

IN PACE.

A LEGEND OF THE CATACOMBS.

By JOHN TALON-LESPERANCE.

I.

"Good morrow, Quintus; thou art up betimes!"

"Aye, it is a great holiday, my friend. I have risen, like a loyal Roman, to take my stand beside the Capitol, and see the Imperial pageant. The Emperor and his train halted for the night in the plain beyond. His reception will be magnificent."

"Yes, Quintus, and well deserved. *Io triumphe*, say I. But what have we here?"

The two friends looked up to a large scroll hung on one of the pillars of the Imperial building.

"*Divus Marcus Antoninus Aurelius Imperator!* Why, a new decree against the Christians, I declare."

"The Emperor wishes to grace his triumph by other captives than those taken in Illyria and Thrace, I ween."

"An *aureus* is awarded for every Christian man, woman or child, that shall be seized and sentenced. Merry sport this, eh, my Lentulus? What say you for a hunt after Christian flesh till the trumpets herald the steep ascent of the Capitoline?"

"Agreed, Quintus. An *aureus* is no small matter in these war times, and may serve a poor fellow a good turn in quaffing draughts of Chio or native Falernian to the honour of our Divine Emperor. *O Bacche, quo me rapis!*"

And the two friends locked arms and sauntered down the street.

II.

The morning light was tipping the crests of the Seven Hills. Imperial Rome was still asleep. Silence reigned in her gardens and public places. Her thoroughfares were deserted.

Lentulus and Quintus walked along the square, when, suddenly, across their path a hooded figure glided and went into a by-street.

"Look, Quintus, at the slender girl! Did you see her face?"

"No, Lentulus, it is too heavily veiled."

"What a lovely form. She *must* be beautiful."

"Who is she and what doing, alone and at such an hour?"

"A daughter of the people, belike, on some household errand."

"Nay, no plebeian she, Lentulus. Look at the jewelled sandal, half hidden under her stole."

"Perhaps a waif of the Suburra."

"Ah, no; too modest and demure."

"Who then?—Let us follow."

"Ha, ha! I have it—'tis Euphrosyné, the pride of Consular Vossii, a Christian, and hieing to Christian rites. The *aureus* is mine!" hissed Quintus to his friend, and, darting from his side, hurried down the street. The hooded figure turned around a corner, and he followed. As for Lentulus, he seemed stunned at what he had heard, and walked away in another direction, shaking his head doubtfully.

The sunset was gilding the tops of the Seven Hills. Rome was awaking from her slumbers. Her avenues were filling with the *plebs*, and, out on the Campagna, resounded the bray of trumpets from the camp of the Divine Emperor.

III.

The tapers on the altar were lighted, and a few vases of flowers set around the tabernacle of the Lord. A troop of virgins knelt about the holy table. The door of the chancel opened, and the venerable Pacificus entered, accompanied by white-robed acolytes. He performed the sacred mysteries, blessed his little flock, and, when about partaking with them of the Host and the Chalice, thus spoke in a low and impressive tone:

"Let us thank the Master, my daughters, that once more He has strengthened us with His Sacraments. The day of tribulation is at hand; the decree of persecution has been published, and this may be the last time we shall meet upon earth. Eat ye, therefore, the bread of the strong, and drink of the cup of salvation. Put your trust in the crucified spouse of your hearts,

and, whatever may betide, keep your souls in His peace. *In pace servabitur animas vestras.*"

He said these words and administered the sacred rite.

The lights on the altar were extinguished; the flowers removed from their vessels; the incense had melted away, and the band of virgins had glided out of the house of prayer. Only the venerable Pacificus remained, bowed before the shrine. Suddenly he felt the hem of his garment gently touched, and a hooded figure stood beside him. The old priest smiled paternally, as he recognized one of his little flock who had just partaken of the mysteries.

"What wouldst thou have, my daughter?"

"I would make an offering to my spouse before I go, for I feel, father, that I am about to depart. never to return."

The pastor looked up to heaven, as though he understood the meaning of the girl's presentiment.

"See in the picture yonder," said she, "how the Saviour sits by the well, on the hills of Samaria, weary and footsore. I would give Him these jewelled sandals wherewithal to go his ways more lightly."

And, stooping, she slipped them from her feet, and set them before the holy picture.

"God bless thee, daughter!" whispered the priest, benignly; "and now go in peace. *Vade in pace.*"

A loud knock at the door, a shuffling of feet in the lobby, a violent crash, and, through the broken portal, there rushed a stalwart man.

"Aye, aye, 'tis she! I recognize those sandals," he cried, and darted up the aisle into the chancel. "Down with thee, old dotard!" he exclaimed, as he grasped the aged priest by his long white beard and dragged him to the pave. Then, laying his hand on the shoulder of the girl.

"Come with me, pretty Christian. Come, Euphrosyné," said he, with a look of sensual scorn.

And Quintus led forth Euphrosyné out into the city, barefoot, on the stony streets.

IV.

Euphrosyné, the daughter of Vossius, stood alone in her high prison cell.

