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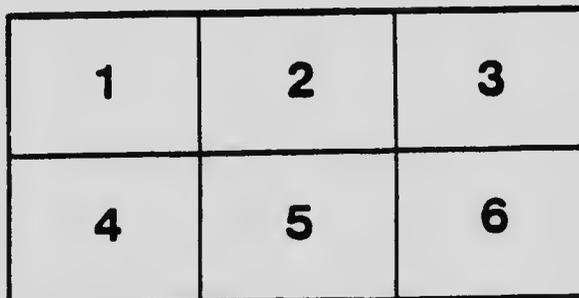
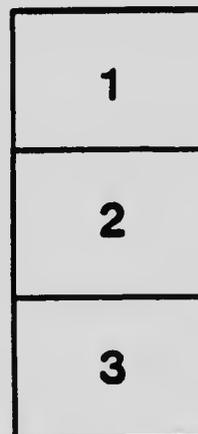
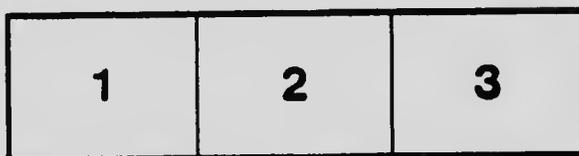
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Valeria

OR

The Triumph of the Catacombs

BY

Mgr. Ant. de Vall

QUEBEC

Franciscan Missionary printing press

180 Grande-Allée

1918



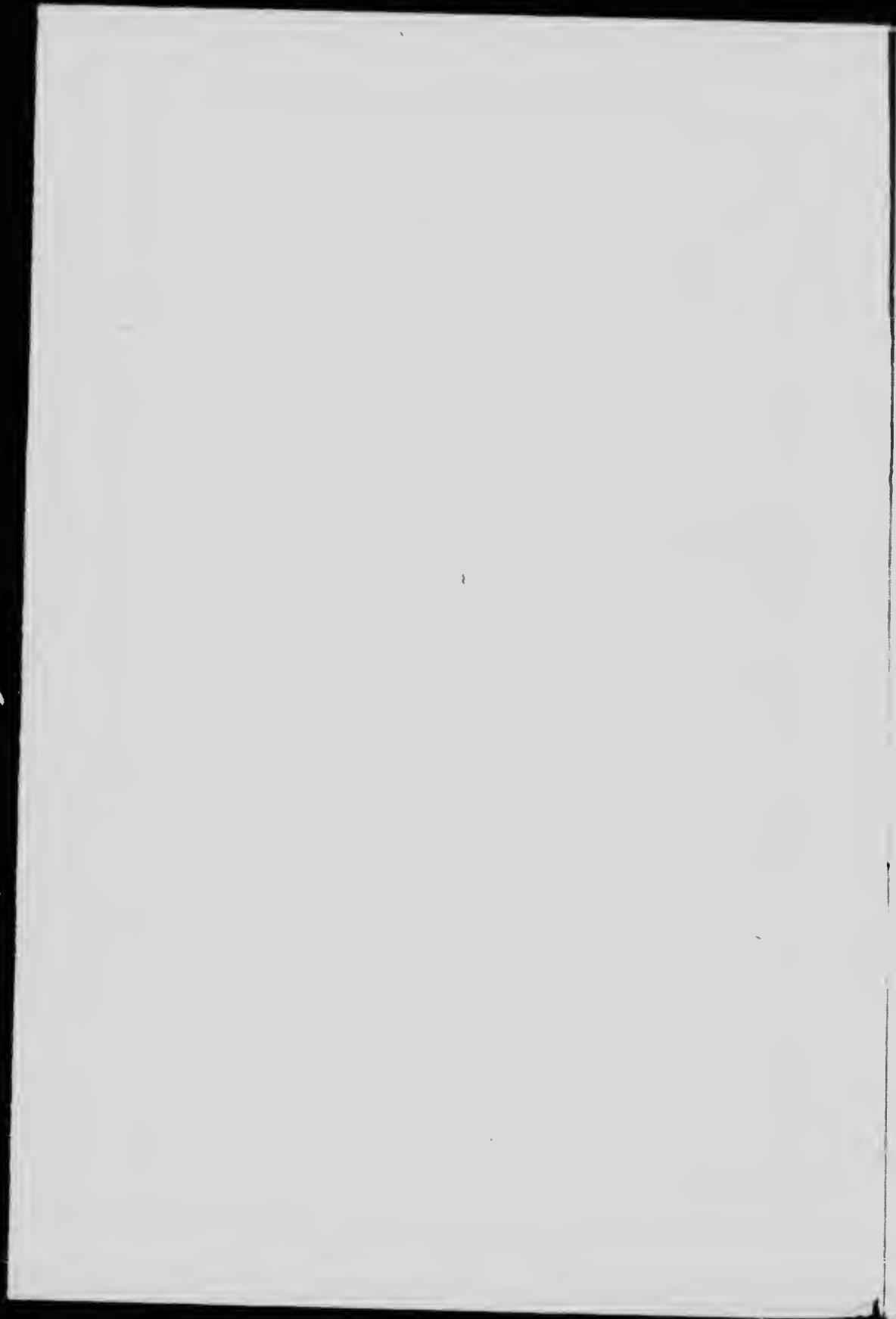
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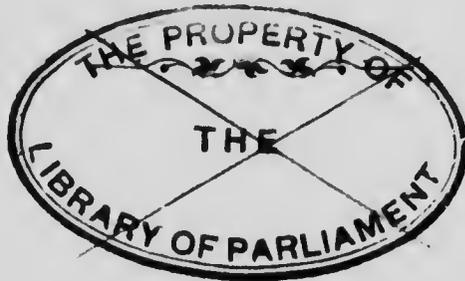
OR

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CATAGOMBS

BY

MGR. ANT. DE WALL.

(Adapted from the German.)



QUEBEC

FRANCISCAN MISSIONARY PRINTING PRESS

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IMPRIMATUR:

† L.-N. CARD. BÉGIN,

Archbishop of Quebec.

FOREWORD

Books — there is no end to the making of books especially in this Twentieth Century, but of the many thousand that greet the public eye, in the course of a year, how brief is the existence of the great majority; how short lived their popularity. In the case of bad books, there is nothing to regret in this. Would that the impressions these have left behind them were as transient. But there is always need for a good book, for a good book is a friend, that raises our thoughts to higher things, that inspires us to nobler deeds; that encourages us in hours of depression, and comforts us in those of sorrow; that helps us to remember what we too often forget; that reading is not merely undertaken as a pastime — to while away a tedious hour, but it is one of the innumerable talents of which we shall have to give an account to GOD.

Books have a wide spreading influence; they are given admission where the writer would be refused, and they often go into homes, impossible of access to either Priest or Religious. So the work of publishing good books to counteract the influence of those that are bad or to say the least, indifferent is a real apostolic work, and one that draws down upon it the divine blessing. Need we apologize then for presenting in English dress another little work, the story of a young girl, who in the early days of Christianity is said to have suffered for her faith even to heroism.

Alban Butler, mentions no St. Valeria, but what matters the name which in this chronicle is typical of the countless Virgins, who as Confessors and Martyrs, rejoiced to follow the Lamb, whithersoever He goeth, — here on earth, —

*through much tribulation — that in Heaven they may share
with Him an eternity of joy.*

May this little book then do all the good its author desires !

*Parve, nec invideo sine me liber ibis in urbis,
Hei mihi! quo Domino non licet ire tuo, (Ovid)*

*“ Go little book to where your author cannot go,
Into the cities ;*

*I do not grudge your fate, but O the pity
That here I must remain to mourn out side your gate. ”*

VALERIA

OR

THE TRIUMPH IN THE CATAGOMBS



CHAPTER I

A SIGN IN THE HEAVENS

THE Autumn of the year 312 was to give to the Church the peace and rest so necessary after the bloody persecution which had lasted three centuries.

Two Emperors then reigned over the western portion of the Roman empire.

The cruel Maxentius, who had risen from the lowest ranks of society, and who had not hesitated to dip his hands in the blood of his own father, Maximinus, in order to invest himself with the imperial purple, ruled over Italy, the northern part of Africa and the whole of Egypt.

Constantine, son of Constantius Chlorus, whose election had been received with acclamations by the army and the people, governed Gaul, Spain and Britain. As his father had done before him, this prince daily increased his influence over the hearts of his people, while Maxentius retained his crown by crime and cruelty. It was not to be wondered at then that his Italian subjects, wearied of his exactions and wickedness, turned

their eyes towards Gaul, towards a prince who, to the prestige of royal birth added the qualities which ennoble the supreme power.

Constantine was not ignorant of the wishes of the Roman people, but he knew too that Maxentius hated him with an implacable hatred, and that the tyrant, trusting in his wealth and the strength of his army, was desirous of provoking a war in which he hoped to crush his dangerous rival.

More than once the valiant Cæsar of the Gauls had to restrain the impatience of his captains who could not understand why their chief did not answer the insulting provocations of Maxentius and the entreaties of the Roman nobles and senators by resorting to arms.

Constantine did not allow himself to be dazzled by ambition or carried away by a generosity that might prove rash ; he knew his troops, he knew that though sufficiently strong to carry on a war in his own territories, they were not adequately equipped to undertake an expedition into Italy and follow the enemy into the heart of his fortified strongholds.

Not only did he avoid every subject of quarrel with his powerful colleague, but he treated him with prudent courteousness, and though his overtures received no replies, he never failed to write and congratulate Maxentius on the anniversary of his coronation.

Circumstances however were to oblige the lion to quit his lair.

Constantine was in his thirty eighth year, he had spent the summer of the year 312 in the neighbourhood of Lyons, and still held his camp there at the end of September.

The Emperor had just been assisting at some military

exercises and was about to retire to his tent, when a man, covered with dust and with his clothes torn, threw himself at his feet.

Constantine quickly recognised him. It was Anicius Paulinus, one of the first Senators of Rome, who had already been sent to him as legate. He kindly raised him up and then asked :

“What is it that brings thee here from Rome and in this state ?”

A prey to the most violent emotions, the Senator answered bitterly :

“Know, O great Emperor ! that Maxentius, after having carried off my wife, accuses me of the crime of high treason. Helped by a few faithful friends and with the assistance of the immortal gods, I have escaped from prison. But my wife, my children... what has become of them ?... Avenge me, noble Prince, avenge Rome that has been trampled on by the tyrant and his partisans, avenge thyself !

“If thou remainest deaf to the call of the Senate, insensible to the tears of our wives and of our children, indifferent to the sorrows of a nation, wilt thou forget that among the victims of the monster who oppresses us, there are the descendants of the divine Claudius thy glorious ancestor ? Dost thou not know that the relentless enmity Maxentius bears thee makes him break down thy statues and tear out the eyes of the pictures which represent thee ?”

The Chiefs of Constantine's army listened at first in silence to the burning words of the Senator, but when they heard of the insults offered to their Emperor, their eyes flashed and with one accord their hands sought the hilts of their swords ; the younger captains throwing

themselves at his feet implored him to avenge these indignities without further delay.

Though motionless and silent, the son of Constantius Chlorus was not unmoved; his thoughtful brow was dark and his eyes shone with suppressed anger. No, such affronts could not be allowed to pass unpunished, but, true to his wonted prudence, Constantine did not say a word. At length he asked his captains to withdraw and to leave him to think calmly and quietly over the resolutions he ought to take. He was obeyed.

But while the Emperor, alone in his tent, strode angrily up and down, the news brought by Anicius Paulinus spread through the camp with the rapidity of lightning, and but one tumultuous cry arose from the hearts of his warriors :

“Up! let us march on Rome! Down with the wretch!”

Constantine was meanwhile fighting a terrible battle with himself; his pride demanded sanguinary reparation for the insults offered by Maxentius, but he hesitated in face of the actual difficulties attendant on such an undertaking.

Irresolute as to the decision he ought to take, Constantine ordered the high priest to consult the gods; while Gordien examined the smoking entrails of the victims, the Emperor called together the chief officers of his staff, his most trusted advisers, and the Senator Paulinus, and held a council of war.

These were all brave soldiers who had fought in the East against the Persians, on the Rhine against the Germans, or had been either in the campaign in Egypt or in Bithynia. The youngest were Constantine's companions in arms. Among them all, the Centurion, Can-

didus, was conspicuous by his stature and for his bravery, which had won for him the title of *Amicus principis*, during the battle in which his good sword had saved Constantine's life. Son of a martyr and brother to those who had also shed their blood for Christ, Candidus was himself a Christian, born of a saintly mother; his soldiers loved him; many of them were Christians, and the number of the followers of the Crucified was daily increasing in the Gallican army. Constantine held him in great esteem and appreciated his uncommon virtue; like the children of Israel in the fiery furnace, Candidus passed unscathed through the dangers of camp life and inspired respect in all with whom he came in contact. The German kings and chiefs who served in the army as auxiliary troops also had a voice in the *Concilium Principis*. The oldest as well as the bravest of these foreign princes was Eroc, King of the Alaman. In spite of his seventy years he bore himself bravely and was proud of the glorious scar which seamed his forehead. His long white beard fell down to his belt. He exercised a peculiar influence over Constantine, which was due to his loyal service and to the part he had taken in the emperor's election.

The council being assembled the Emperor began to speak. He spoke slowly as if he were thinking while speaking :

"You know the outrageous affronts that I have received from Maxentius. By Jupiter! I declare that your solicitations and the cries of the soldiers were not needed to excite me to vengeance. But the immortal gods do not always immediately punish crime; it was expedient that your Emperor should act prudently."

The officers had listened to the Emperor in silence.

Eroc was the first to rise, and with a slight irony which the noble old man alone could allow himself to use, he addressed Constantine :

" Oh ! wise and powerful Emperor ! I thought that thou hadst summoned us only to give us the order to march at break of day ; I thought that thou didst wish to be before the gates of the proud capital in less than a month. By Woden ! this campaign must last but a few short weeks , thou must advance unhesitatingly and impetuously against the enemy, striking repeated blows, which will be so many victories ; Maxentius must still be asleep when he shall be aroused by the avenging shock of our swords at the gates of his palace ! "

The vociferous applause which greeted this speech proved to the emperor that Eroc had expressed the feelings of the whole council, and Constantine seeing that all his chiefs were unanimous in their desire for revenge, was about to repeat the celebrated words of Cæsar : "*Alea jacta est !* . . ." when the curtain before the door of the tent was raised and Gordian, crowned with flowers and carrying the rod of divination, entered and advanced towards the Emperor :

" According to thy commands, immortal Lord, " he said, " we have consulted the entrails of the victims in order to know the will of our all powerful gods.

