, Berzelius and Maximus, both sculptors, were there in the humble room and joined in the conversation.

Erato read Ennius's letter and was overjoyed. He was a longtime friend. They had known each other since childhood.

He was at Celsus and Tacianus's disposal in any way he could be helpful.

The boy explained that he and his father would need shelter until the following day when they would meet with a family member who could perhaps help them. They wanted to settle in the big city, but found themselves displaced.

Their host ordered a light meal of bread, olive oil and vegetables to be served and they continued their fraternal conversation.

Tacianus, of course, did not adhere to Christianity, but to please his adopted son he smiled as he listened to the comments. He could tell that Celsus was so inexplicably enthusiastic that he had no desire to upset him in any way. The old man, his nephews and the boy were so perfectly attuned that they seemed to be old acquaintances in an intimate reunion.

Maximus and Berzelius, selfless worshipers of the Good News, brought up the difficulties of life in Rome. A new crisis of violence and unrest had broken out. The defeat of the emperor Valerian, scandalously imprisoned by the Persians, had created a threatening atmosphere for the Christian groups.

The humiliated emperor's son Egnatius Gallienus had ascended to power. Personally, he was sympathetic toward Christianity, and would offer public demonstrations of that fact soon thereafter. But due to strong social pressure, the new ruler had to bow to the wishes of the dominant classes. The force of the edicts of 257 and 258, which caused tremendous and cruel

repression of the work of the Gospel, had reappeared with great force. As usual, potentates and authorities blamed the political disasters of the Empire on the wrath of the gods and were disgusted with the intense Christian proselytizing.

The fury of the persecutions against the most important Christian families was abating, however, but was worsening against the poor and powerless.

The prisons were overflowing.

Vespasian's Colosseum was in full swing.

The elders and teachers of the Church especially recommended that slaves and plebeians avoid gatherings in the streets.

Innumerable slave owners had banded together in an effort to curb the spread of the Gospel, and had not hesitated to hand over their Christian servants for retaliation and punishment as enemies of the public order.

In response to possible subversive activities, the courts were packed with magistrates and demagogues.

According to the opinion of the decadent patrician class, Christians, who preached fraternity, were accused of being responsible for the wave of regenerating thought.

The festivities in honor of Gallienus would continue indefinitely into the future.

The people were concerned about Shapur's victories, so to keep them entertained the government had heeded its most representative dignitaries and had promoted various exhibitions.

Along with the public prayers before the statue of Jupiter, the sacrifice of animals on Capitoline Hill, the abundant distributions of olive oil and wheat, the electrifying chariot races and the brutal matches involving famous gladiators, the killing of Christians from the lower social spheres continued in sinister nighttime spectacles.

Therefore, would it not be more advisable for the two travelers from Gaul to remain well hidden until the persecution ceased?

As his host's question hung in the air, Tacianus was reminded of his need to head for the urban center without delay. He had to be on Aventine the following morning.

When Maximus asked Quintus Celsus how he felt about that, the boy replied cheerfully:

“I’m not afraid. I have two great loves: Jesus and my father. Since I don’t plan on losing my father, I shall be very happy to obey the will of our Lord, who has brought us together. If our desires are met, we’ll stay together, and even if a bit of suffering appears along the way, we won’t be separated.”

This won smiles from everyone, and even Tacianus, happy to have found someone in the world who loved him so much, showed clear signs of comfort and contentment on his face.

Night had fallen and the sky was embellished with an infinite number of shining stars.

In the light of two torches, the small group continued talking for some time about the arduous paths of the Good News, pausing to give special consideration to the martyrs who, for over two centuries, had died in their service to humanity.

Tacianus listened to it all silently, with discretion and respect, until Marcellinus offered the guests a clean and modest straw bed where they would sleep.

The next morning, they were both on their way.

They went hopefully along the Via Ostiensis and were about to enter the city, when in the vicinity of the Pyramid of Cestius, Celsus noticed a large crowd. Two unfortunate women had been arrested to a huge uproar from the people. The mob was shouting, “To the lions, to the lions!”

