

The Passing of Peter and Paul

One of the great books of 1897 was "Quo Vadis: a Narrative of the time of Nero," by the brilliant Polish writer, Henryk Sienkiewicz. It gives probably the most vivid and picturesque description of Rome at the time of Nero that has yet been written. Two of the principal characters delineated in the book are the Apostles Peter and Paul, and the following account of their martyrdom is a graphic piece of writing. Nero has been busy torturing and destroying Christians by scores and hundreds. His fellow-followers of the Nazarene beseech the aged Peter to flee from the city and so escape from the cruel clutches of their persecutor. Peter hesitates long, but in an hour of weakness finally decides to flee from Rome in an endeavor to save his life.

ABOUT dawn of the following day two dark figures were moving along the Appian Way toward the Campania. One of them was Nazarius; the other the Apostle Peter, who was leaving Rome and his martyred co-religionists.

The sky on the east was assuming a light tinge of green, bordered gradually and more distinctly on the lower edge with saffron color. Silver-leaved trees, the white marble of villas, and the arches of aqueducts, stretching through the plain toward the city, were emerging from shade. The greenness of the sky was clearing gradually, and becoming permeated with gold. Then the east began to grow rosy and illuminate the Alban hills, which seemed marvellously beautiful, lily-colored, as if formed of rays of light alone.

The light was reflected in trembling leaves of trees, in the dew-drops. The haze grew thinner, opening wider and wider views on the plain, on the houses dotting it, on the cemeteries, on the towns, and on groups of trees, among which stood white columns of temples.

The road was empty. The villagers who took vegetables to the city had not succeeded yet, evidently, in harnessing beasts to their vehicles. From the stone blocks with which the road was paved as far as the mountains, there came a low sound from the bark shoes on the feet of the two travellers.

Then the sun appeared over the line of hills; but at once a wonderful vision struck the Apostle's eyes. It seemed to him that the golden circle, instead of rising in the sky, moved down from the heights and was advancing on the road. Peter stopped, and asked:

"Seest thou that brightness approaching us?"

"I see nothing," replied Nazarius.

But Peter shaded his eyes with his hand, and said after a while:

"Some figure is coming in the gleam of the sun."

But not the slightest sound of steps reached their ears. It was perfectly still all around. Nazarius saw only that the trees were quivering in the distance, as if some one were shaking them, and the light was spreading more broadly over the plain. He looked with wonder at the Apostle.

"Rabbi! what ails thee?" cried he, with alarm.

The pilgrim's staff fell from Peter's hands to the earth; his eyes were looking forward, motionless; his mouth was open; on his face were depicted astonishment, delight, rapture. Then he threw himself on his knees, his arms stretched forward, and this cry left his lips:

"O Christ! O Christ!"

He fell with his face to the earth, as if kissing some one's feet.

The silence continued long; then were heard the words of the aged man, broken by sobs:

"*Quo vadis, Domine?*"

Nazarius did not hear the answer; but to Peter's ears came a sad and sweet voice, which said:

"If thou desert my people, I am going to Rome to be crucified a second time."

The Apostle lay on the ground, his face in the dust, without motion or speech. It seemed to Nazarius that he had fainted or was dead; but he rose at last, seized the staff with trembling hands, and turned without a word toward the seven hills of the city.

The boy, seeing this, repeated as an echo:

"*Quo vadis, Domine?*"

"To Rome," said the Apostle, in a low voice. And he returned.

Paul, John, Linus, and all the faithful received him with amazement; and the alarm was the greater, since at daybreak, just after his departure, pretorians had surrounded Miriam's house and searched it for the Apostle. But to every question he answered only with delight and peace:

"I have seen the Lord!"

And that same evening he went to the Ostian cemetery to teach and baptize those who wished to bathe in the water of life.

And thenceforward he went there daily, and after him went increasing numbers. It seemed that out of every tear of a martyr new confessors were born, and that every groan on the arena found an echo in thousands of breasts. Cæsar was swimming in blood, Rome and the whole pagan world was mad. But those who had had enough of transgression and madness, those who were trampled upon, those whose lives were misery and oppression, all the weighed down, all the sad, all the unfortunate, came to hear the wonderful tidings of God, who out of love for men had given Himself to be crucified and redeem their sins. When they found a God whom they could love, they had found that which the society of the time could not give any one—love and happiness.

And Peter understood that neither Cæsar nor all his legions could overcome the living truth—that they could not overwhelm it with tears or blood, and that now its victory was beginning.

At last the hour was accomplished for both Apostles. But, as if to complete his service, it