" Mayst thou in all things obtain what is best and most salutary, but know, O glorious Master ! that the omens are not those which thy valiant soul desires ; our divinities do not favour this undertaking. "

A thunderbolt falling in the midst of this warlike assembly could not have provoked greater stupefaction. The impression made on Constantine was particularly deep and keen.

A silence full of anguish fell over all, and each one asked himself anxiously :

“ Who would dare to brave the will of the gods ? ”

Anicius Paulinus alone, exasperated by his sorrow and anguish, made a protest.

“ No, no, the gods cannot will that such a monster should oppress Rome any longer ! The omens have been badly interpreted, or our divinities wish to obtain worshippers elsewhere. ”

“ May the gods forgive the criminal blasphemy, which only thy sorrow excuses, ” said Gordien wrathfully. “ What ! thou wouldst measure with thy feeble mind the designs of the eternal Olympus. All the omens have been rightly interpreted, and the day will come when the divine Constantine will understand that the gods will that he should abandon this undertaking only that they may lead their favourite by a safer path to supreme honours. ”

If Paulinus' words were at first received with signs of approval, the authoritative and solemn voice of Gordien cooled the general enthusiasm ; the difficulties and dangers of such an expedition presented themselves and opinions were divided ; one captain advised that they should wait the arrival of the troops who were charged with the defence of the Rhine, another insisted on the necessity of an alliance with the eastern princes, a third thought the war perilous and imprudent, and said that though vengeance was legitimate it was better to defer it till later.

Candidus had said nothing, but tumultuous feelings agitated his soul ; he, better than any other, knew the just value of Gordien's explanations, and he was compelled to speak.

“Powerful and noble master,” he cried, “pardon the youngest of thy warriors if he should speak too boldly. If thou shouldst march against Rome only to avenge a personal affront, the blood that thou shalt shed will not be pleasing to God; but if the object of thy expedition be to deliver the capital from the tyranny of an impious master, if thou dost purpose avenging innocence and virtue which have been outraged by crime, re-establishing peace which has been disturbed by violence and oppression, replacing slavery by liberty, then the Lord will bless thy arms and, with the glory of victory, grant thee the greater glory of being called the Father of thy country.”

What were Gordien’s feelings at this moment? The look of hatred and menace which he gave Candidus showed them all too plainly.

He knew him to be a Christian, he knew that the Disciples of Christ treated the pagan oracles with contempt, and a fierce desire for revenge took possession of him.

At the words of the young chief, Eroë raised his head, and unable to restrain his feelings any longer exclaimed: “By Woden! Youth possesses wisdom! Listen, Emperor, dost thou not hear the increasing tumult of thy soldiers? Their cries are the voice of the gods! Ah! if thou wilt permit me I shall send to consult one of our most powerful priestesses who approaches the divinity very closely; at thy command she will interrogate the heavens anew.”

The tribune, Artemesius, whose sound judgment carried great weight with the Emperor, also supported the opinion of the young centurion, but the majority of the assembly hesitated and had not the courage to begin

a war under such unfavourable auspices : the council became more and more undecided. Constantine, knowing that he could hope for victory only if his soldiers were united and convinced of success, was about to submit to the will of the gods ; but at this moment a soldier, trembling with indescribable emotion, rushed into the tent.

"Come," he cried, "come, Prince, hasten and see the sign which has appeared in the heavens !"

Everyone left the tent precipitately. Stupefied witnesses of the wonder, some prostrated themselves, some threw themselves at the feet of the Emperor, already shouting their cries of victory ; others, struck with respectful fear, looked tremblingly at the heavenly sign which appeared above the setting sun.

It was a luminous cross interlaced with an inscription in Greek letters, which might be thus translated :

"By this sign thou shalt conquer." At sight of it Candidus also fell on his knees, and with eyes filled with tears he cried :

"Hail ! O heavenly symbol of my Saviour, our only hope ! Since thou dost thyself enlighten us, who can be against us ?"

Then, rising triumphantly, he said to Constantine who was silent but who looked with increasing surprise at the sign :

"Emperor, it is true that by this sign thou shalt conquer ; it is not a human tongue but heaven itself which announces it ! Know that at this sign the demons tremble even in the depths of the abyss, and when thy enemies shall see it they shall be confounded."

The Emperor continued to look at the heavenly apparition, but could not unravel its meaning.

"I see clearly the Greek letters X. and P. interlaced," said he, "but I do not understand the signification of the monogram."

Candidus was about to give the Emperor the only true explanation, but Gordien, whom the wonder had disconcerted and who wished to regain the influence which he felt he was losing, forestalled him and said in a loud and solemn voice :

"Divine Sovereign ! according to the rules of augury, the higher oracles, those that come from heaven, are superior to the lower, those of the sacrifices. Thou art truly the favourite of the gods ; by this brilliant apparition they destroy the prognostics which were unfavourable to thee and confound thy enemies. Behold ! O Prince, the meaning of this prodigy :

"The great Mithras who is the invincible guide of thy army will protect thee. The entwined letters are the consonants of the Greek word *xarpe* which signifies : Hail to thee ! This word clearly indicates that if thou dost take the God of the sun as thy guide, a splendid victory awaits thee."

Gordien then triumphantly cast a glance of hatred and pride at the Centurion, but Candidus was not at all disturbed.

The commanders of the army completely satisfied with the explanation given by the aruspex, cried out with one accord :

"*Omen accipimus !* We accept the favourable omens ; Mithras, under whose protection we shall march to battle will give us the victory."

On learning Gordien's explanation the soldiers became delirious with joy, and the air resounded with their cries :

"We accept ! to Rome ! to Rome !"

Constantine alone remained undecided ; the explanations of the high priest had not convinced him, and his anxious eyes remained fixed on the mysterious characters which were so clearly defined above the sun, and the encouraging words :

“ By this sign thou shalt conquer.”

The old chief Eroc, still less learned in Greek than in Latin, had only partially understood Gordien's explanations ; he too looked at the sign questioningly, and sighed because of the absence of his wise priestesses.

Candidus easily read the thoughts which troubled the Emperor. He came and stood respectfully before him and drew from his breast a sort of medal on which were engraven the same letters, X. and P. whose interpretation so perplexed the sovereign.¹

Showing it to Constantine he said :

“ Prince, these two initials are not unknown to us Christians. They are the two first letters of the word *Christus*. We engrave them on the tombs of our dead to show that they have conquered death by faith in Jesus Christ, the son of God, and that through Him they enjoy eternal rest.

“ In our holy Scriptures, the Christ is called the Sun of Justice ; when on Thabor He deigned to appear trans-

1. The bishop gave each person who was baptized a *tessera*, which consisted either of a small fish in silver, glass, or mother of pearl, etc., bearing this inscription in Greek letters : “ Save me ! ” or else a sort of medal, of different metals, with the letters P. X. engraven on it and a small hole by which it was hung round the neck. He might also give a ring, a piece of money or a medallion ; but all these objects bore the sign of our redemption. The *tessera* was both a recommendation and a means of recognition among the Christians.

figured before His apostles, "His face did shine as the sun;" His throne, according to the word of our holy canticles, is as "the sun before the face of God." "Besides," added Candidus ironically, "what sense can the word *xarpe* (welcome) have? The parrots at the doors cry it out to all those who cross the threshold. What connection can it have with the heavenly inscription which promises us victory?"

The young Centurion's Christian explanation was not favourably received by the Chiefs, they shook their heads and waited for their master's reply.

"This monogram then is the symbol of thy God?" he asked, his brow still clouded and his eyes shining with a strange light.

Then without waiting for an answer he retired a little distance and buried himself in deep thought which no one dared to disturb. His gaze was again fixed on the brilliant sign; Gordien's explanation did not satisfy him, that of Candidus was most repugnant. Could there not be a third and a true one?

But the longer he looked at the luminous cross the more loudly did an interior voice seem to say: "Believe in the words of thy Centurion, have confidence."

"Candidus," he at last asked of the young man, "how will this sign lead us to victory? Till now the eagles have been the only ensign of our legions."

"O Prince! make a standard on which the monogram of the Christ shall be emblazoned; place it at the head of thy troops and, as the bright inscription promises, by this sign we shall conquer."

"My Lord," continued the young Christian bending his knee before the Emperor, "if I have found grace in thy eyes, deign to accord me one signal favour. En-

trust me with this sacred standard. I will bear it into the thickest of the fight, and I swear that, before the symbol of the Christ, the eagles of Maxentius will fly like so many timid hens on which the vulture darts down."

The eyes of the brave young warrior shone with holy enthusiasm ; his words, inspired by profound conviction, moved the Emperor. But Constantine was still far from being a Christian, he had to reckon with his legions who were most devoted to the gods, particularly Mithras. Would they consent to march under the standard of the GOD of the Christians? Eroc once more turned the balance in favour of Candidus and his proposals.

"Whatever the true meaning of these emblems may be," he said, "the Centurion's counsel appears excellent to me. We are all certain that the sign comes from heaven and promises us the victory. Let us follow it ! and then each one may interpret it as he pleases."

Constantine's policy was always to leave his subjects entire religious freedom ; Eroc's idea fell in with his own inclinations, and he understood too that the remembrance of the heavenly marvel would excite the courage of his soldiers, and finally taking a decided resolution, he returned towards the imperial tent to announce his decision to the army.

At sight of him silence was immediately restored ; closely crowded against one another, the warriors prepared to listen to their Sovereign. The setting sun brightened the stirring scene with a purple light, and in the heavens the victorious sign shone with a purer and more serene lustre.

Constantine himself seemed transformed ; his move-

ments were full of grace and majesty, his glance intrepid and confident, and his glowing countenance made him appear a demi-god in the eyes of his superstitious men.

Words of peace or of war, of rest or of triumph were about to fall from his lips. He spoke, and, in the profound silence of the camp, his voice rang out and was heard by the furthest ranks of soldiers.

In a few words he recalled the insults Maxentius had heaped on him, and the desolation of the Roman city.

"I hesitated however," said he, "to expose the lives of my brave warriors, but heaven has spoken, and promises us the victory ; I obey that voice and cry : Forward, to Italy !

"A new standard bearing the celestial sign will replace the imperial eagles at the head of our army. Before the month closes we shall be at the gates of Rome. To-morrow morning the camp will be raised !"

As the roar of the ocean which is tossed by the tempest, an immense clamour rose from the mighty army, the clanking of arms filled the camp, and the mountains re-echoed the joyous cries of the soldiers.

Constantine was not the least happy ; his doubts had vanished, and he was now perfectly confident of success ; with the last light of the setting sun the heavenly sign grew paler, but it left a feeling of security and ineffable peace in the heart of the Emperor.

Without loss of time the most skilful goldsmiths were brought from Lyons and ordered to make the new standard.

The staff, which was very long, was to be covered with gold, and bear at the top the monogram of the Christ in solid gold, enriched with pearls and surrounded by a crown of oak leaves.

A transverse bar forming the cross was to hold up

the banner, as wide as it was long, which was to be richly embroidered in gold and pearls and represent the celestial vision. Quite at the bottom the bust of the Emperor, the head crowned with rays, was to be placed.

This new banner, called the *labarum*, was to become the standard of Constantine's troops.

Acceding to the request of the centurion, Constantine entrusted him with the charge of carrying the glorious emblem. Into what more valiant and worthy hands could he have placed it?

After night had fallen, and while the soldiers on guard, stretched beside their fires, sang of the coming expedition, Candidus gathered the Christians of the army into his tent.

They thanked God for the signal favour He had that day granted them, and then talked of the sweet hopes it inspired them with : the conversion of Constantine, the triumph of the Christian faith in Rome itself.

A feeling of filial tenderness also made the young Centurion's heart beat more quickly. Rome sheltered Irene, that pious mother whom he venerated and loved so dearly, whose letters he knelt in order to read, kissing the lines with devotion. He knew that the persecution which had deprived her of her husband and her sons had reduced her to poverty, and even though so far away Candidus tried to help her.

Anicius Paulinus had brought him good news from Irene. He told him with what heroic courage she had watched her husband and sons die for the faith, with what devotedness and self-sacrifice she gave herself up to the care of the poor and the sick.

When scarcely more than a child Candidus had left his father's home to follow the career of arms, and for

seven long years he had not seen that beloved mother; but like some holy vision her sweet image was ever in his thoughts, and, after God, he attributed to her the grace of having preserved his innocence and piety in the midst of the camp.

Oh! the joy of returning to his mother, of feeling her kiss and blessing on his brow! Candidus seemed to see it all already.

In a tent near by that of the happy Candidus, while the whole camp was rejoicing, one man was occupied with dark, angry thoughts. It was Gordien.

Lying on sumptuous cushions, his head leaning on his hand, he had imperiously ordered his slaves to leave him alone. Beside him there were a golden cup filled with sparkling wine and a silver tray of delicious fruits, but they had not been touched. The dark looks of the high priest were filled with anger and hatred; he spoke to himself in a low voice, and seemed to take pleasure in irritating his wounded pride.

“What! and shall I be ridiculed by one who is still but a youth, by a vile Christian? Did I not hear him audaciously scoff at our sacrifices, and treat with scorn the interpretation of the omens of our divinities which was given by me? Shall I, without trembling with indignation, see the name of the abhorred Nazarene at the head of our legions, and the standards of the immortal gods of Rome consigned to oblivion?—No! No! it shall not be so!”