The boy held on to his father with the care of someone protecting a treasure, and they passed through the crowd.

Getting directions along the way, they came to Aventine and headed toward the Temple of Diana, where they had no problem locating Lucila’s magnificent little palace.

Tacianus felt his heart palpitating in his troubled breast...

How would he be received? Would his daughter sympathize with the misfortune that had befallen him?

He described some of the details of Veturius’s aristocratic villa, where he had spent his youth, and Celsus, both curious and anxious, confirmed his reminiscences.

Met at the gate by one of the slaves that took care of the gardening, they were sent to the atrium. Helen's widower asked about the servants he had known there in the past, but his old ties of affection were all gone.

He requested the lady's presence, but after waiting a few moments, an impeccable steward informed them that Lucila was busy with an important dance rehearsal and therefore was not receiving visitors.

Tacianus insisted.

He said that he was her father and pronounced family names that obliged his listener to reconsider the discourteous reception.

The servant went back inside, and after a few minutes, Lucila appeared, along with the tribune Caius Percilianus. She was somewhat pale, but had an unveiled expression of irony and indifference on her heavily made up face.

Celsus noticed her scornful expression and was afraid.

This surely was not the woman they were looking for.

Lucila was the very picture of feminine cruelty, framed in impudence.

She looked at the blind man with a sneer, clasped her lover with a feline gesture and said mockingly:

"How is it that I am sought out by such illustrious relatives?"

Merely on hearing her, her father realized how much she must have changed to speak to him with such malice in her voice.

Still, in a sacrificial effort to identify himself, he said touchingly:

"My daughter!... My daughter! It's me, your father!... I'm blind! I'm appealing to your protection like a castaway!"

But she failed to sense the pain enveloping his pleading utterances. She laughed coldly and said to her companion:

"Caius, if I didn't know my father was dead, I would almost believe these lies."

"No, Lucila! I'm not dead! You cannot disown me!" shouted her father in anguish. "I'm alone now! Don't abandon me! Help me in memory of Blandina; she, too, is gone! I have come from Lyon looking for you... I have suffered enough! Take me in, for mercy's sake! For the love of the gods, for devotion to Cybele, who has always watched over our home!"

Galba's widow did not betray herself.

With incredible hardness of heart, she said to the tribune, as if perplexed:

“This old man must be some fool from the land where I was born. Blandina really was my sister, and according to some news I received a few days ago, she is now at rest under the protection of the immortals.”

And with purposeful haughtiness, she went on:

“My father died in Baiae, at the same time when I had the misfortune of losing my mother.”

The blind man, however, knelt and pleaded:

“Daughter, flee from injustice and evil! For the sake of our ancestors, awaken your conscience! Don't let money and pleasure deaden your sentiments!”

Exasperated, Lucila cut him off, shouting to a nearby slave:

“Croton! Hurry! Go get the guard dog! Chase these Gallic thieves out of here!”

A ferocious mastiff appeared.

It pounced on Quintus Celsus, who threw his arms around Tacianus in an effort to protect him; but when the boy's arm began bleeding, Percilianus, disturbed, pulled the animal off.

As the young man watched the visitors leave with their heads down, he whispered in his mistress's ear:

“Dear, let's not make this into a courtroom. Let's proceed with wisdom. This beautiful dwelling is not meant for the unpleasant duties of a court of justice. Just be calm. If those vagrants really do know your family, they could threaten our happiness. They will be corrected in time.”

And saying goodbye, he added:

“They'll be arrested. The arena with its grand festivities is our cleaning machine.”

Lucila gave him a grateful cat-like smile and Caius went to follow the pair.

Thoroughly astounded and indignant, Tacianus had no tears left to cry. The futile desire for revenge haunted his thoughts. The love he still cherished

for his firstborn had suddenly turned into ravenous hatred. If I could – he thought – I would kill my own daughter, believing that this was the only recourse for someone like him who had helped create a monster.

Celsus urged him to calm down and be forgiving. They headed back to Marcelinus's house. They would resume their struggle in another way.

