

LUCIUS, OR THE FLIGHT OF CONSTANTINE.

(By the Ven. R. I. Wilberforce, A.M.)

CHAPTER III. THE ENCOUNTER.

Lucius was in a narrow place he overtook. And fierce assailing force him turn again: Sternly he turn'd again, when he him strook

When Lucius left the palace he walked on for a time, scarcely heading in what direction he went-- The preparations which he had beheld, the scenes which he expected, swallowed up his thoughts.

He turned round, and saw the course but friendly features of the captain with whom he had come to Nicomedia. This sight nearly overcame him.

"If my vessel were ready for sea," he said, "I would take you back to-morrow for nothing; but it will be a month or more before my cargo is collected, and in the meanwhile the ship is laid up in dock."

"I scarce know where to go," said Lucius, "for my letter to Constantine was burnt in the palace-- unless it be to the bishop of the Christians."

"That is not the safest of places just now," said the sailor; "but it may do for a while; and when my ship is ready, you shall be welcome to a passage back to Ostia."

Lucius thanked his rough companion; and though he remembered that for a penniless man it was a long journey from Italy to Britain, he felt the gloom of his prospects somewhat abated.

"What want you, young man, with me," said the bishop; "from your dress you appear to come from the palace. Are you the bearer of any order from the emperor?--you will find me as little disposed to resist as to fly."

Lucius hastened to declare that he was himself a fugitive. "You come, my son, but to a poor place of refuge."

"The young man, thus encouraged, told his tale, and that he was the bearer of a letter from the Bishop of York, which he had lost in the fire of the preceding night. Already, he said, he had been up to deliver it. Anthemius showed deep interest in the fortunes of the Church in Britain.

"I would," he said, "that we could live with the same confidence here, which the Lords prevail under the mild sway of Constantius; but the Lord reigneth. My office, young man, he concluded at last, "is to show hospitality to all men; and though not one of our own Christian family, yet you are welcome to such as I can give, and while I have to bestow."

They were interrupted by a person who came to entreat the bishop that he might that day be admitted to the Holy Communion.

"You were publicly convicted," said the bishop, "of adultery only half a year ago; but the sentence of our fathers, by which you would have been excluded from the Holy Communion during seven years, was shortened to three years, on your giving signs of a sincere repentance. For three years only are you to continue with those without the church in daily fasting and penitence. This is for your own benefit, as well as for the sake of example; for if you were allowed at once to approach the holy table, you would be in danger of coming with a carelessness, which would increase your guilt. You need some severe lesson to remind you of the greatness of your crime. What reason, then, can you give why you should be admitted so early to absolution?"

The penitent pleaded the danger of the times--the probability of a persecution--that he might be cut off without the sign of forgiveness or the bread of life.

"So much," said the bishop, "I am ready to allow, that in case of sickness or danger, any priest may reconcile you to the Church. But times of persecution are rather fitted to increase than to relax the rigour of discipline. For, whence comes this visitation upon us, but because our discipline has been allowed to languish? Is not God calling us by it to an increased watchfulness? Has He not shown this judgment upon us because our love has grown cold? Look at the times of our fathers, and you will find that it has always been when the Christian body was exercised with the greatest outward trials that its inward life had been most vigorous and entire."

Lucius was surprised to find, from the rest of the conversation, that the man who was thus rejected was a person of wealth and influence, who voluntarily submitted to stand at the door of the Christian church when the more favoured worshippers entered into it.

Anthemius took occasion from this circumstance to acquaint him that, as a heathen, he could not consider him as a part of his family, or allow him to share its daily worship--unless, indeed, he was willing to become a catechumen, and to prepare himself for baptism; but that he might continue to live under his roof "so long," said the old man, "as it pleases God to leave me one." Here, therefore, Lucius resolved to continue till an opportunity should offer for rejoining his friends.

To dissipate the unpleasant thoughts to which his situation gave occasion, Lucius determined next morning to explore the adjacent coast. He set off with the earliest dawn; and, depressed and agitated as he felt from the failure of all his hopes, he had no sooner cleared the town, and begun to breathe the balmy air of the adjacent hills, than his youthful spirits revived. The novelty of all that he saw round him--the singular dress of the peasants, the magnificence of the buildings which were yet visible--kept him in perpetual delight. Never having left home before, and having derived all his knowledge from books, every object which he now beheld seemed to present to him a new phase of life. He pictured to himself the pleasure with which he should recall these distant scenes when he was again settled in the quiet simplicity of some British dwelling.