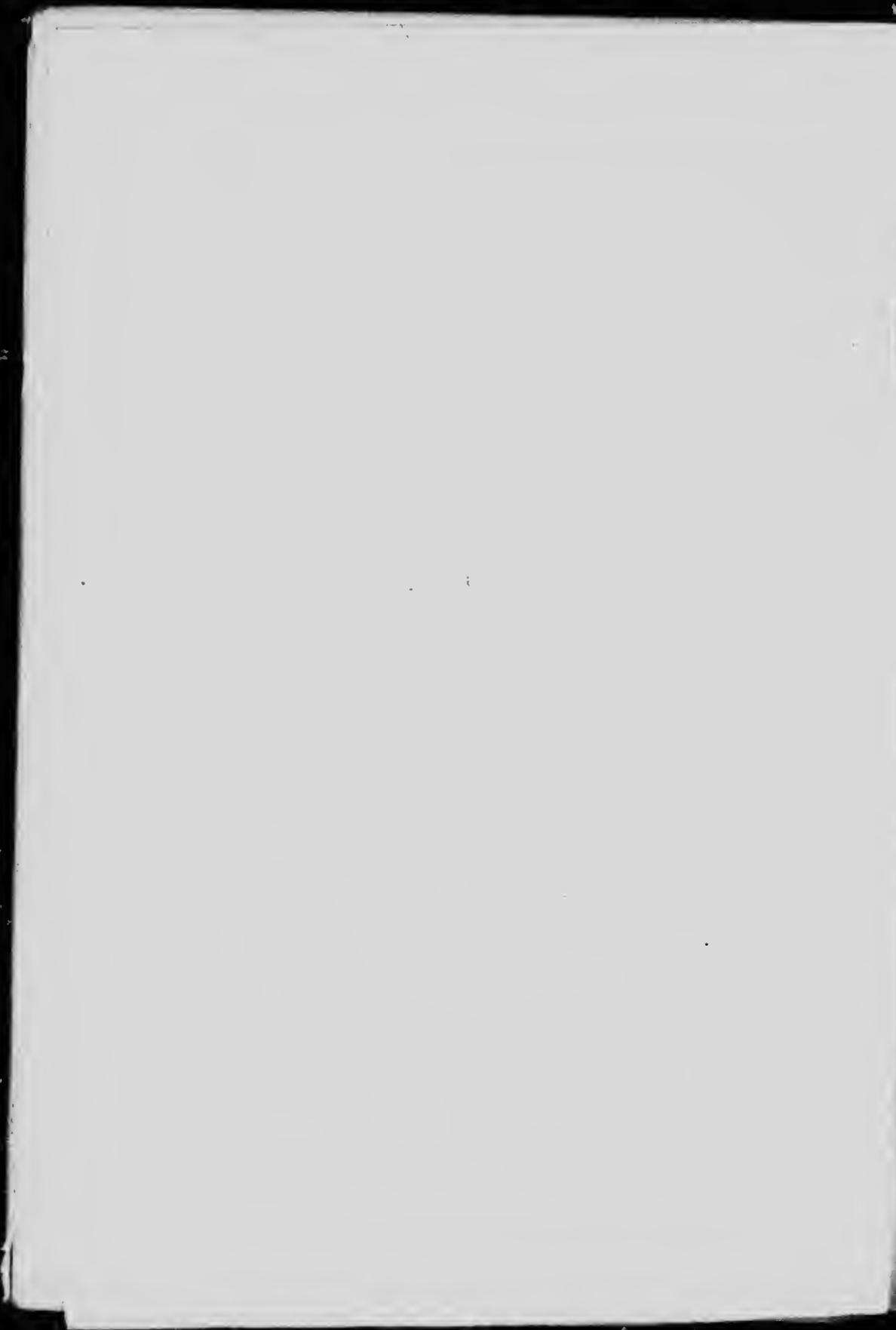
Beside himself and carried away by his anger, the aruspex raised himself on his couch, while a diabolical sneer curled his lips.

“No, Emperor,” he cried with proud defiance, “no, thou shalt not conquer by this sign! Gordien shall work

for his gods, and on the bloody battlefields, in the midst of the heaps of the dead bodies of thy soldiers, — splendid hecatomb for the altar sacrifice ! — Gordien shall celebrate thy ruin and proclaim the triumph of his divinities over the Galilean.”

Without further delay he set to work to carry out the treacherous designs his vengeance had planned.

An hour later one of his trusted slaves stealthily left Gordien’s tent, and gliding quickly and cautiously between the other tents, pitched here and there, jumped as dexterously as a cat over the high palisade which surrounded the Roman camp. Sewn into his clothes he carried a letter addressed to Rufus who commanded the legions of Maxentius in the cantonments in the north of Italy.



CHAPTER II

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

A fragrant coolness had replaced the sultry heat of summer ; the heavy rains had refreshed the parched earth, and the Roman Campagna adorned with its luxuriant vegetation seemed to awaken to a second spring and offer its charming flowers and delicious autumn fruits in profusion.

This day, the 11th of October, was a day of great rejoicing in Rome ; the cries of the peasants resounded on every side ; it was the festival of the *Médétrinales*, when for the first time the new wine of the year was drunk. Two days later the *Fontenales* would be celebrated, at which time all the fountains and springs would be tastefully decorated with garlands of flowers and leaves, amid universal joy.

These festivals brought the noble Romans back from their beautiful, luxurious country Villas to the capital. This was the reason why the Prefect Aradius Rufinus had returned to Rome with his wife and daughter and now occupied his splendid palace on the Cœlimontium hill, not far from the Latran. This quarter of the city was the centre of the splendid aristocratic homes which rivalled each other in grandeur and magnificence.

Aradius began his military career under the emperors Maximus and Constantius Chlorus, and had been the companion in arms of Constantine and Maxentius.

Called later on to the Asiatic court of Diocletian, in Nicomedia, he had married the noble Sophronia who

belonged to one of the most influential families of the country. Three sons and one daughter were born of this happy union.

Rufinus entrusted the education of his sons to Lactantius Firmianus who had been recalled from Africa to Nicomedia, in 301, and was nominated master of eloquence.

Shortly after his appointment, Lactantius, who was as seriously earnest as he was learned, began secretly to study the Christian religion, and, being soon convinced that it was the only religion which possessed the truth, embraced it, but did not openly declare his faith, in order to be the better able to serve the Church. The Prefect relied on him implicitly and had not the slightest suspicion of his being a Christian. The duties of his office often kept Rufinus away from home and Lactantius took advantage of these absences to sow in the young hearts confided to his care the seeds of Christianity; he did so however with great prudence and discretion.

Unfortunately the three young men were withdrawn all too soon, from the influence of this good master, to embrace a military career.

Valeria, the privileged child, remained alone with her father and mother. At her birth she was confided to a Christian nurse who tried, at an early age, to instil into the child's heart the teachings of the Christian faith. Valeria seemed naturally disposed to receive them, and the Prefect's daughter was already a fervent Christian in heart when Diocletian opened the terrible and bloody persecution, in 303, during which her devoted nurse was taken away from her.

Consequent on important public events, which the limits of our story will not allow us to give in detail,

Diocletian was compelled to give up the crown ; the Church then enjoyed a short respite, of which Valeria availed herself to be thoroughly instructed and baptized secretly.

When in 306 Maxentius assumed the imperial purple, he decided to recall his former companion in arms, whose eminent qualities he recognised and appreciated ; he offered him all that could flatter his ambition, and Rufinus came and took up his residence in Rome with his wife and daughter.

The Emperor entrusted him successively with the highest offices, the most eminent posts, and finally made him *prefectus urbi*,¹ thus placing in his hand the superior direction of the civil administration.

Rufinus was then about fifty years of age. He was tall and striking looking ; his bearing was stern, his fidelity to all the duties of his office was unexceptionable, his integrity and his justice had gained for him the reputation of a faithful yet kind judge.

Sophronia had not yet attained her fortieth year ; she was beautiful, of a dazzling oriental beauty, which attracted attention the more as, in her passionate love for her country, she retained her national costume.

Valeria was not quite sixteen ; she had inherited her father's stateliness and her mother's beauty. Her waving, silky, black hair framed a delicate, finely featured, oval face, and her large dark eyes reflected the innocence and purity of her soul. Gifted also with more than ordinary intelligence, and a strong will, she was the pride and joy of her parents. With what love and tenderness

1. This office which was much the same as that of the Mayor of to-day, was created, in 312 for Aradius Rufinus.

did they not watch over this cherished child, the only one left to brighten their home.

Two of Valeria's brothers were in the army in the East under Lucinius, the third had met a glorious death on the field of battle.

Valeria, but little solicitous about her own beauty and charms, thought anxiously only of obtaining first her mother's conversion to the true faith and then her father's ; and she did not hesitate, soon after her baptism, to make known to them the new faith which she had embraced.

This declaration came like a thunderclap to Rufinus ; his indignation was as great as his sorrow was deep.

He loved his daughter too well however to remain long displeased with her, and the young girl joyfully foresaw in her father's indulgence the hope of his future conversion.

During her husband's absences, Sophronia, faithful to the customs of her country, avoided all company and remained quietly in her own palace. These hours of solitude drew the mother and child more closely together, and Valeria availed herself of this to gently bring her beautiful, dearly loved mother to know the truths of Christianity ; Sophronia, on her part, unconsciously allowed herself to be influenced by the ardent faith and zeal of her young daughter.

Sometimes however Sophronia was obliged by her rank to assist at some of the brilliant fêtes that Maxentius gave in honor of the noble Roman ladies, and from which she could not absent herself without exciting the tyrant's anger ; on these occasions she regretfully left her daughter alone in their home on the Cœlimontium.

When alone the young girl prayed and implored heaven

to grant to her beloved mother not only the gift of faith but the courage to confess that faith.

In her work of conversion Valeria had a devoted helper. During the last winter, circumstances had thrown Sophronia and her daughter into the company of Irene, the saintly mother of the young tribune Candidus. This noble woman bore bravely the trials with which her life had been strewn. Full of faith and ardent charity, she possessed a powerful charm to which Valeria could not remain insensible, and the truly filial affection of the young girl or the Christian matron, opened to the latter the doors of the palace of Rufinus.

With infinite tact, Irene gradually introduced Valeria and her mother to the life of active Christian charity. In her company the wife and daughter of the Tribune learned their way to the abodes of the poor in the Suburra or the Transtevère, and tasted the sweetness of giving to the poor of their abundance, and pouring into their hearts the balm of compassion and Christian charity.

To Irene alone did Valeria dare to speak of her sorrow in seeing her mother hesitate, on account of her husband's position, to declare that she was a Christian and openly ask to be instructed by a priest. Irene consoled the affectionate girl by telling her that the prayers of the poor are all powerful with God, and that the noble soul, whose struggles she so earnestly watched, could not perish.

Alas ! even then as now it was not easy for the great ones of the world to enter in at the narrow gate which leads to the kingdom of heaven. Family, position, fortune, were so many chains, so many obstacles, which retained Sophronia's soul captive.

She knew indeed that Rufinus who but just tolerated his daughter's conversion would never permit his wife to follow her example, for guessing the work that was going on in her soul, he had told her one day in decisive words, that such an act on her part would bring about their separation.

"If I were but a simple citizen," said he with the unconscious egotism of a man holding a high position. "I would leave you free to follow your inclinations, but the wife of the Prefect of Rome can have no other religion than that of the Roman state."

And Sophronia had bowed her head before this menace, feeling that she had not yet the courage to brave the anger of the husband she loved. She was one of those souls who would not shrink before suffering but who dreaded the displeasure of those dear to her.

God was about to have compassion on Sophronia's desires and loving weakness, and in a few short hours lead her to make the greatest possible sacrifice and at the same time break Rufinus's proud heart.

Maxentius was scarcely seated on the throne, when, to conciliate the people, he suspended the persecution against the Christians. But this respite was of short duration. When Rufus's victories assured him of the tranquil possession of Egypt, when he had made the people forget his criminal revolt against his father which had led him to the throne, and when, at last, the dissensions which reigned between the other emperors, and the death of Galerius dissipated his fears, he let fall the mask, and Rome shuddered on finding what a savage despot had become her master; she wept over his cruelty, his revolting cupidity and the shameless debauchery of which she was the witness.

The pagans were not treated any better than the Christians by this crowned monster. A severe famine added to the sufferings of the people, and their exasperation and despair reached its height when they saw that the Emperor mocked at their misery, distributing gold and provisions lavishly among his soldiers and saying jeeringly :

“Revel, and make good cheer even to excess and prodigality.”

When the cries of the starving populace and their importunate demands reached his ears, the tyrant ordered his troops to pitilessly strike the importuners who surrounded the palace, adding with horrible cynicism :

“Satisfy their hunger thus forever !”

But the increased taxes, collected with extreme severity, did not suffice to cover Maxentius's insane expenditure. The money extorted from the merchants and artisans was immediately squandered on riotous feasting or helped to raise the magnificent buildings in which the Emperor delighted. The new circus was not completed when he laid the foundations of a temple whose splendour was to be unrivalled and which he dedicated to his son Romulus.

The discontent of the lower classes soon spread amongst the nobles who were not free from the exactions of the tyrant. On the false information of the partisans of Maxentius the noblest and richest citizens were imprisoned, deprived of their property and often put to death. The Christians, more than all others, suffered from the cruelty of this profligate prince.

In 310, the Pope Marcellinus had suffered martyrdom ; the following year, his successor, Eusebius, was exiled to Sicily where he died shortly after, and, if Maxentius

had not yet renewed the bloody edicts of persecution it was simply because he feared to strengthen the attachment which the Roman army seemed to have for Constantine who, on the contrary, showed himself the protector of the Christians.

Under these conditions a stay in Rome was full of sadness and anxiety and Rufinus would have preferred to leave his wife and daughter for some time longer in their handsome Villa on the Alban hills, but the Emperor had invited all the Roman Matrons to the fêtes of the *Médétrinales* and the wife of the Prefect, more than any one else, could not avoid accepting the imperious invitation.

A few days after their return to the Capital, Rufinus, with his wife and daughter, were seated on a beautiful terrace, looking west, resting after the fatigues of the day. Rufinus gazed with pleasure at the charming picture made by the hills whose slopes were dotted over with pretty villages and graceful villas all bathed in the golden glow of the sunset.

Silent and pensive Sophronia's eyes wandered listlessly over the lovely scene.

A profound melancholy had taken possession of her and she was anxious and uneasy, for a mysterious voice seemed to be speaking to her heart, unceasingly urging her to leave Rome. A conversation with Valeria had brought her some comfort and she longed more than ever to become a Christian, not only in heart but openly and sincerely.

The conversation as well as the ideas of the Roman matron were affected by her frame of mind. After the *cæna* (the supper), a slave brought a basket of magnificent purple grapes and placed them on a table. Taking

up one beautiful bunch Valeria expressed her admiration of them ; Sophronia looked at the delicious fruit and turning to the young girl said to her, as if she wished her to remember this lovely sunset hour :

“Is not this fruit the type of a soul that has grown up amid sufferings and trials ? The vine was planted in stony ground, it was bound to the wood, it shed tears under the knife of the vine-dresser, it was necessary that the warm sun of summer should take pity on it and pour over it its life giving rays to ripen on its branches this fruit which is the noblest of those of earth.”

