

The celebration of birthdays was a pagan custom, abhorrent to the Jews because connected with idolatrous worship. It was common amongst the Egyptians (Gen. 40: 20,) Persians, Greeks, and Romans. The Herods celebrated their birthdays with such magnificence that they passed into a proverb. "A Herod's day." (*Herodis dies.*)

Mark tells us that a splendid company was assembled consisting of the civic and military dignitaries of Galilee, together with the most influential personages in the province who were not in the service of the Tetrarch.

Mark says that the dancer was "the daughter of Herodias herself" i.e. Herodias' own daughter. The emphasis expresses the scorn of the writer. She degraded her own daughter into a common dancing girl, in order to play upon the worst passions of Herod, and by them gain her purpose.

Her name was Salome. "Her dance was doubtless of a mimetic and wanton character" (Meyer,) a statement which is amply warranted by what we know of the customs of that day and the morals of the court of Herod.

To engage in such a dance with a circle of men all around "was to forget even the decency and decorum of a Jewish maid." (Lange.) Contrast the modesty of the heathen queen in Esther 1: 10-12. (But see what Dr. Merrill says in "Lesson Illustrations.")

6.—The conduct of Herod is a weak imitation of grand monarchs. He was nothing, and held his tetrarchy by grace of Cæsar (Compare Esther 5: 3-6; 7: 2.) Perhaps Salome had been "before instructed of her mother" to secure any promise in this way, in case that when sobered, Herod should refuse to perform it.

8.—"Before instructed" (R.V. "put forward.") Herodias suggested the hideous request. "The girl flew to her mother, and said 'what shall I ask'?"

It was exactly what Herodias expected, and she might have asked for robes, or jewels, or palaces, or whatever such a woman loves; but to a mind like her's revenge was sweeter than wealth or pride, and we can imagine with what fierce malice she hissed out the unhesitating answer, "The head of John the Baptizer." (Farrar.)

A "charger" is a large platter for which

other dishes are replenished or "charged." The Greek word means "a wooden trencher," such dishes having been made of wood in primitive times.

9.—Herod was sorry for several reasons:

1. He shrank from the deed, especially in the midst of jovial feasting. It was an ill-omened ending to a birthday banquet.

2. He had a superstitious, if not a conscientious fear of the consequences.

3. It was a dangerous thing to do, for all the people held John to be a prophet, and they might rise in rebellion to avenge him.

4. He did not feel his rebukes so keenly as Herodias did, and so did not cherish such vindictive designs against him.

5. He felt annoyed at being outwitted by Herodias, whom he had been holding back from slaying John.

But he felt compelled by a false sense of honor. R.V. "For the sake of his oaths." He had reiterated his promise again and again. Such an oath ought not to have been kept (Lev. 5: 4-6, 10.) He had promised "even to the half of his kingdom" but this was risking the whole. A true sense of honor would have cast the shame upon the damsel for taking a mean advantage.

When one has begun wrong, repentance is more honorable than persistence. But Herod was sensitive to the sneers of the sycophants around him.

10, 11.—It is worth noting that Mark, who wrote his gospel for the Romans gives here the name of the official who acted as executioner. It is a Latin word meaning "a watcher," one of the body guard. The narrative conveys the impression that the banquet was held at Machærus, where John was imprisoned, and that all was over in a few moments.

Had the feast been held at Tiberias, as some suppose, two days must have elapsed before the head could have been brought. Horrible as such a scene appears it was not strange in those days. Jerome says that Herodias treated the poor head with savage indignity.

12.—Tradition tells us that Herodias ordered the headless trunk to be flung over the battlements for dogs and vultures to devour. (Farrar.) John's disciples henceforth attached themselves to Jesus.