Leaning her white arms on the iron bars, she looked down upon the great city, arrayed in its holiday attire. She saw its marble columns and decorated fountains; the palaces of its senators and the temples of its gods; the triumphal arches, wreathed with flowers, and the wide streets lined with emblematic bays, in honour of its Emperor.

Euphrosyné mused! She, the offspring of a noble Roman house, illustrious for their deeds in mail and toga; descendant, too, by her mother, of Attic heroes; of him who, in the ancient days, hurled the tyrant from his throne—Aristogeiton, whose avenging blade a grateful people twined with sprigs of myrtle. She, a hopeless captive now, soon to be the bye-word of the populace, the disgrace of her family, the food of wild beasts. She raised her eyes to heaven, now radiant with the sunshine, and prayed—prayed to the Crucified for comfort in her loneliness, courage in her pain, and perseverance in her struggle on the sands of the amphitheatre.

"O," she sweetly moaned, "through it all may I keep my soul in peace. *In pace, in idipsum.*"

Footfalls are heard along the narrow lobby. The door of her cell is opened and her aged father walks forth to meet her. An ancient Roman he, but the tall form is bent, the proud step falters, and the great massive face is shrouded in sorrow. Thou hast come upon a hopeless errand, O Conscript Father! Thy will, unused to yield, will be gently but firmly met, and not all thy power and consular authority will obtain what this weak child cannot and will not grant. Give up her faith and desert the service of her Lord? Oh! not by thy venerable white hairs, nor by the memory of a buried mother wilt thou compass that. Renounce the troth of her spiritual bridal? Never! The daughter wept in her father's arms. And when he arose to depart, did he curse her in his stoicism, as a Brutus or a Cato would have done? No, but kissing her on the forehead, he said:

"I, too, am a Christian!"

V.

One trial never comes alone. Scarcely had Vossius left the cell of his daughter than another visitor intruded himself upon the privacy of the persecuted girl. He was muffled in a war-cloak, but she recognized in him the dastard Roman who had, that morning, seized her and led her to the gaol. She turned her calm, blue eyes upon his face, and Quintus could not withstand the look. There was no reproach, no hate, no revenge therein, but it smote him as if these three fastened full upon him. She stood in the embrasure of the window; he, with body half turned, withdrew a little to the shadow of the wall.

"Euphrosyné," said he, at length, with hesitation.

The child lowered her eyes and listened.

"Knowest thou me?"

"I do, O Quintus," she murmured, softly.

"As thy persecutor?"

"Nay, as my benefactor," with a sweet smile.

"No, no! I have wronged thee grievously, and I would repair the mischief."

"There is no need, O Quintus!"

"I would rescue thee from thy doom, thou beautiful. There is one means—accept my troth, and thou art free."

She smiled with a melancholy air, and said:

"My heart is plighted, Quintus."

"To whom?"

She pointed above.

O! she was divinely fair, as she stood there, half turned to the light, her lovely eyes fixed brightly on heaven through the prison bars, and her white hands folded in prayer on her bosom. A feeling of awe fell upon Quintus, as he gazed on the ecstatic, transfigured girl, and he stole silently from the cell, leaving her in rapture. As he crept along the lobby, he stopped a moment and, striking his forehead with his hand, exclaimed:—

"I, too, am a Christian!"

VI.

The sun had not reached his noon on the same eventful day, when Euphrosyné had been duly questioned and condemned. There is no need to rehearse the details of this scene, common to most martyrs. It is enough to say that the weak, shrinking child faced the judges with unflinching heart, preferring death to apostasy. The strength and resolution of the Martyr of Calvary poured into the hearts of twelve millions of Christian athletes, in presence of the wheel and the faggot, the sword and the cauldron, inspired Euphrosyné in the supreme hour of her trial, and spurning at her feet titles, rank, wealth and happiness—renouncing by an heroic effort the ties of home and family—she chose her Lord and Him crucified as her portion for evermore. Aye, and thou hast chosen the better part, O daughter of consuls, which shall never be taken from thee.

All eyes were fastened upon the angelic girl, and a murmur of pity rang through the crowd when the sentence of death was pronounced against her. Eager as they all were for the ghastly shows of the circus, and athirst for Christian blood, they felt compassion for this tender victim, and with the old instinctive Roman respect for aristocracy, still rife in those degenerate times, grieved that an *ingenua*, a high-born child of fortune, should perish in the indiscriminate slaughter of "Christian dogs."

They led her forth from the Praetor's hall to the amphitheatre, where fifty thousand enlightened Quirites were to attend the games, decreed, as a part of his triumph, by their Divine Emperor.

VII.

The immense colosseum was densely filled. Tier upon tier of Roman patricians, knights and plebeians sat expectant of their favourite spectacle. High above them, on his ivory throne with golden bosses, towered their imperial master, Marcus Antoninus Aurelius. Joy beamed on every countenance, for it was a day of national rejoicing and were not those hated Christians to be delivered to the beasts?

Suddenly the trumpet sounds! Every eye is turned toward the tent where the victims of the show are kept. The curtain is drawn and the