Valeria gently laid down in the basket the bunch she had been holding, and her mother, following up her idea, took up a single grape and pressing it between her delicate fingers continued as if speaking to herself :

“See, the skin is as red as blood, but the interior is clear and transparent, and around the hard seeds we find the sweet, refreshing juice.”

While speaking a tear fell down her cheek and mingled with the juice of the grape.

This mood, which was quite foreign to Sophronia's nature, filled the heart of her husband and daughter with uneasiness and they sat silently beside her not daring to disturb the deep reverie into which she had fallen.

Night brought Sophronia no comfort. The next morning Rufinus, seeing that she was still a prey to these dark forebodings, wished to remain with her and help her to overcome them ; but, alas ! an important council had been convened for that day and the Prefect could not absent himself. He promised however to despatch his business as quickly as possible in order to return early, and he then left sad at heart.

Sophronia, when alone, went up to the balcony from which she could see the road her husband was to take, and she followed him with her eyes till he went past the Coliseum and towards the Forum, behind the temple of Peace, near which stood the palace of the Prefecture. A magnificent panorama stretched itself out before her sad gaze. Immediately in front of her lay the Amphitheatre, the Coliseum, the double temple of Venus and of Rome, and the Arch of Triumph of Titus; towards the left was the Palatine, with its sumptuous palaces, the Emperor's overlooking all the others. But the noble matron paid no heed to the beautiful sight; her heart was full of other thoughts. She longed with an irresistible longing to see her sons, she thought of her native land, a thousand dear memories brought the sigh to her lips, and the eyes she raised to heaven were filled with blinding tears.

It was only from thence that Rufinus's wife could obtain the courage necessary for the terrible combat which awaited her.

Plunged deep in thought, she had not perceived the strange dark figures who were approaching the palace. Slaves in imperial livery and carrying on their shoulders a carefully curtained Sedan chair had entered the vestibule, while armed soldiers were posted around guarding all the entrances to the house.

A slave suddenly presented himself before Sophronia saying that a messenger from the Emperor wished to see her. He had not ceased speaking however when the freed man, who had craftily followed him, entered the room.

At sight of this man whose naturally repulsive features were rendered more so by a coarse smile, the noble woman was seized with a terrible fear. The messenger bowed

profoundly before her and, without any preamble or subterfuge, said :

" Noble Lady, our divine Emperor, smitten with your beauty and your grace, has chosen you for his spouse. I am ordered to take you immediately to his Divinity, the bearers are waiting in the vestibule."

At these words a mortal pallor spread over the poor woman's face. For a few seconds paralysed by fear, she stood motionless, like the roe when she suddenly sees herself before a wild beast without any means of escape.

She raised her imploring eyes to heaven in mute supplication, however, and then recovering herself answered proudly :

" Go, and give the Emperor the answer his servant sends him :

" I have sworn fidelity to my husband, Rufinus, and I believe in the Christian faith, for which two reasons I shall never accede to the Emperor's desires."

" Very well, noble Lady," said the courtier with disgusting cynicism, and emphasizing each word so as to make her the better understand ; " but learn that the ties which bind you to your husband are easily broken, for, says the proverb, no one on earth is immortal, and it is not to the Christian but to the patrician that the Emperor addresses himself."

Sophronia trembled with indignation on hearing this and stirred to the inmost depths of her being, wounded in all that was most noble in her nature, she cried with an energy that only heaven could have given her :

" No, no, never ! dost thou hear, never ! "

" Then," said the messenger with a very significant movement of his head, " then understand that I have express orders to take you to the Emperor without delay,

by violence, if necessary. All resistance will be vain. It will be better to avoid any noise. If however you are obstinate, my men are there ready to bind you and carry you away by force."

The poor woman wrung her hands despairingly and murmured :

"Is there no means of escaping from such an odious order ?"

"None," replied the instrument of the dishonest pleasures and vengeance of the imperial despot.

In her deep distress, Sophronia again raised her eyes with a look of entreaty and despair. Life was over for her. The patrician would never give herself up to dishonor ; the Christian, who seemed suddenly to be born in her, preferred death to the sin which she thought would render her unworthy to enter the Church.

The hour had come in which the love of Rufinus could not prevent her going to GOD.

Suddenly she grew calm and a quiet decision could be read on her features. Addressing Maxentius's freed man she said :

"I ask thee for a quarter of an hour to attire myself in my festive robes."

"Willingly," replied the messenger who was delighted at this decision.

He watched Sophronia retiring towards her apartments and said with a loud, coarse, sardonic laugh :

"She is like so many others, she will soon prefer the glitter of the imperial crown to the home and love of Rufinus, and will wear her mourning lightly !"

However a quarter of an hour passed and the noble matron did not reappear ; the messenger's patience was exhausted, he thought of the expectant Emperor and

without further waiting he passed through the rooms leading to Sophronia's apartments. He knocked at the door but there was no response ; he called several times, but the silence was unbroken ! . . .

Could this woman, in spite of all his precautions, have found some secret means of escape ? The freed-man was not ignorant of the fate which awaited him, should he be unsuccessful, and he hastily opened the door.

Sophronia, who had spent some of the time in prayer, rose immediately when she saw the fatal hour had arrived.

" Lord ! " she cried, " forgive me if I follow the only way of escape from crime which remains open to me, I give my soul to Thee. "

At the same time, seizing a poniard, which she had placed near at hand, she plunged it into her breast and fell silently at the feet of the stupefied freed-man.

This noble woman's last sigh was an appeal to heaven to remain faithful to her duty; though she had not received baptism she believed in the Christ and it was with Him that her soul, athirst for peace, justice and virtue, found its place of rest.¹ A frightful blasphemy escaped

1. This is an historical fact. Eusebius cites it in his *History of the Church*, in the biography of Constantine, and he adds : " This woman has shown now and for ever to the entire world, that a true sentiment of honour and ward of the heart are to be found only among Christians ; with them they are stronger than death. "

Although Saint Augustine declares that no one has a right to take his life, even in a desperate case like Sophronia's, he acknowledges that God might sometimes demand this heroic act. The Saint even mentions certain women who, to escape from imminent peril, threw themselves into a river, and their feast is solemnly celebrated by the Catholic Church. The Roman Church does not feast Sophronia or Dommiria and her daughters, but the Greek Church honours them with a special cult on the 4th October.

from the lips of Maxentius's messenger, and he fled struck with fear and horror.

Where was Valeria while these tragic events were taking place in the palace ?

She was accustomed to spend her mornings in study. Informed by a slave that armed men had arrived, she quickly hurried towards her mother's apartments, but the emissaries brutally repulsed her and drove her back to her own rooms without giving her any explanation.

Terrified, the poor child asked herself in an agony what sad mystery could be taking place under her father's roof.

After the lapse of half an hour, which to her seemed a lifetime, she saw the soldiers quickly retire at a sign from the imperial messenger. Quite reassured by this departure, and not doubting but that her mother had succeeded in getting rid of these terrible, rough men, she ran to her, knowing that when with her she would soon overcome the nervous excitement into which her fear had thrown her.

Arrived at the atrium she called out to her mother anxiously, but the silence which answered her call fell on her heart like a presage of evil.

She then hastily opened the door of the room ; great God ! what did she see ? Her mother, her beloved mother stretched on the floor, and bathed in her own blood, to all appearance lifeless.

Valeria uttered a cry of anguish and fell in a swoon beside her mother's inanimate body . . .

In the meantime, Rufinus, who was very anxious about his wife, hurried through his business and hastened home. He too apprehended some evil.

He crossed the vestibule, and meeting some slaves

who were weeping and lamenting, he rushed to Sophronia's room in terrible anguish.

At sight of the bleeding body he stood a moment speechless, almost without breathing, his soul filled with indescribable horror.

Overcome with grief he then knelt down beside his wife's body, and lifting her head in his hands, he said in a voice full of tenderness and broken by sobs :

"Sophronia, Sophronia, my sweet beloved wife, no, it cannot be true ! It is impossible, thou art not dead ! Dead, without my being able to defend thee ! Oh ! speak but one word, only one ! Open thine eyes once more and look at me, Sophronia."

But the proud, tender soul that he had loved, no longer quickened the body, no longer animated the beautiful, cold face. Brave and faithful, she had fled from earth rather than perjure herself and render herself unworthy of the God to whom she had opened her heart.

When he recovered himself the Prefect enquired for his daughter. They took him to her.

On approaching the bed on which Valeria lay pale and motionless, the unfortunate father thought that she was dead too and a groan broke from this tortured heart.

"Is she really only in a swoon ?" he implored. "Is not this rigidity death ? Am I to have my wife and my child torn from me in the same hour ?"

And the poor father pressed his child's cold hands convulsively, trying vainly to impart some warmth to them.

However, the faithful, devoted slave who watched so lovingly over her young mistress, calmed Rufinus, and assured him that she would soon recover as the pulse was good.

"But," she added, "we shall have to be very careful."

She then begged the Prefect to retire into an adjoining room ; Rufinus obeyed, and during these long moments of waiting, he had, alas ! time to understand the greatness of his trial and to feel the weight of his suffering.

The blow which had struck him so suddenly had crushed him; in vain did he seek for something on which to lean and by which to raise himself. For the first time and from his own experience he learned that human strength is but weakness and altogether powerless to carry the weight of a great sorrow alone. His gods could not comfort him, his philosophy was vain. He was plunged in these bitter thoughts, which proved the vanity of all that he had hitherto esteemed, when a slave brought him a paper which had just been found on a table in Sophronia's room. What were not his feelings when he recognized the writing of her whom he so bitterly mourned !

It was with a full heart that he read the following lines, the last memorial of his beloved wife :

“ My dear Husband, God alone knows how tenderly I love thee and our children ! My heart is broken at having to leave you all without saying a last good-bye, but I cannot do otherwise. No human power shall make me unfaithful to the promise I made thee ; how should I dare, after having perjured myself, to don the white baptismal robe for which I have been longing so ardently for so long a time ?

“ With all the fervour of my soul, at this supreme moment, I ask of the one only God to show me another way to save myself ; if no help comes to me I shall follow the inspiration of my conscience, and, like the hart, I shall escape from the snare of the hunter, I shall climb the high mountains where the feet of the persecutor cannot follow me.

"The Christ, in Whom I have, till now, believed in secret, and Whom, at this moment, I confess, will, I hope, receive my soul.

"Oh! how much I shall pray for you all!

"Valeria, my beloved child, console thy father; recommend me to the prayers of the Church, remember!..."

Sophronia, interrupted by the imperial emissary, was unable to write more; she could not tell her husband all she believed, all she hoped for, she could not tell him of her wish to meet him beyond the tomb where there is no parting and where happiness is without fear, without alloy, true and enduring.

Rufinus read and re-read the precious lines without tiring while the tears flowed down his face, but his deep sorrow was inexplicably soothed by it. Each word told of tenderest love and each line reflected the delicate, generous and noble feelings of the faithful wife!

At this moment a slave came to inform the Prefect that Valeria had recovered from her swoon and asked for her father. On seeing him, she stretched out her arms to him without saying a word; Rufinus also looked at his child without speaking, but their eyes told sufficiently of their common grief.

Sophronia's friend, Irene, had heard of the sorrow that had fallen on Valeria and her father and she came in all haste to the house of mourning; full of charity and compassion, she knew how to apply a balm to the bleeding wounds. It was always thus wherever she went; this noble woman carried with her the treasure of which her name was the emblem: peace! She came with trust and hope, those two angels whom the compassionate mercy of our eternal God has sent to this vale

of tears so that we poor, weak mortals should not sink under the weight of the cross.

After the death of our dear ones the sweetest consolation to us who weep, is the memory of the good done by them and also their last words : like the brilliant sunset which leaves its luminous traces after a fine summer day.

Irene, whose own delicate feelings made her understand this, began gently to speak to Valeria and her father of the good done by Sophronia and how, only the day before, she had visited the Transtiberian quarter to carry to a poor woman, who had just become a mother, strengthening food and linen for the new born infant ; she told also of other acts of charity, self-denial and devotedness of their beloved dead of which she herself had been a witness and the faithful confident.

Listening to Irene they were better able to understand the last words Sophronia had written in face of death.

In their love for the dead, and forgetting the difference in their religious belief, the two women talked long on this inexhaustible subject, and the Prefect listened attentively, allowing their words to sink, into his heart which was athirst for consolation, and which received them as the parched earth drinks in the refreshing rain.

Rufinus had always thought that he understood his wife perfectly, but it was only now that he really knew the depths of her pure, noble heart. What sublime thoughts did he hear spoken of for the first time by the lips of Irene and Valeria, thoughts which were abstruse to him but which appeared quite natural to the two women.

Rufinus knew that Irene's husband had been condemned for the Christian faith with her two sons, but he had never heard of the details of their death. He asked him-

self how a weak woman could have borne so much sorrow and he gently questioned her. Irene, guessing the Prefect's thoughts and feelings, willingly acceded to his request ; she thought, and not without reason, that the recital of the martyr's sufferings would have a happy influence over him in his present state of mind, and after reflecting a moment she began :

"When, after Diocletian's sanguinary edicts had been proclaimed, Maximian, yielding to his natural cruelty, tracked the Christians like wild beasts, confiscating our churches and our hospitals, and not even respecting our cemeteries, my husband was Governor of the palace, and we lived in Maximian's own house. A good Christian, Castulus, did not fear to place our home at the disposal of the Church. And while Maximian signed the cruel edicts which were to make the blood of countless martyrs to flow, the Christians celebrated the divine office in his palace. Noble Rufinus, dost thou not remember the brave Tribune Sebastian ?"

"He who was first pierced by the arrows of the Mauritanian archers and left for dead, but who was taken away by the Christians and cared for, and after being cured, was clubbed to death ? I remember that he was much talked of at the time."

"Yes," continued Irene, "we took away the body which was thought to be dead. We had it carried secretly to our house to have it quietly buried the following night ; but what was our joy on finding that the martyr still breathed ! We nursed and cared for him as best we could and he grew strong again. However the holy young man, who desired so much to die for the faith, presented himself bodily before the Emperor and reproached him for his cruelty and crimes, with so much liberty and in such

forcible language, that Maximian who had overcome his first feeling of fear and was furiously angry had him beaten to death on the spot.