As he listened, the disgruntled patrician's mind gradually settled down. He recalled the day when he himself had ordered a mad dog to be loosed against his own father.

In the chambers of his memory, once again he heard Silvanus's cries begging to be rescued, and on the screen of his mind, as if his eyes were now turned inward, he saw again the anguished face of Quintus Varrus pleading in vain for understanding and mercy.

The return to his past smote his heart...

Ashamed, he remembered Celsus's words urging him to seek the good and to forget evil. He acknowledged the fact that he was under the iron glove of heavenly justice, and broke into tears from the oppression of his soul.

However, the memory of his past had changed him inwardly. Something had renewed his mental horizon.

To his own surprise, his hatred changed to pity.

He realized that Lucila, just like himself in his youth, had sentiments that were intoxicated with dark illusions.

Poor daughter! – he reflected bitterly – who would be the instrument of her unavoidable pain in the future?

The two continued down the hill, holding on to each other sadly, secretly watched by Percilianus. When they were far enough away from the stately residence, the tribune called for the aid of praetorians along the road and reported them as relapsed Christians and habitual thieves, asserting that they had robbed his home.

Caught off guard, Tacianus and the boy were arrested without consideration.

The blind man tried to reestablish the truth and shouted with dignity:

“Guards, I protest! I am a citizen of Rome.”

One of them burst into laughter and remarked:

“A comedian worthy of the theater! You play the role of a disgraced patrician quite admirably!”

Tacianus’s forceful words were of no avail.

In a few moments, a scoffing, idle crowd surrounded them, yelling sarcastic remarks and insults.

Tacianus, humiliated and silent, and Celsus, tired and sorrowful, were locked up in the old Esquiline dungeons filled with Christian slaves and miserable beggars regarded as social turncoats.

To Tacianus, whose eyes were shrouded in nocturnal darkness, the outward picture had not fundamentally changed. But Celsus, though firm in the faith, was dismayed as he saw the anguish of those souls relegated to the labyrinth of the prisons. He realized how much they were about to suffer.

Here and there, old men lay groaning in pain; skeletal men leaned against the blackened walls, covering their faces with their hands; women in rags held half-dead children.

However, over groans mingled with the terrible stench, soft singing rose harmoniously.

The Christians were thanking God for the gift of pain and flagellation, rejoicing in the triumph of suffering.

Celsus found a gentle charm in those hymns, and Tacianus, feeling both anger and moral torment, asked himself what miraculous power the Galilean prophet could possibly possess to sustain the loyalty of thousands of people who could praise him in the midst of misfortune in absolute disregard for poverty, affliction and death.

Two burly guards carrying torches and spears led them to a cubicle while talking cheerfully.

“It’s a good thing all these prisoners will be dead by tomorrow,” one of them said. “The malignant fever has reappeared. We had thirty deaths today!”

“I know,” muttered the other one, “the gravediggers are alarmed.”

And he added sarcastically:

“I bet that the beasts themselves will refuse such pestilence.”

“The authorities are doing the right thing,” said the first one.” As you know, the show is going to include some African animals. But so the people

won't be contaminated by the sick, there are also going to be poles and crosses, where the diseased ones will be used as living torches.”

Tacianus, in desperation, tried one last time to get a response.

“Soldiers,” he cried out with dignity, “are there no judges left in Rome? Can you arrest citizens without just cause and sentence them without a trial?”

One of the soldiers answered his question with a violent shove into a cramped, damp cell.

Quintus Celsus, aided by the dim rays of light coming from the distant passageways, found some rags piled on the floor as a makeshift bed, and begged his adoptive father to rest a little.

In a few moments, a jailer with a beast-like countenance brought them their food for the day: a few pieces of black bread and cloudy water, which the thirsty boy gulped down.

They both talked at length. Celsus stressed the importance of resignation and patience. The blind man listened uneasily, as if he had to drink the gall of the most blatant injustice with no right to try to fight back.

Much later, when they sensed that night had fallen, they slept holding on to each other, disturbed by upsetting prospects...

The next day Celsus woke up with a fever.