With these thoughts he walked on, determining to reach an elevated brow, which stood prominently forth among the woods which he had now entered. He had brought with him sufficient provisions for the day; so that it was needless to turn back till the sun had passed its zenith. But as he advanced, the way became more difficult, till at last he found himself completely brought to a stand by a wall of rocks which ran through a wild part of the forest. It was evidently a natural barrier which opposed him; and yet there was some appearance that it had been strengthened by human art. In one or two places, where he thought he might find a passage, it seemed as if ravines had been blocked up by artificial means. At length, however, by climbing into the top branches of a tree which grew adjacent to the rocks, he reached their summit. The view on the other side convinced him that he had trespassed upon one of those extensive enclosures

which the habits of the East reserved as hunting-places for the emperor. Before him lay an open lawn of grass, interspersed with occasional clumps of trees, on which deer of various sorts were feeding, with buffaloes and other animals, which were quite new to him. Beyond a most beautiful prospect opened itself; the high land which he had before seen, rising abruptly at its conclusion out of a dark forest. The whole space before him, from the mountains on the one side to the sea on the other, had no signs of being inhabited, though the villages which crowned various wooded promontories which he saw projecting into the sea, on his left hand, shewed how populous was the adjoining neighbourhood. But this was beyond the limits of the royal chase, which ended in a bay at a few hundred yards from him, where the rocks on which he was standing descended sheer into the water from a great height. Lucius made his way for a short distance along their summit; but he was soon brought to a stand, at a point where a small village, divided from him only by a deep but narrow inlet, presented a most attractive halting-place.

As no boat was in sight, and he did not feel disposed to swim over without occasion, he sat down upon the rocks to make his repast on the provisions he had brought with him. While doing so, his attention was roused by a noise in an arched part of the rock beneath him. He knew that in these royal parks wild beasts were kept, as well as smaller game; and descending the rock half way, he could see, as he expected, that the den in which a lion was secured, lay underneath him. It was a favourable opportunity for watching the habits of this monster of the desert, which had been purchased from the Indian borders, enclosed only on the outside by a grating. With the aid of the hunting-spear which he carried with him, Lucius let himself down in the neighbourhood of the monster. But while thus occupied, a noise at a distance recalled to him the danger of being found within the emperor's hunting-ground. Concealing himself behind a large tree, which grew close to the den, he saw a party approach, who had been employed apparently in the pursuit of smaller game. Their chief, whom Lucius knew at once to be the Cæsar Galerius, was accompanied by a younger man, whom he seemed to treat with considerable attention. The Cæsar's companion wore a soldier's dress, and his appearance bespoke resolution without ferocity. His tall and manly figure was set off by an open and attractive countenance. His age appeared to be that in which the activity of youth had lately ripened into the firmness of manhood. He might be somewhat under thirty; and if a broad and sinewy frame promised great strength, yet the management of his horse shewed it to be equalled by his agility.

Lucius had good opportunity for observing the two first persons in the party; for when they came opposite the den, they reined up their horses. Galerius, turning to the other, said: "Here is the wild beast I promised to show you; look at him well, and see if you hold to what you asserted, that a brave man, well armed, would do too much for him."

The beast seemed as if he divined what was passing; for he opened his enormous mouth with a wide yawn, and then suddenly changing, like the sea during a hurricane, from rest to fury, he erected his shaggy mane, drew up his wrinkled lips and displayed his vast teeth, as with a short deep snarl he rushed against the bars of his den. Galerius's horse started aside at the sound, so that, though a good horseman, he was nearly dismounted; but the other did not seem daunted.

"What I said I will maintain," he answered, "that with this couple of good hunting-spears I should not hesitate, were there any necessity, to attack this monster of the forest."

Lucius could see from his hiding-place, that in the sinister features of Galerius there was a mingled expression of malignity and satisfaction which augured no good to his companion.

"Why, you should have been the grandson of Maximian himself," he said; "for you have a better right to his name of Hercules than any of your father's other sons."

"The son of Constantius," said the other haughtily, "needs no higher descent."

"And yet," said Galerius, with a sneer, "I have a shrewd notion that you would gallop for it as well as any one, if we were to turn this creature out to try the sharpness of our hunting spears. I can see that you are getting ready to make off as soon as the den shall be opened."

Galerius's insinuation evidently provoked his companion; for, without deigning any reply, he alighted to put something right which was out of place in his bridle. Galerius pretended not to see that he was dismounted, and, riding close to the den, drew back its bolt, so as to allow the beast a passage.

"Now Constantine," he cried, turning round towards him, "mount, and keep clear of his first spring!"