"The Emperor did not stop there ; he made enquiries to find out by whom Sebastian had been taken in and cared for, and when he discovered that an officer of his court had given Sebastian a refuge in his own palace and that the Christians often assembled there for praying, his rage knew no bounds, and he ordered my husband to be thrown into prison. After a summary examination and cruel tortures, Castulus was buried alive in a sand-pit before the Sabioanian gate."

Overcome by these sad memories, Irene was silent for a few moments, and then continued :

"Thrown into prison with my two daughters, one of whom was fifteen and the other sixteen years old, I had much to suffer : the only one who escaped from the hatred of the persecutor was my youngest son, Candidus, whom his father had sent to the military school in Gaul.

"My sufferings during this captivity of several months were all the more cruel... I was entirely seperated from my poor daughters ; I was never allowed to see them again in spite of all my tears and supplications; the orders were so strict that I was not permitted to have even the slightest news of them.

"One morning however the keeper came to announce to me, with heartless indifference, that both my daughters were lying on their prison floor, dead of starvation and want.

"What was not my sorrow on receiving this message, a sorrow that was increased by the formal refusal to allow me to see my beloved children for the last time... Mad with grief I threw myself at the feet of

this man of marble; my tears, my sighs, my terrible sufferings were at last victorious.

"But how describe what my crushed heart suffered when I entered their dark prison, and saw my darlings lying lifeless on the ground, close by each other! one victim beside another victim! The elder lay with her arms extended in the form of a cross. I thought I should die. Holy martyrs of God, pray for us! They fell for the Christ and I shall one day find them with Him."

Irene stopped again, her voice choked with sobs.

Rufinus deeply touched at this maternal sorrow, seized Valeria's hand. This treasure at least had not been taken away from him: that was his great consolation. The matron dried the tears which had flowed so abundantly at the recollection of these sad memories and concluded briefly.

"The crowning of Maxentius led to the opening of our prisons, and gave relative peace to the unfortunate Christians; my first visit, after my release from captivity, was to the place where Castulus reposes; then I went to pray at the tomb of my two daughters, who had been buried together, in the cemetery of Saint Calixtus. And now like a tree in winter which lifts its leafless branches to heaven, I raise my heart and my eyes hopefully to God. In my sorrow and loneliness, God has left me one consolation, one affection, my son Candidus."

Irene paused; Rufinus, silent and thoughtful, asked himself how this gentle woman could have borne so much suffering, whence did she derive the heroic strength necessary to combat such painful trials.

Valeria now feeling herself stronger, asked her father to permit her to perform her last duties towards her mother with Irene.

Despite his fears, and being reassured by Irene, the Prefect gave his daughter the required permission. Did not Irene know, from her own experience that whosoever drinks of the chalice of sorrow with courage and resignation, finds mysterious and divine strength at the bottom of the cup ?

Valeria, accompanied by her whom, now more than ever, she could call her adopted mother, went to the *tablium* where Sophronia's body had been laid.

How deeply was the poor child moved when she found herself in this loved presence ! Kneeling down she passed her arm under her mother's head and murmured:

"My mother, my dearest mother ! baptized in thy own blood ! I shall not weep for thee, the daughter of so brave a woman must show herself worthy of her mother. May God bind the young vine to the wood of the cross ? Through my tears I can see the happiness which thou dost enjoy in heaven, and I praise the Lord with thee, brave, happy mother !"

Assisted by Irene and two faithful slaves, Valeria accomplished her last, sad but consoling task ; she embalmed the dear body with the most precious aromatics and clothed it in a rich robe of silk interwoven with gold, placed a palm in her hands and wove a wreath of roses which she laid on her head.¹

1. The ancient Romans took the greatest care of their dead . . . They enveloped them in fine winding-sheets (*lintea*) and anointed them with highly perfumed oil (*unguenta*) or clothed them often in precious fabrics of gold and silk.

In the "Acts of the Martyrs," "precious winding-sheets" and "splendid garments" are often spoken of ; in our own days most valuable stuffs have been found in which the dead had been buried.

According to the ancient Roman custom, the corpse was laid with the feet turned towards the door ; numerous tapers were lighted around the funeral couch and threw their pale light over her, while scented incense burned in the *acera* and filled the room with its sweet perfume.

After having arranged everything, Valeria reverently took all the garments that had been steeped in the blood that had flowed from her mother's heart, and enclosed the precious relics in a rich chest of costly wood inlaid with silver and mother of pearl.

During this time, Irene attended to the preparations for the funeral, informing the authorities of the decease so that all would be in readiness at the hour appointed.

Faithful to the mission confided to her by her mother, Valeria returned to her father to comfort him ; she felt how necessary she was to him, for the light of faith did

According to Tertullian, the Christians employed more perfume and oil for burying their dead than the pagans did for their gods.

In the Catacombs, De Rossi found several sarcophagi of the 4th century, which on being opened exhaled a delightful perfume.

The pagans considered contact with the dead a defilement from which it was necessary to purify oneself. This ceremony was always observed after a funeral.

The Christians, on the contrary, dressed themselves in their finest clothes, as for a festival, and no mention whatever is made of purifying.

Their solicitude for the inhumation of their dear dead was very great, particularly in the case of martyrs. Prudence tells us that the faithful approached them with as much eagerness as respect to collect their blood in linen prepared for that purpose, and, so that none should be lost, they wiped with equal care the instruments that had served for their martyrdom.

Gaudentia of Brescia, a contemporary of Saint Augustine, counted among the treasures of his church the plaster impregnated with the blood of the martyrs Gervase, Protase and Nazaire.

not brighten his dark night of sorrow. He was not upheld as she was by her trust in divine Providence which turns all to our greater good, neither had he the blessed hope of one day seeing again, in a happy eternity, never to be separated, her whose loss he mourned so deeply.

The girl found her unhappy father again reading the last words written by Sophronia ; on seeing his daughter approach he held out the paper to her saying :

“ Read it aloud, my child, I shall hear your mother’s voice while listening to yours.”

Valeria took the paper, and, true daughter of her whose great courage she had inherited, read in a steady voice, though she trembled with emotion, Sophronia’s last message.

When she had finished the last words : “ The Christ, in Whom I have, till now believed in secret, and Whom at this moment, I confess, will, I hope, receive me, soul. Oh ! how much I shall pray for you all ? ” Rufinus regretfully said :

“ Oh ! why did I prevent her from doing as she desired ? ”

“ She is praying to Our Lord for you now, ” said Valeria gently, “ and she is waiting for us both there with Him. ”

According to custom, Valeria led her father to the chamber of death ; we can well conceive how his sorrow was renewed on seeing his beloved wife lying lifeless on the bier ; but a strange, unknown feeling filled his heart, a deep veneration seemed to take possession of him when he approached his dear dead.

Kneeling beside her, he placed her last lines on her breast and, as if he expected once more to hear the words from her own lips, he looked, through the blinding tears

from the writing to the beautiful peaceful face of his wife who appeared transfigured.

Sophronia's heroism opened new worlds to him.

What the words of the loving wife would perhaps have never obtained during life, the voice of her blood, which had been shed to be faithful to duty, and the thought that this generosity had been inspired by the Christian faith, already began to influence the Prefect's soul.

Sophronia gently drew him onwards and upwards to the heights where she had taken refuge, and Rufinus' heart was not averse to follow her.

CHAPTER III

THREATENING CLOUDS

INDOLENTLY stretched on a magnificent divan, with clouded brow and yawning over the vexatious reports contained in the political pages of the *Acta Diurna*, Maxentius anxiously awaited Sophronia's arrival.

The low extraction of the tyrant seemed to reveal itself more amid the luxury of the imperial dwelling; his whole exterior betrayed the barbarian; his broad shoulders, as well as the thick neck which supported the large round head, were indicative of brute force; the low, narrow forehead was covered almost down to the eyebrows with thick shaggy hair resembling a mane, and there was something so bold and fierce in his eyes that people avoided encountering his looks. Proud of his savage strength, he loved to compare himself to Hercules, and had given this name to his body guard which was composed of picked men who had been chosen for their height and strength.

He threw aside the official paper, and tired of waiting, was about to send a second emissary to the Prefect's house, when it was announced to him that a messenger with a very urgent letter wished to see him.

"Let him take it to the Prefect at the Chancellor's house, and if he does not find him, let him take it wherever he likes," replied the Emperor, showing unmistakable signs of impatience; then suddenly thinking that the

letter probably contained news of the war against Constantine in Upper Italy, he changed his mind and took the letter. Before even opening it, remembering some slight successes won by his adversary, he cried out to Rufinus as if the latter could hear him :

“Should the pike break a few meshes of the net into which I have drawn him, it matters little ; the inclination to wriggle and flounder will soon pass, and I shall pay thee for this big fish by giving thee Gaul to govern.”

The messenger was in fact an estafet of the Commander who led the armies in the north.

Maxentius opened the cover. He read and the further he read the more his face darkened.

Constantine had crossed the Alps and had won a victory at Turin. Maxentius knew this already, but he had not paid much attention to it. He trusted so entirely to the well-known bravery and incontestable military talents of his Commander, of which he had proofs in Egypt, that up to the present moment he had not doubted but that Rufus had purposely allowed himself to be beaten and that he would soon send his imperial master his enemy's head.

But events were taking a course that was far from expected by Maxentius. This letter informed him that after having taken Turin, Constantine had marched on Brescia and Verona ; he had beaten the imperial troops at both these places, Verona had been taken by assault, and Ruricus, the Commander of the place, was among the killed ; and contrary to all military laws, at Verona and at Brescia, as at Turin, he had spared the lives of the garrison.

“With the taking of Verona,” said Rufus, “the whole of Upper Italy is lost ; the impetuous advance

of the enemy and the discouragement of our own soldiers do not admit of my again measuring my strength with our adversary in the plains of the Po; I was therefore obliged to give the order to close the passes of the Apennines so as to gain time to reconstitute a new army in the neighbourhood of Florence. I implore you, O Emperor, to send me without the least delay, all available forces, particularly the legions so eagerly expected from Sicily and from Africa."

"No," cried Maxentius impetuously, "such news cannot be true!"

Full of rage he trod the fatal letter under foot, without even reading it to the end, and becoming more furious cried :

"Florence! Florence! Ah! the base, the traitrous! Give up Florence, Parma, and Bologna without striking a blow, without even drawing the sword! Why am I not myself at the head of my legions, where, like Hercules in his fury, I would hunt the boar which lays waste my fields!"

Mad with rage he strode up and down the room repeating :

"How is it that Rufus, who has never been defeated, who commands the best legions, an army twice as large as Constantine's, has allowed himself to be beaten several times and so crushed that his army is completely routed?"

Then remembering that he had not finished the letter, he picked it up and read this :

"Gordian, the faithful, devoted priest of Mithras, the sun-god, who is attached to Constantine's army, reported to me that this Emperor, after a pretended apparition in the heavens, made a new Standard like the sign which he is said to have seen; he has himself re-

presented on it as a sort of god of the sun, and above has place a mysterious sign which is none other than the name of the God of the Christians.

“ However ridiculous may be this fable of the heavenly apparition, seen by Constantine only, doubtless, after a sleepless night, it is none the less true that his superstitious soldiers are performing prodigies of valour under this standard.

“ Before the last battle, I chose from among our different legions five hundred of our bravest men, and I promised them rapid promotion and even the highest dignities, if they succeeded in taking the Standard. Never was there a more desperate, murderous fight, but that cursed banner seemed to be upheld by some diabolical force ; of my five hundred valiant men but few have survived it ! ”

“ What ! ” said Maxentius grinding his teeth and clenching his fist convulsively, “ What ! the Nazarenes then are not only aiming at my crown but at my life ! They whom I delivered from their chains . . . Ah ! mangy dogs ! is this how you thank me ? The divine Diocletian judged you better than I have. Why have I destroyed the edict of extermination against this scum of the people ? ”

At this moment, all trembling with fear of his despotic Sovereign, the courtier who had been for Sophronia appeared ; he told how the noble Roman Matron had declared herself a Christian, and as such had preferred death to obeying the Emperor's orders.

This dreadful news did not affect Maxentius in the least, it did not awaken the slightest remorse in his seared conscience ; he replied mockingly :

“ A Christian will not obey the Emperor's orders, yes,

that goes well with the rest... From the lowest beggar to the Bishop Melchiad, they are all traitors. Ah! how they would triumph if Constantine entered Rome! But by the immortal gods! I shall render their drink very bitter before it comes to that.

"Go!" he shouted to the courtier who was delighted to get off with only a fright, "go, and order Heraclius to come to me immediately after the *prandium* (dinner); it is he who must take these lice out of my hair."

When the Emperor was in a rage, these coarse expressions often fell from his lips. The vulgarity of the plebeian revealed itself.

Maxentius began again to stride up and down, his heart full of implacable hatred; a thousand different ideas, a thousand different projects, rejected as soon as conceived, seethed in his brain which was on fire. Last year, had he not, either by his Herculean soldiers or his pretors, massacred hundreds of the citizens without any consideration for rank, sex or even age? Why should he not now lead into the amphitheatre a few thousand Christians, so as to intimidate the others by the sight of the atrocious torments he should have inflicted on these victims?

"But," thought he, "these *insects* are indestructible; like vermin in wool they overrun the whole city; there is not a corner in which there are not many concealed; are there not some even in the palace? What a terrible thing!

"And then, what a pretext for this Gaul? He will pose as the saviour of the Roman people, if I kill these bands of thieves."

Having thus given vent to his hatred of the Christians, without having decided anything however, he returned to personal considerations.

"If Rufus is again beaten in the neighbourhood of Florence, the way to Rome will be open before the evening...

"Bah!" he continued suddenly, "I shall have the walls of the city put in good order, strengthen them by having moats dug around them and raising the ramparts. And then if the Gaulish dogs try to force my lair, they will retire with bloody muzzles!"

He had arrived at this point in his reflections and projects, when Rufus himself was announced. In the critical position in which he found himself, the Commander had judged it necessary to see the Emperor and to present to him his plans for war and for defence, and to talk the situation over with him, for it was becoming complicated, almost desperate.