His whole body was in pain, and he was thirsty and tired.

Tacianus appealed to the warden for the appropriate medication, but he was only given more cloudy water, which the boy again swallowed greedily.

Tacianus's soul was in anguish. He let his mind wander off to days gone by, remembering his bounteous home and blissful days, but reflecting more deeply on the hard trials that had punished his dear parents. How could his father have survived for so many years the moral tumult that befell his destiny?

He felt immense remorse for the days he had lost by enthroning himself on the deceitful altar of pride.

How could he have believed he was superior to other men?

He thought about the cruel suffering of so many like himself, hidden away in these infected dungeons, strangled by a persecution that they did not deserve.

Although he could not possibly accept Christianity, why had he not gotten involved with the unfortunate world of the misery of his time? How many slaves had he seen bearing dreadful afflictions with their sick or nearly dead little children? How often had he given unjust orders, tyrannizing the infirm as they worked on his estate? He had the impression that his former slaves were rising up in his mind, laughing at his pain...

Celsus's labored breathing troubled him.

Why had the fever spared him and not his beloved son? Why had he, Tacianus, not been born among miserable slaves? Servitude would have been a balm to him because he would now find himself free from the terrifying memories that were tormenting his conscience.

With tears in his eyes, he tried to comfort Celsus.

Several hours passed, marked with expectation and torment, when all the prisoners were ordered to be led out.

The gates were opened and they left, group by group, to the shouts of the guards who spat curses and insults. The strongest were in handcuffs, with deep wounds on their wrists, but most were lethargic sick people, malnourished women, skeletal children and trembling old people.

Even so, all the prisoners were smiling happily... They were finally out in the sun and the pure air of nature. The fresh breeze in the street was reviving them.

Celsus felt his strength returning. He regained his vitality and led his father with his usual care. Animated by the sublime hope that shone on the faces of their companions, he told the blind man about the joy radiating from everyone.

No one knew where they were going.

They only knew that, like sheep to the slaughter, they could expect nothing but the extreme sacrifice of death. Showing their highest trust in a higher life, the Christians went on, their heads up and serene, with humility and forgiveness written on their faces, seeming to be unaware of the mocking words of the soldiers, hardened butchers in the business of death.

After the forced march, they arrived at the arena, where a filthy room awaited them for the evening spectacle.

Celsus looked in amazement at the Flavian Colosseum, standing so stately since Alexander Severus had ordered its restoration.

The facade, divided into four levels, was adorned on the first three with Doric, Ionic and Corinthian half-columns, between which there were arcades, which on the middle two levels, housed exquisite statues. Everything lent an austere grandeur to that architectural monument.

Luxurious carriages, litters, and four and two-wheeled chariots surrounded the building.

Whoever happened to see such a colossus – which would immortalize the glory of a people – would never suspect that the great culture behind it only knew how to foment idleness and debauchery, brutality and death there.

An odious-looking tribune read some orders to the condemned, while the hard-hearted Praetorians threatened the old people who were going too slowly.

The followers of the Gospel, however, seemed very distant from the scene that inspired revulsion and suffering.

Ragged men embraced each other happily and women with emaciated faces kissed their children with the excitement of someone who was preparing for an encounter with perfect bliss.

They had not been able to sing on the way from the dungeon to the arena, but as soon as they found themselves together in an enormous cell, from which they would march to their death, they sang hosannas to Christ, with the joy of people chosen for the splendor of supreme triumph, by which they would receive the crown of immortality. More contingents arrived from other prisons. Among the newcomers Celsus happily discovered Erato Marcellinus.

Ennius's friend had been arrested the night before while he was listening to the Gospel in the Callixtus Cemetery.

Their reunion was a blessing.

Even Tacianus, who was still circumspect and afflicted, suddenly felt a new strength.

With joy in his smiling eyes, the old man from the Via Ostiense told him how he had been taken to the dungeon, and reaffirmed his acknowledgment to

heaven for the grace of being allowed to receive spiritual victory through martyrdom.