His companion looked back, and saw the door of the den open, at a few paces behind him. If he attempted to mount, he felt assured that the lion would be upon him before he gained his saddle; indeed the beast seemed as though in act to spring. Happily he had rested his two hunting-spears against the fore-quarter of his horse, within reach of his arm. Grasping one of them, he threw it with so just an aim, that it wounded the lion in a mortal part. But the huge monster had strength left for one fatal bound against his opponent. His victim, however, was not unprepared. Springing sideways to the great tree which grew near the den, he received the beast upon his remaining spear, the back part of which he rested upon its roots. Though its stock was thick, and intended apparently for such a purpose, yet such was the weight of the animal that Lucius, as he stood behind the tree, could hear it crack and break. The rock rising too abruptly on the other side of the tree to allow the man to ascend, he could do nothing but slip aside into the narrow crevice which intervened between the tree and the den, and called out to Galerius to throw him his hunting-spear, that he might despatch the creature. But Galerius, who when he had opened the door, had motioned his followers to some little distance, kept aloof himself, crying out, whether truly or not, that his horse was frightened by the affray. His companion's horse had galloped off at the first spring of the lion. The beast would in a moment have despatched his now unarmed opponent, had not Lucius, at the instant, quitted his hiding-place, and presented his hunting-spear through the crevice, which, at a few feet from the ground, was wide enough to admit his arm. It came just in time. The man, who had retreated as far back as he could, caught it with his left hand, and thrust it down the throat of the beast, as it once more flew open-mouthed upon him. Its expiring strength yielded before his vigorous arm, and the creature lay dead before him.

He had now time to think of his deliverer, whose situation he understood in a moment. "Save yourself," he said, "if you can, among the rocks behind; and remember that it is the prince Constantine who is your debtor." Lucius saw his danger; for Galerius and his attendants were by this time coming up, and the service which he had rendered to Constantine was not likely to conciliate the Cæsar towards an intruder; he must look to himself, therefore, for escape. On the side where he stood, nothing but a single rock intervened between the cavern and the precipice, which overhung the sea. In that part it was tolerably accessible, so that, springing up it, he was at the top in a moment; and before the huntsmen, who shouted so soon as they saw him, could let fly their arrows, he had plunged from the cliff into the sea. He threw himself as far forward as possible, fearing only hidden rocks; and the splash which he made as he sunk into

deep water was the only indication to his pursuers of his course. He had been well accustomed to this exercise on the bold coasts of his own country, and had often leapt, for sport, from rocks as lofty; so that he found no difficulty in turning, as soon as he was under water, and in emerging close to the shore, where projecting rocks covered him above. He floated here, with nothing but his head above water, till he heard the hunters gradually leave the rocks; some intimating that he was a water-god, who had come to aid prince Constantine, and others that he had been entangled in the weeds at the bottom. None ventured to follow him down the cliff; and as the face of the rocks formed a promontory in the sea, no view could be obtained of them except from the opposite shore. To it Lucius swam as soon as all his pursuers were departed; and returned home with no loss, save that of his favourite hunting-spear.

The next morning brought the news that Constantine had returned to his quarters near Nicomedia, and that on the preceding day he had slain a lion, by the special aid, as some said, of Castor and Pollux--Anthimus, who knew of Lucius's prospects, was now the first to advise that he should try and gain admission to the prince. Never did the young man more grudge the loss of his letters than when he found himself at the quarters of Constantine's legion, and was refused admittance unless he would state his business. But here his British birth stood him instead. He said he was a subject of Constantius, a native of York, one of his favourite cities, and that he had a special errand for the emperor's son. But when this point was gained, and he was admitted to the prince's tent, how should he begin? His embarrassment was over when he saw his own hunting-spear, the companion of his sports at home, in the corner of the tent. Going up to it, he said, as he made obeisance to the prince: "I am come to reclaim my favourite weapon." Constantine instantly recognized his friend of yesterday. After blaming him for the risk he had encountered in entering the emperor's hunting-ground, "I had anticipated," he said, "from the inscription on your weapon, that you were from my father's province, and felt doubly interested in your escape."

Lucius, thus encouraged, told his whole history; that his recommendations to Constantius had perished in the fire at the palace; and that, failing in his hopes from Dorotheus, he was at present dependent on the charity of the Christian bishop.

"You are yourself, then, I presume, a Christian?" said Constantine.

"No, I am not," said Lucius; "though the charity which has been exercised towards a stranger like myself is a powerful argument with me in favour of the Christians."

"It is well that you remain as you are," said Constantine. "The emperor's orders do not allow me to prefer any man to military rank who does not sacrifice to the tutelary gods. But come with me to-morrow; to say nothing of the service you have already rendered me, I shall be glad to be accompanied by one of my father's subjects."

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