He had left his army momentarily, after having entrusted the command to one of the bravest chiefs, and he had travelled night and day without ever resting.

Although Maxentius was very much surprised at the sudden appearance of the General, he listened and heard the confirmation of the news he had just read. He then replied :

"I shall fortify Rome and put it in a state of defence. Rather than give in to Constantine, there shall not remain one stone above another!"

Rufus knew what influence he had over the Emperor, and he did not hesitate to speak to him as no other could do.

"If Constantine arrives at the gates, Emperor," he said : "thy walls and thy trenches will not be of much use. For a siege abundant provisions are necessary. Did not last year's famine empty thy store-houses? I doubt much whether the Prefect Rufinus has been able

to fill them this year with the meagre crops we have had."

"If the granaries are not full," cried Maxentius whom the commander's resistance had begun to exasperate, "I swear by the gods that I shall have him roasted alive! Besides that, I have another account to settle with him with regard to his wife."

"In any case, there will be sufficient provisions for the troops for several months."

"Of what advantage will it be to thee to keep Rome for two or three months," persisted Rufus. "Art thou sure besides that the people besieged in the city will not revolt?"

"The people revolt!" said the Emperor with a frightful grin, "the people revolt! Well, yes, let them! Like the jugglers with their dogs, with a bloody whip in my hands, I shall make them dance before me, the people! But continue."

"Thou wilt not be able to hold Rome against Constantine for long," said the Commander; "but if on the contrary, thou retirest to Sicily and the African provinces, thou wilt there find new forces at thy disposition. Soon after thou shalt be able to appear at the mouth of the Tiber with a powerful fleet. As for me, I shall retire with my legions towards Capua during the winter, and take up my quarters behind the Valfernus."

"During this time, Constantine, proud and content in the possession of Rome, will leave us in peace, and in the beginning of the spring, we will advance with the fresh troops."

"I also count on the alliance of the other Cæsar with thee against Constantine who, uniting under his

sceptre Great Britain, Gaul, Italy and Africa, will be too powerful and redoubtable a colleague."

"By Hercules, I shall think over it," said Maxentius. "Ah! if Constantine could get me into his power, he would hasten to cut off my head and, exposing it at the end of a staff, have it carried about in all the cities of the Roman empire. But by all the gods of Olympus! I swear to do so with his!"

"When thou shalt have got it," replied Rufus drily.

"If I must leave Rome," cried the Sovereign whom the Commander's remark had set beside himself, "if I must leave Rome, it shall not be before I have set fire to the four quarters of the city. Nero will be but a vulgar fireman beside me. As for my soldiers, I know I can count on them."

Rufus was a Roman of the old stock. The Emperor's insane threat was as revolting to him as was the using of his soldiers as hired labourers for his proposed incendiary fire. With frowning brow and dark looks, he added in a significant and contemptible tone:

"Certainly thou canst count on me and the army, but... for battle!"

The tyrant but too well knew the man who thus resisted him, to misunderstand the meaning of his words.

At this moment a slave entered most opportunely and interrupted the conversation.

"It is six o'clock," he said, "the hour for the *prandium*."

"Do not let Constantine trouble our meal," said the Emperor indolently, showing once more what a large part of his life was given up to pleasure and his own comfort; "it is easier to reason about people and things with glass in hand," he added.

The same evening, Rufus left Rome more than displeased at Maxentius' manner of doing things and the orders he had received from him. Having consulted the oracles, the soothsayers in whom he had unlimited faith, and the omens being favourable, the Emperor, contrary to all military tactics, and in spite of the wise counsels of his Commander, had ordered him to withdraw towards Rome with his troops so as to gain time while waiting for the legions which were to arrive from the south.

While these events were taking place at the palace, the young senator, Symmachus, was standing in one of the galleries of the Therma. At that time there was not, in all the city of Rome, a more pious man than he, and a more fervent and zealous worshipper of the gods. Alone and thoughtful, he could not take his eyes off the magnificent group, in marble, of the Laocoon and his sons, placed in a richly carved niche at the end of the gallery.

Among the rare men of merit that the capital then contained, Symmachus was one of the most remarkable. Brought up in the school of Plato, of austere life, he was of noble senatorial origin and possessed great riches. Many times had Maxentius offered him the most envied, the most brilliant posts, but Symmachus had always refused them not wishing to be the slave of a tyrant. He soon even gave up political life, as he did not approve of the mode of acting of the senators and military men, who, with very few rare exceptions, not only themselves forgot the glories and virtues of their ancestors, but even tolerated in their barbarous, cruel Sovereign, the most infamous crimes, the most unheard of cruelty.

Symmachus therefore lived in retirement occupying himself entirely with the education of his son, still

a child, who gave him great hopes for the future¹.

Was Sophronia's tragic end or the disheartening news of the war, which Symmachus knew by secret means, the cause of his sadness? Perhaps both together, and yet the senator felt no compassion for this woman, who died to save her honour it is true, but who died more especially because she was a Christian. As for the war, what fear could he feel for the power of Maxentius whom he despised as much as he hated Constantine?

His dark thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of an old man who came towards him with a kind, paternal smile and affectionately holding out his hand. His face brightened on recognizing Lactantius Firmanus, his old master of rhetoric at the court of Diocletian, in Nicomedia.

After the customary salutations, Lactantius said:

"It must be eight years now, since on leaving Asia, thou didst return to Rome; I did not hope to see thee again in this world, Symmachus, when a happy chance procured for me the pleasure of once more seeing the brilliant sovereign of the world, Rome, the golden city."

"If thou dost think that a happiness, it is because thou art ignorant of many things," replied Symmachus whose brow darkened again.

"It is true," said Lactantius, who also grew sad. "I only arrived yesterday and yet of how many sad things have I heard! But what moved me to the depths of my soul was the death of the noble Sophronia. I knew her in Nicomedia and I admired the loftiness and delicacy of her feelings."

1. It was he who so eloquently raised his voice before Damasus and Ambrose in defence of the gods.

“The death of this woman would have affected me deeply too, if instead of acting as a Christian enthusiast, she had killed herself as a true Roman, reviving anew the courage and coolness of Lucretia. But tell me, Lactentius, is it not revolting to think that even the Prefect of Rome is not safe in his own home from the passions and tyranny of the Emperor? And is it not an execrable shame that there is not in Rome a second Brutus to take up the bloody poniard from the ground? These however are not the only misfortunes of our fallen Rome, there are still others which menace her. It is said that Constantine, after having beaten Rufus several times, has completely routed his legions, and is advancing towards us by forced marches, and that his army already treads the soil of Umbria. Will not his be the powerful hand that is to chastise the tyrannical Emperor?”

Symmachus looked questioningly at Lactantius who did not reply, and continued:

“Look at that group,” pointing to the Laocoon, “examine it attentively; see how the Laocoon, lacerated by the two frightful reptiles, writhes in pain and raises his beseeching eyes towards Olympus; see how his children, strangled in the cruel coils of the monsters, implore their father whose suffering increases in proportion to his powerlessness to help them; is that not an image of Rome? of Rome and her people whom Maxentius and Constantine are crushing and tearing to pieces? The comparison is imperfect in one point however, the horrible serpents throw themselves together on their unfortunate victims and torture them, while the Emperors tear their prey separately, rivalling each other, one in cruelty the other in hatred.”

"No, no, stop!" cried Lactantius, with an ardour and warmth that did not escape Symmachus. "Stop! you mayst not, thou canst not compare Constantine with this monster, this serpent who is called Maxentius."

"Poor master, thou art too good! Thou dost not know him," replied Symmachus bitterly. "Thou dost doubtless imagine that he resembles his father Constantine-Chlorus, and thou dost appear to forget that his mother Helen, is a stranger who is said to be of low origin, and more than that, a Christian."

Lactantius was about to reply, but the Senator, who was passionately excited, did not give him time to do so and in a voice, trembling with sorrow and hatred, continued:

"Dost thou know that Constantine has dared to place the odious name of the God of the Christians on the banner of the army!!! O, Rome, Rome! The Gauls and the Carthaginians did not put thee to shame as this Roman Emperor has done! Lactantius, if thou hast preserved in thy breast the gushing fountain of the Muses, I implore thee, raise thy voice, let it vibrate for our immortal gods whom thou dost love, against the crucified Jew whom Constantine wishes to place on the altar of Jupiter."

An expression of profound sorrow passed over the features of the old man. An ardent worshipper of the gods, in days past, he had, as orator and poet, fought against Christianity to the death, and had thus won Diocletian's favour. Suddenly touched by grace and converted, he had since then, with all the eloquence of which he was master and with his poetry, but more especially by his philosophical treatises, valiantly defended his new faith and combated paganism, trying

thus to repair the evil which he reproached himself for having done. What was his grief on finding that his writings for the glory and triumph of idolatry were not yet forgotten, while, on the contrary, his works in defence of the Christian religion remained unknown!

He shook his head sadly and smiling bitterly replied :

“ If Jupiter cannot shoot forth lightnings to defend his throne, if the sword of Mithras and Apollo’s arrow are shattered, how can the style, in the feeble hands of an old man, have the power to save the gods of Rome from ruin ? ”

Symmachus could not reply, and the inopportune arrival of some strangers accompanied by a guide speaking very loudly, disturbed their conversation. Vexed by these visitors, and hurt by Lactentius’s words, he hastily took leave of his old master and precipitately left the gallery.

Sophronia’s tragic end had not passed unnoticed however, in Rome ; it had caused deep emotion in the different centres of the city, and if the morals of the people did not gain by such an act of virtue, this death was another protest against the baseness and tyranny of Maxentius ; and plebeians and patricians were of one voice to stigmatize the infamous conduct of the Emperor.

The prefect of the Chancellor’s house, Heraclius, had in his service a set of perfectly trained spies : no corner of Rome escaped the investigation of these emissaries ; consequently he was well informed on all that took place in and around the city, and could better than any one else, keep the Emperor acquainted not only with the smallest incidents which took place, but even with public opinion.

A Greek by birth, and once a Christian, pride and

ambition, as no doubt also fear of suffering and death, had made him deny his faith, and like all apostates, Heraclius had become the implacable enemy and shameless denunciator of his former brethren. He had even carried his audacity so far as to furtively enter the house of a senator, arms in hand, and take unawares an assembly of Christians who were celebrating the divine office, not fearing to shed innocent blood, the blood of those whose faith he had formerly professed, to satisfy his hatred.

Aradius Rufinus, though a pagan, was just and loyal, and he had then condemned the apostate to exile for trespassing and had sent him to Sardinia, then a deserted and almost uncultivated island. Heraclius's wife, Sabina, was of an ancient patrician family; he had obtained her hand by his apostasy. This woman used her credit, and by her solicitations obtained her husband's return.

His promotion was rapid. A year had hardly passed since his recall from exile, and he was already honoured with the charge of Prefect of the Court of Chancery. A pompous and flattering speech in honour of the Emperor, on the anniversary of his coronation, had at first gained him the sovereign's favour; at the time the court of chancery had need of some one who knew Greek perfectly on account of the important relations which existed between Rome and the East: Maxentius soon chose his man, and Heraclius left his title of master of eloquence for that of Prefect of the Court of Chancery. His new dignity brought him into frequent communication with the Emperor, whose confidence he won completely by basely flattering his passions, but without neglecting his personal interests however, be it understood.

Maxentius listened unconcernedly to the reports

brought to him by the Greek with regard to the feelings of the Romans and the general impression produced by Sophronia's death.

"Well," replied he ironically while swallowing down a large glass of hot wine, "well, we must certainly take public opinion into consideration. I begin then" he coolly declared, as if it were a matter of course, "by putting the Prefect of the city under arrest. Write the order immediately, and to save appearances, prepare the accusation, and say that it is because... because... well! because he has not filled the store-houses of the city..."

"Rufus, told me so."

At these words, Heraclius's eyes shone with satanic joy. There was not a man in the world whom he hated more than Rufinus. He had never forgotten that he had suffered exile by his orders, and he nourished frightful projects of vengeance in his heart. Rufinus held a very high position and it was therefore difficult to reach him; Heraclius was both too prudent and too cunning not to understand that it was necessary to wait a favourable opportunity, and he had waited! But the hour had come; he was at last to gratify his vengeance. His satisfaction was the greater, as just but a few days before, Arcadius, with all the pride of a Roman senator, had repulsed a pretention of the Greek upstart, and had made him feel his contempt by haughty, sarcastic, cutting words.

Things were going well for Heraclius therefore, and he found it difficult to dissimulate his joy under the appearance of hypocritical astonishment; as if terrified by this order, he cried:

"Powerful Emperor, thou dost wish to arrest Arcadius-Rufinus! the Prefect of Rome! but..."

"But, yes," replied the Sovereign coldly, "I arrest

the Prefect of Rome, and, if it is my good pleasure, who can prevent me from condemning him to death? What matter to me if he is the Prefect of the city! The poppy head of a senator is not better fixed on its stem than that of the lowest plebeian thistle on his."

"However, if thy Divinity will allow me to say a word, I would dare to beg thee not to lay a hand on the Prefect until after the arrival of the legions from the south," perfidiously insinuated the too wily Greek who had already well measured the effect of the blow he was about to strike.

"The legions!" said Maxentius frowning, and becoming gloomy, "wait for the legions!" and his eyes flashed with a savage light that would have put to flight any other than Heraclius.

"Yes, immortal Emperor," he replied calmly, "thy clemency has nourished this viper too long already, and thou alone wouldst not see his false and criminal attempts to win the consideration and esteem of the citizens. All means served his purpose. More than once did I tremble with rage when I saw the extent of the power that this ambitious man had succeeded in obtaining to the prejudice of thine. Now that Constantine is marching against thee, is not Rufinus's rebellion doubly dangerous, if, as thy Divinity very wisely thinks, he did not take the necessary measures for provisioning the city."

"The traitor! the infamous wretch!" interrupted Maxentius, "it is true that he was companion in arms to the Gaul."

"Then, how can you doubt," continued Heraclius perfidiously, "but that we shall find papers in his palace which will compromise him? For example, a secret correspondence by which..."

"Hasten! without the least delay," exclaimed the Emperor, "write the order of arrestation, and see thyself that the judges do their duty promptly; and remember that thy head will answer came for all."