Before the cheerful curiosity of those around, he showed a small, soiled fragment of parchment and read the beautiful words from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians:

“Rejoice always!”

In a cheerful mood, he said:

“Brothers and sisters, in my life of nearly eighty years, this scrap from the sacred writings is all I have left. Yes, let us rejoice! Whoever lives according to the Gospel finds divine joy... Of the millions called to live at this time, we are the chosen ones! Let us praise the glory of dying, in the same way that oil is burned in the wick so that the light can shine! The best trees are used to make the orchard, and the finest marble is chosen by the artist for a masterpiece!”

In the rapture of his soul, he continued:

“In the teeth of the wild beasts, the most wholesome grains of living faith become the whitest flour so that the bread of grace will not be lacking on people's tables! May hope increase in us, for it is written: ‘Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.’”²⁶

Those words brought a radiant bloom of happiness to every face.

The ragged, ecstatic assembly seemed overcome by unbounded bliss.

Erato, lifting Celsus's morale with his courageous words, raised his voice to join in the songs of rejoicing.

Tacianus silently asked himself why he had been going through these Christians' ordeal, when he had never actually supported their beliefs.

What irresistible destiny was forcefully dragging him to the Christ he had always made it a point to run from? Why had he become involved with the “Galileans” in such a way that he had no choice but to join them in their martyrdom? By what decision of the immortals had he grown so attached to Quintus Celsus, who was, after all, a boy of unknown origin, and come to love him and cherish him as if he were his own son?

Deep in thought, he reconstructed his past, asking, asking...

He did not have much time for his mental soliloquy.

Outside, the crowds were gathering.

Night was approaching, cold and cloudless.

Shouting had begun inside the monumental building, echoing to its foundations.

As the darkness grew, so did the noise of the crowd.

The shouting of the masses gradually rose higher, joining with the music of lutes, drums and tambourines. By now it was deafening.

The prisoners, however, would appear in the arena only at the close of the spectacle. They were praying and singing, when one of them, who was more enlightened, encouraged his listeners with touching exhortations, reminding them of the glory of Jesus Crucified and the example of the martyrs of faith.

After several games in which many combatants lost their lives, and after the exotic dances, the scenario changed.

Poles and crosses covered with a resinous substance were set up in front of nearly one hundred thousand delirious spectators.

The sick Christians were separated from the well ones, who would be left unbound as they took part in the exhibition. Among the former was Quintus Celsus, who, because of his sickly appearance, was violently snatched from his father's hands.

With a trusting look, the boy asked Erato to lead Tacianus to the post to which he, Celsus, was to be tied. And while two streams of tears ran down Tacianus's face, the boy bravely said to him:

“Courage, father! We shall be together... There is no death and Jesus reigns forever!”

After difficult minutes of waiting, the prisoners were herded in the direction of the festive arena, but as if a strange heavenly power were vibrating the strings of their souls, they praised the Lord who was waiting for them in Heaven.

Men with unshaven faces, stumbling old people, cripples and beggars, elderly women haloed with snow-white hair and women displaying exuberant motherhood, young people and children with smiling faces – all were happily singing, firmly hoping in the sermon on the beatitudes.

As he leaned on Erato's fragile shoulders, Tacianus detected an unexpected and sublime inner renewal. Those souls torn apart by the injustice of the world really did not worship gods of stone.

To inspire such epic love and selflessness, hope and happiness in the face of death, Jesus really would have to be Heaven-sent to reign supremely in all those hearts.

His soul was immersed in a mysterious joy...

Yes, he finally realized in those final moments that, just like a prolonged and powerful storm, time had passed him by, destroying the lying idols of pride and vanity, ignorance and illusion...

The gales of grief had left his hands empty.

He had lost everything.

He was alone.

But in those brief moments, he found the only reality worth living: Christ, the higher ideal of humanity, whom he must now go to meet.

He remembered Blandina, Basilius and Livia, and had the impression that the three of them were there, reaching out their arms in smiles of light.

He recalled Quintus Varrus with inexpressible affection.

Would he find his father again after death?