Without any emotion Heraclius calmly continued:

"In this conspiracy, of which there can be no doubt, and of which we must find the proofs, for there must be proofs, Sophronia will necessarily be compromised, and we can affirm that fearing to give witness against her husband, she preferred to kill herself. The Romans will hear of it through a supplement of the "Acta Diurna," and will soon forget their first impressions.

"And when we shall have this correspondence in our possession, wise Emperor, there will be other proceedings to institute, thou canst guess them, accomplices to discover. All those who will be condemned, always after evident proofs, to protect thy justice, will see their goods confiscated, and these goods will of right go to swell the imperial treasury."

The blow could not have been more cleverly planned.

Maxentius, with his heavy brain, had to reflect a short while before he could understand all these projects; but when he did understand, striking his hands on his knees, he cried out delightedly:

"By the club of Hercules! there cannot be a better blood-hound than thou in the whole empire. Thy plan is excellent, do as thou wilt with Rufinus; condemn him to the mines, to penal servitude, or to death, it matters little to me; but confiscate his goods, and that without delay."

"Apropos," continued Maxentius, "dost thou know, Heraclius, that Sophronia was a Christian, and that was the pretext she gave for refusing to obey me? Do

not forget to mention this in the "Acta," that will suffice to close the mouths of the people with regard to that woman."

Heraclius was in such haste to at last satisfy his desire of revenge that he sought some pretext for taking leave of the Emperor, but the latter still retained him.

"Dost thou know," he began again, his face growing dark, "dost thou know that Constantine has discovered a multitude of Christians in his army, it is said, and he has made them his most faithful friends? And now, as the wild beast in his cage lies in wait for the moment when the guard will open the bars, thus the Nazarenes are watching for the hour when Constantine will appear before Rome to fly at my throat. But, by Hercules! I promise thee that they shall first make acquaintance with my club! First, I wish and command that Melchiad, with all his priests and deacons, be taken in less than eight days. Thou canst do this business better than anyone else. Thou knowest their hiding places, their signs, their secrets, and I am sure that it will be a source of real pleasure to thee to deliver up to death thy former companions in shame," and Maxentius added immediately:

"When all that is finished, thou shalt have a large share in the benefits."

The Emperor had indeed spoken truly, for the hatred of the apostate against the Church was very great, and he lost no opportunity of instigating Maxentius against it. This order given at the present moment, however, upset his own private plans. Convinced of the futility of the persecution, Heraclius, who knew the invincible strength of Christianity judged the time ill chosen for persecuting it.

A personal interest however was mingled with this general consideration. Constantine's victories made him foresee that Maxentius's fall was not far off. What would become of him then, of him, the abhorred instrument of his crimes and his exactions ?

An idea came into his cunning brain : reconciie himself with the Church, feign repentance, and give the Christians a proof of his sincerity by obtaining an edict from Maxentius in their favour. But how lead the imperial wild beast to issue such an edict ? Heraclius did not despair of succeeding.

That very morning, he had prepared a rough draft of an edict which was to render to the Christians their churches and cemeteries that Diocletian had confiscated, but the Emperor's new mood ruined his hopes.

However, the Greek, as cunning as he was perfidious, did not so easily give up his prey. In a few minutes he had invented a new expedient of escaping from the office of persecutor which he judged to be very dangerous.

He took good care not to contradict the Emperor, or make any objection, that would have been adding fuel to fire, thus he contented himself by replying :

"My powerful Sovereign, for a long time past, have I been seeking a means of punishing these infamous Christians and I think I have found one. Thou knowest that the long persecutions of Diocletian, after so many others, only served to inflame their fanaticism and increase their numbers. Do not then oppose the miry torrent, dam it up and let it loose itself in the sands of the desert."

"To all the disciples of the Crucified, whoever they may be, forbid all connection in public and civil life with the true Roman people, that is to say with those

who fear and adore our immortal gods ; place thy image in all the schools and command that each day, before beginning class, masters and pupils offer incense to it ; let the priests go to the market every morning and sprinkle the fruits, the vegetables and in fact all eatables with lustral water ; order that all merchants, from the greatest to the least, place statues of the gods in their shops, before which the buyers must bow down ; declare that marriages, contracts, agreements, be null without the sacrifices ; that no plaintiff will be allowed to enter court unless he has first respectfully invoked the gods. By such means, and others like them, thou wilt exclude the Christians from instruction, commerce, industries, all rights, all relations, and before one generation has passed away . . . ”

A tremendous yawn and a coarse exclamation interrupted Heraclius.

“ Let others use such means, as slow as they are tedious, very well ! ” shouted the tyrant, “ as for me, I seize by the throat those whom I wish to strangle and all is soon over . . . A Greek, naturally, even though he should bear the name of Heraclius, uses slower means and poisons, ” added the Emperor with a loud contemptuous laugh ; “ for me, I repeat, ” he continued with insensate violence and striking his fist on the table, “ for me, I will cut off the seven heads of this hydra of Lerna, and if thou wilt not be the burning brand that I will force down its throat to prevent its heads from springing up again, so let it be ! I shall find another. ”

Heraclius, whom this blustering tirade had deeply mortified, lost nothing of his coolness however. He had expected to see his propositions rejected ; but he had a second plan which he himself preferred.

“Thy Divinity knows,” replied he, “whether I obey thy orders without delay ; listen to me for a few minutes more, most clement Emperor. No one can deny that the wise and learned Diocletian made some mistakes ; the most unfortunate was the confiscating of the meeting places of the Christians ; he thus deprived himself of the traps in which he might have caught his game.

“Render their churches and cemeteries to the disciples of the abominable Galilean, let them freely hold their meetings there, and wait patiently for one of their feasts ; on that day, the whole crowd, with the bishop, priests and deacons at their head, will throw themselves into the net that thy wisdom shall have so cleverly spread for them. For that matter, towards the middle of next month, they will solemnly fête the memory of Cecilia, near her tomb on the Appian way. Send thy Prætorian guards and Hercules against them then, and the chiefs of this execrable race and their adepts will disappear for ever.”

“By Jupiter !” said the Emperor, “I think the demons of Tartarus inspire thee. What a singular proposition ! I must acknowledge that there is something alluring in it.”

However, after a few minutes of reflection, he added :

“But will not these dogs of Christians say that I gave them back their cemetery through fear of Constantine, and will they not bark more audaciously, more boldly than ever ?”

“What will their barking be before thy great power ?” replied Heraclius. “If thou desirest the triumph of our gods, thou must treat their greatest enemies like dogs ; whilst with one hand thou dost throw them a bone, with the other thou must use the whip and strike with re-

doubled blows, neither counting nor choosing their number ; then they will crouch before thee !”

“ I shall think it over,” said Maxentius simply.

Then he continued in a low tone :

“ Diocletian ! Diocletian ! Oh ! he was not a Hercules ! He made the beast return to its den instead of strangling it, and he preferred cultivating his cabbages to following the beast. ”

Heraclius was very well satisfied however ; these simple words of Maxentius : “ I shall think it over,” showed him how far his diabolical plan pleased the Emperor.

It was necessary to strike the iron while it was hot.

“ Give the order without delay, powerful Emperor,” he cried, “ and the edict shall immediately go forth from thy Chancellor’s office. If thou dost publish it before the anniversary of thy coronation, thou shalt see the grateful enthusiasm of the Christians and how they will express their sincere devotion. ”

Heraclius having gained his object, thought it wiser to divert the Emperor’s thoughts from these different plans, and to hasten to interest him in the building of the temple and the circus which was a passion with Maxentius.

Heraclius was born in Athens, the city of art and letters. He was naturally eloquent and had exquisite taste, and these talents even more than his crafty political ability made him invaluable to the vulgar Maxentius.

The moment was well chosen for dazzling his ignorant master. Heraclius talked to him of his projects, and even persuaded him to remove some of the finest statues from the Pantheon to the new temple, and accompanied all his propositions with so much elegant flattery, that.

the crowned soldier surrendered himself more than ever to the influence of his favourite.

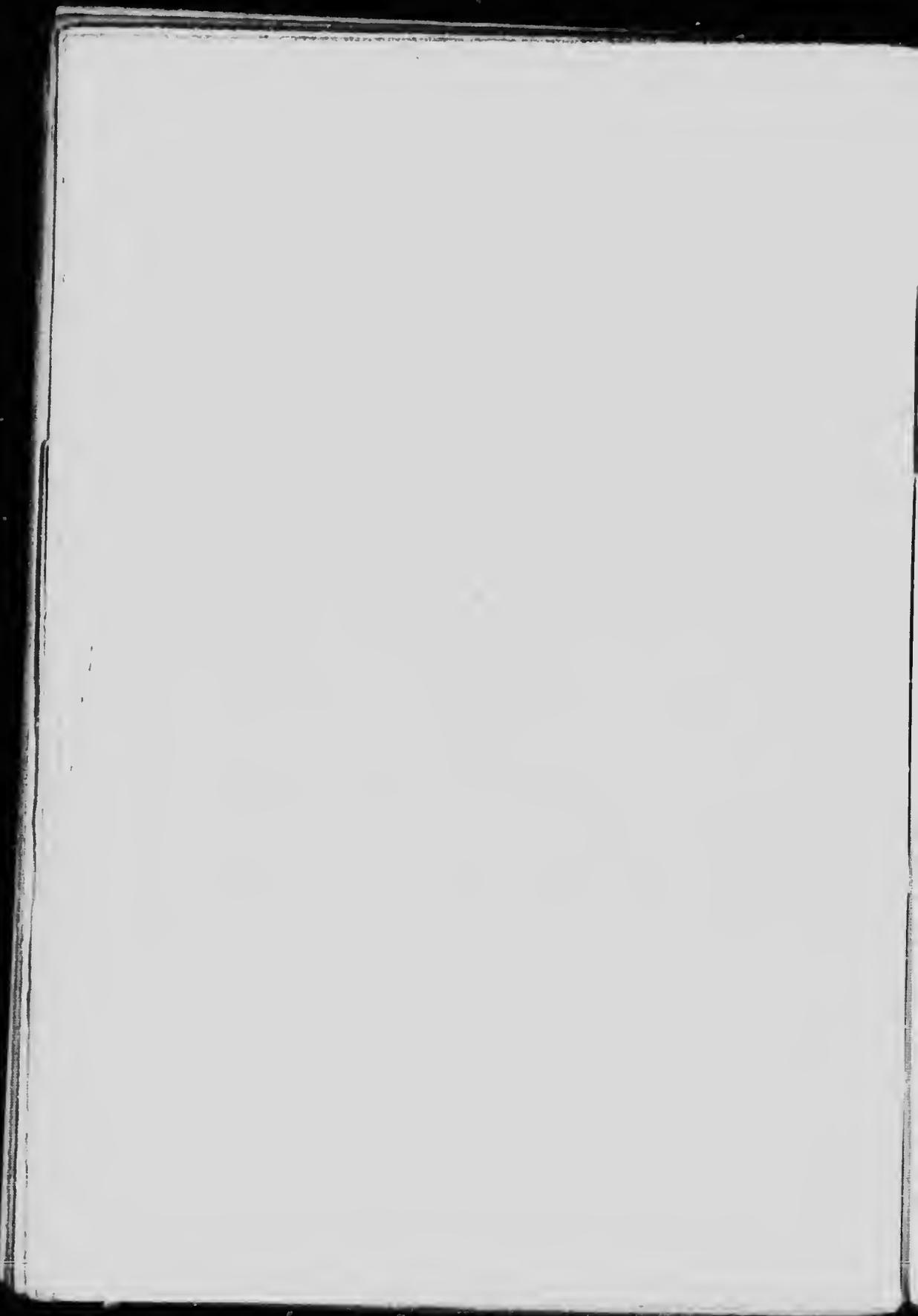
To these plans, which he displayed and which he saw with complacency were approved of, Maxentius added a proposition in keeping with his cruel instincts.

"The inauguration of the circus will not be made by the priests with their lustral water," he said. "That indeed would be too uninteresting. I must have blood. When the first winner in the race arrives at the goal then, when the excited people will be making the circus ring with their applause and cries, fifty Christians will be immolated and," he concluded with a frightful sneer, "that will be a better blessing than all the idle talk, the lustral water and all the sacrifices together."

One can guess that such was not Heraclius' opinion; but to contradict his despotic master, not to bow before his tyrannical will, would have disturbed his good humour and risked the loss of his good graces which were so difficult to win; the Chancellor kept silence then and thought only of his own projects.

The conspiracy being duly proved, it was necessary to draw up a list of pretended accomplices and to find a means of implicating them in the plot.

But all these difficulties were only child's play to the crafty Heraclius.



CHAPTER IV

IN THE CATACOMBS

IN the year 250, the Pope Fabian had divided Rome into seven ecclesiastical divisions and placed at the head of each a deacon, who to his other functions added the superintendence of the cemeteries situated in his division.

The Cœlimontium, where Rufinus's palace stood, belonged to the second division and had its tombs on the Appian and Latin ways.

Sophronia had not been baptized, but during her last moments she had proclaimed aloud that she died as a Christian. If in all ordinary circumstances religious burial is denied to suicides, the motive which led her to give herself the death-blow rather than to fail in her duty did not allow of the brave woman being deprived of the blessing of the Church; and not one dissentient voice was heard when Miltiades asked that the noble patrician should be interred with all the ceremonies of the Church.

Valeria chose the catacombs situated on the Appian way for her mother; they were, by a great privilege, under the special superintendence of the Pope himself, and bore the name of Saint-Calixtus.

In ancient Rome, funerals always took place at night. According to the prudent arrangements made by Irene, the mortal remains of Sophronia were to be removed in silence and without any pomp, which, however, did not

prevent their being escorted by a great number of poor, maimed and old, all the protégés of the Prefect's wife, and who had gathered in the atrium. They desired to give a last proof of their love and gratitude to her who had been so good to them.

Irene, accompanied by two slaves, came and distributed abundant alms among them in the name of Rufinus and his daughter. Among the crowd was Rustica, the wife of a *fossore*, or grave-digger of the church of the transtiberian quarter, who had become a mother only a few days before ; she too had come with her babe and her old blind mother to show once more how grateful she was to her benefactress ; and when Irene gently reproached her for thus exposing two frail lives, the young woman replied :

“ We could not rest in the house, we felt that we must come once more to kiss the hand that had so often succoured us. ”

The two poor Roman women were then taken to the death chamber, and nothing was more touching than to see the young mother, with her little one in her arms and her old mother beside her, kneeling by the bier of her who had been an angel of charity to them, and, in the midst of sobs, expressing their love and gratitude.