He had never felt such a longing for him as in that fleeting minute... He would give anything to see him and confirm his love for him, and that in this moment of death his father's life had not been in vain!

He was weeping – yes! But for the first time, he was weeping out of understanding and acknowledgment, emotion and joy.

He remembered how many had wounded his heart during his life, and as if he were being reconciled with himself, he sent them all thoughts of joyful peace.

The difficult steps of that redemptive walk of a few yards had ended.

Leaning on Marcellinus, he heard the wild cries of the spectators crowded on the platform, the balconies, the galleries, the tiers, the vomitories and the stairs.

Thousands and thousands of voices shouted in chorus, like animals:

“To the beasts! To the beasts!”

But Tacianus, inwardly renewed, was smiling...

After some searching, Erato found Celsus’s post and fulfilled his promise, bringing father and son together for the supreme moment.

“My son! My son!” Tacianus sobbed happily, touching Celsus’s body, whose hands of flesh could no longer touch him back. “I have felt Christ’s power within me! Now I, too, am a Christian!”

Exulting with inner joy for having realized the greatest and most beautiful dream of his life, Celsus shouted:

“My father, praises be sung to God! Jesus lives!”

At the same moment, drunken soldiers set fire to the posts, which quickly burst into flames.

Moans, discrete appeals, pleas for help and muffled prayers from various places were heard amid the rising flames as the wood crackled and threw off pieces into the air like restless serpents proclaiming the victory of iniquity. Wild lions, panthers and bulls entered the arena, inciting the fury of the bloodthirsty mob.

Kneeling before Quintus Celsus, who was looking down at him, enraptured, the blind man understood that the end had come. He pleaded:

“Son, teach me how to pray!”

But the flames were consuming the boy’s writhing body. Nevertheless, Celsus repressed his torment and spoke calmly, bathed in peace:

“Father, let’s say Jesus’ prayer, the one Blandina used to recite! *Our Father who art in heaven...* Let us pray aloud...”

The ravenous beasts were devouring bodies and strewing human viscera here and there, but as if he were living only for the faith that illuminated his final moments, Tacianus knelt and said the prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name... Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors... Do not let us fall into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. So be it!”

The converted Roman no longer heard his son’s words.

Celsus's head had fallen forward, lifeless...

Tacianus was going to raise his voice, when hooves trampled him into the silvery gravel of the arena.

His brain roared, but right after the sudden shock, as if Christ were sending miraculous light to his dead eyes, he regained his sight and found himself beside his own body, which lay motionless in a pool of bloody sand.

He looked for Quintus Celsus, but, oh! What divine bliss! He saw, emerging from the post of martyrdom, not his adopted son, but his father, Quintus Varrus, who extended his arms, exclaiming:

“Tacianus, my son, now we can toil in praise of Jesus forever!”

Dazzled, he noticed that the souls of the heroes were abandoning their remains, dressed with robes of light by entities that looked more like beautiful aerial archangels.

He kissed his father's hands like someone quenching terribly painful longings. He was trying to say something, when he saw Blandina, Basilius, Livia and Rufus singing with joy in a group of happy spirits that included Corvinus, Lucanus, Hortense, Silvanus and other champions of the faith, all smiling at him with trust and love!

Above the black structure of the Colosseum, challenging the darkness, hundreds of radiant souls were holding up a lily-white banner that shone with the touching and sublime greeting:

“Hail, Christ! Those who will live forever glorify and greet you!”

.....

A dazzling pathway was opening up toward the heavens...

Intoxicated with joy, Quintus Varrus grasped his son to his breast, and surrounded by a large assembly of friends, rose to heaven like a victorious fighter who had managed to steal, from the quagmire of darkness, a diamond scourged by the chisels of life to make it shine in its full light...

.....

Down below, cruelty screamed with glee. The mob delighted in watching the bodies burn in the sinister banquet of carnage and death; but far away in the unending firmament, whose peace portrayed the unchangeable

love of God, the stars shone, pointing to a glorious future for men and women of goodwill...

THE END

²⁶ Revelation 2:10 – Emmanuel.

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