How often, under the coarse guise of poverty, do we not meet with precious pearls of the noblest feelings ! Rustica gave a proof of this. As disinterested as she was delicate, it was with great reluctance that she accepted a soft, silky shawl from Valeria to protect herself and child from the cold and damps of the night.

The hour for the funeral having arrived, Rufinus and his daughter approached their beloved dead once more and with tears gave her a last kiss.

According to custom, they covered the body with a rich, precious pall of Syrian purple, the face being left uncovered. She was then placed on a litter to be carried to her last resting place.

After the priests had devoutly said the prayers of the Church, the cortege started, lighted by the torches carried by the slaves attached to the Prefect's house. The only ones who followed were Rufinus and his daughter, Irene and some of the servants.

Although it was late in the night, groups of persons, standing silent and recollected before the neighbouring houses and palaces, told sufficiently of the sympathy felt and the impression made; but no one dared to say a word of condolence so great was the fear of the imperial spies who were everywhere and whose presence was well known.

On descending the Coelimum hill, the cortege met a group of young men coming out of one of the ill-famed taverns of the quarter; half drunk after their orgy and ready to mix themselves up in any nocturnal disturbance, or even to provoke one, the excited group rushed towards the poor looking funeral cortege. At the head of the group was a young man whom we shall soon meet again: the son of the Prefect to the imperial great seal.

"By Bacchus!" he cried to his companions, "the dead have no need to see to find their way underground; but we, we must see to be able to serenade the beautiful Telesilla."

Loud shouts of laughter greeted these unseemly, ill-timed words, and all tried to seize the torches the slaves were carrying, when a tall man of Herculan strength placed himself before the leader of the group, and letting his hands fall with all their weight on the shoulders of

the libertine said in a voice trembling with anger :
“ Stop, stop, miserable wretch ! It is the Prefect of the city who is accompanying his wife to her last home ; stop, I tell thee, and cease troubling this sad procession ! ”

These words, the deep feeling with which they were pronounced, the remembrance of Sophronia's heroic end, the position of him who led the cortege, all together, we must believe, made a salutary impression on the young men who retired precipitately and in confusion, while the leader, more confused than the others, stammered some words of excuse.

The funeral cortege then traversed the baths of Caracalla, and, without further incident arrived before the Appian gate, now called the gate of Saint-Sebastian. There, a crowd of Christians, composed mostly of the poor, waited to escort the body as far as the catacombs of Saint-Calixtus.

It was a splendid night ; myriads of stars shone in the pure tranquil sky ; a profound peace and sad silence reigned over all nature, even the leaves of the trees seemed to restrain their gentle rustling so as not to trouble the intense quiet or disturb the recollection of the faithful ; the superb monuments which bordered the way, while displaying their vain magnificence, seemed, more than ever, to remind poor mortals of their end and to cry out that notwithstanding all the ostentation, all the luxury, all the opulence with which they surrounded themselves, notwithstanding the pleasures with which they gratified and even intoxicated themselves, soon nothing remained of them but ashes and corruption : a terrible end, an odious perspective for those whose hopes do not go beyond the tomb !

The clergy who headed the procession had intoned the psalms in a low voice. Who can tell how many times during the past centuries these pious songs had resounded along the Appian way, particularly during the silence of the night, while the Christians, with so much respect and at the risk of their lives, accompanied the glorious remains of the confessors of the Faith who had fallen in the amphitheatre. But happier times were coming, when the shepherds of the Alban and Sabine hills or the pilgrims from Etruria and Campania also would go along this way, and, to the loud singing of holy hymns, venerate the tombs of innumerable martyrs and celebrate the triumph of Christianity over the world.

When the pompous marble monuments of the pagan cemeteries, with their absurdly vain epitaphs of vain glory, shall have long been but shapeless ruins, buried in the soil and hidden under the thick grass, when all these proud tombs shall have become but heaps of rubbish, then, from the most distant countries, from lands which Roman soldiers never trod, pious and fervent pilgrims will come to go over this Appian way, to pray at the tombs of our valiant Martyrs in one only faith, one only hope and one only charity!

But while the funeral cortege is wending its way to the catacombs, let us go to the house of the imperial Chancellor; we shall there find the perfidious Heraclius occupied in seeing the false letters composed which were to prove the Prefect's culpability, while a warrant had already been issued to search his house.

The funeral cortege had scarcely left the palace of Rufinus, when an officer of justice, accompanied by his men, entered in the name of the Emperor, whose warrant he produced, seized the letters, papers, and even the

official keys of the prefecture. All were taken to Heraclius and we can well fancy how closely they were examined by him. His hopes were not altogether deluded : among the letters he found some from the commander of Constantine's troops, but none could give the slightest ground for accusation ; they were, however, of great use to the perfidious Greek who could now have forged letters as the writing could be copied.

Time pressed, and he was obliged to increase the number of his clerks by three ; all were occupied writing under Heraclius' direction for he was clever enough to dictate several letters, at one and the same time, though their contents and style were altogether different. Thus was the correspondence between the commander of Constantine's army and Rufinus forged ; as for Constantine's writing which Heraclius wished should figure in these false papers, it was not difficult to find it in the archives among the letters written to Maxentius on different occasions.

The *exceptores* (clerks), practised in the art of imitating strange writing, soon finished their work, and, in the momentary absence of their chief, talked among themselves.

"Is it not revolting," said one, "to be obliged to twist the rope that our master wishes to put round Rufinus' neck ?"

"By Diana !" replied another, "is that any business of ours ? Are we anything else than tools in his hands ? He treats us well, pays us handsomely, the rest troubles me very little."

"Certainly," said a third, "we could not wish for a better master ; if he is so exacting and severe about our doing our duty, is he not himself our model ? He

works without ceasing from morning to night ; but . . . ”

“ But, ” interrupted the second, “ is not Heraclius himself only a tool in the hands of the Emperor ? It is not his fault if Maxentius is not a Titus or a Trajan. ”

The appearance of the Prefect put an end to their conversation ; he examined the letters the clerks presented to him, and compared them with the writing of those that had served as models ; the work was well done, and he expressed his satisfaction in a friendly manner, reminded the men that their oath obliged them to eternal silence, and then sent them away, after having prudently recalled to their memories the punishment to which the slightest indiscretion on their part would expose them. Let us leave Heraclius and allow him to give himself up unrestrainedly to the joy of at last possessing the arms with which he was to deal his enemy his deathblow, and by his wishes to hasten the morning of the morrow to obtain a sentence from the judges, and let us return to the ceremonies attendant on Sophronia's funeral.

The proper entrance into the catacombs of Saint-Calixtus was quite near to the Appian way, beside a monument of the Cornelius Christians, between two very large cypress trees. The ruins of this monument are still to be seen. Not far from these ruins, is the old staircase which led to the galleries of the tombs ; but after the ground, under which the catacombs are, had been confiscated by Diocletian, the Christians had made another opening hidden under the small trees and bushes ; a narrow path first led to the sand pits which supplied the material for the preparation of the mortar, and then the catacombs were reached by a passage which had been excavated by the *fossore*s.

Minsius, the *fossore* of the Transtiberian quarter and overseer of these catacombs, with his assistants, awaited Sophronia's body.

The opening which was too small would not allow of the litter being carried in ; Rufinus therefore took the precious burden in his arms, and, helped by Minsius, carried it down into the depths of the underground.

After having, with difficulty, crossed the beds of sand, they traversed the interminable galleries of the underground town, and at last arrived at the *Cubiculum* or tomb in which the noble Roman was to repose until her glorious resurrection.

There, amidst his priests and deacons, Miltiades, in pontifical robes, wishing to preside at the funeral ceremonies himself, awaited the arrival of the corpse. ~~He~~

For her darling mother, Valeria had an *arcosolium* or vaulted tomb excavated at the end of the chapel. The work was just barely ended, and on one side a large marble slab, intended to close the opening of the tomb, was resting against the wall. During, the recitation of the prayers, the *fossores* had placed the body in the excavation which was shaped like a coffin, and over the corpse Valeria sprinkled precious perfumes which filled the chapel with a sweet odour.

Rufinus had assisted quietly at the ceremony though deeply affected by all : the solemn procession on the Appian way, the chanting of the Psalms which echoed along the underground vaults, and above all the recollection and piety of the Christians who attended the funeral, made a vivid and lasting impression on him.

It was with keen regret that he saw himself excluded from the society of the Christians at the moment when the ceremonies of our holy liturgy began. What were

not his feelings of sorrow when leaving the remains of his virtuous wife, and how much more poignant they must have grown when he saw the great abyss which separated him from her and his beloved child!

In his grief, he tried to invoke his gods, but these divinities remained deaf; could the demons find access into this blessed place where the precious relics of so many glorious martyrs reposed? In the obscurity and silence of this world of the dead, the prefect felt as though a bandage were being gradually removed from his eyes, and he seemed to see in the dim distance light glimpses of the truth.

The Bishop, Miltiades, had charged Severinus one of his deacons, to show Rufinus the tombs of the most celebrated martyrs, or, if he preferred it, to take him up out of the catacombs; but the Prefect chose rather to remain, and his conductor, without seeming to do so purposely, directed the visitor's attention to the epitaphs that were most calculated to teach him that everything does not end with this life, and that it is this conviction, this certitude of endless, limitless happiness, which gives Christians strength to support their sufferings, and to martyrs their admirable constancy under torments.

The Prefect was deeply impressed on reading these: "To Cynacus, a holy woman; she was a dove without any guile. May she rest in peace!"

"Jovina left what was earthly to enter into peace."
—"Claudius lives in eternity."—"May the soul, of Sylvanus rest in peace! Amen."—"Sweet soul, thou dost repose in the peace of the Lord! Januaria, may God be thy consolation and refreshment. Pray to Him for us!"—"All our hopes of peace and eternal life are founded on JESUS CHRIST, Our Lord!" And

on the tablet closing the tomb where several were buried he read in Greek : " The Christians who believed in God and the CHRIST. "

A great number of these epitaphs, graven on stone and marble, were incorrect and had been traced by altogether unskilled hands ; they clearly proved that the belief in the next life was common to all Christians ; it was not the privilege only of the priests, the learned and the rich, but also of the poor, the simple and the ignorant.

Some tombs were ornamented with allegorical paintings ; Severinus explained their meaning as well as he could ; but if Rufinus could not quite understand all the deacon's explanations, he understood enough to know that these paintings and epitaphs expressed the same faith, the same hope.

Even the little symbolical lamps placed silently beside the dead and recalling to mind eternal life, brought light to his mind that was unknown before.

Never had the cold pagan tombs inspired in him the slightest emotion ; he had never felt what he did at the present moment ; those tombs had their inscriptions too, but the inscriptions :— " Adieu for ever ! " — " We shall ever remember you ! " give not the slightest hope of meeting again ; none made any allusion to the future life ; their funeral paintings were but profane allegories, lamps were placed there also but they were only for the night-watches and to make them look less dismal.

Rufinus felt all this better than he could have expressed it, and, without being aware of it, he began to believe in eternal life, in the communion of the living and the dead, and the consoling reunion beyond the tomb, of which faith assures us.

The Prefect continued his visit with ever increasing interest. Great indeed was his surprise when he saw, on some of the tombs, the names of persons he had very well known; his astonishment was the greater as he had never suspected that they were Christians; but he was obliged to acknowledge that they were those whom he had most esteemed because of their noble sentiments and the probity of their lives. There were names of senators, of men of high standing in the army, and of those who traced their descent from the most ancient Roman nobility.

From time to time, the Deacon and the Prefect approached the *cubiculum*¹ where Sophronia had been laid, and heard in the distance the voices of the Christians, the Bishop, the priest and the deacons chanting the prayers, alternately, around the tomb. These chants, reverberating along the narrow passages, impressed Rufinus deeply and attracted him more powerfully towards those who prayed thus, and at the same time inspired him with the desire to unite his voice with theirs in prayer, and mingle his hope with that of these fervent Christians.

When the ceremony was over, the Prefect was led back to where the mortal remains of his dear wife were, to say a last good bye before the *fossores* secured the marble slab that was to close the vault.

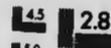
During this time, Valeria was absorbed in the thought of her father's soul. With all the ardour of her filial love, and all the strength of her lively faith, she had

1. The Vault was called *cubiculum*; the tomb itself the *loculus*, that is to say "little place"; where the tomb was placed in a niche it was called *arcosolium*. Light and air entered by small openings made in the vault.



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(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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prayed the Divine Master to penetrate this beloved soul with the light of eternal truth. While praying, she had, in thought, followed him through the catacombs ; and now, as he leaned over his cherished wife and pressed his quivering lips to her cold hands, Valeria, kneeling beside him, trembled with emotion when she heard these words, the sweetest she could hear, fall from his lips :

“ Oh, Sophronia, my dearest wife, may thy God soon be mine ! ”

As soon as Rufinus moved away the *fossore*s placed the slab over the tomb and cemented it according to custom.

The blessed earth of the catacombs had received new seed that was to spring up to everlasting life in a glorious resurrection.

There had not been sufficient time to engrave the inscription on the tombstone ; Rufinus was pained at this and remedied it himself. While the *fossore*s finished their sad task, he took one of their tools with an iron point and engraved the following epitaph :

“ *Sophronia dulcis, semper vives Deo !* ”

“ Sweet Sophronia, thou shalt live for ever in God ! ”

No doubt the Prefect only repeated the signs and words he had seen on the tombs and applied them to his wife, but they were no longer a dead letter to him ; these words which, through some mysterious power, had subjugated him, were the expression of his new feelings. He understood what he had written : “ Thou shalt live in God, ” and the germ of faith, faith in God, faith in life eternal, filled his heart with ineffable consolation and a joy he had never before experienced. Silent tears flowed down his cheeks and, carried away by his emotion, he added under the inscription : “ Yes, Sophronia, thou shalt live ! ”

Since that time, hordes of barbarians have passed and repassed through the eternal city ; they devastated, sacked and destroyed all that was most worthy of love and respect ; the tombs themselves were not spared ; many inscriptions have disappeared, but the words engraved on the wall by Rufinus exist even to this day ; they are there and tell of the victories and consolation of a soul that has triumphed in the combats between nature and grace, and which has passed from the dark night of incredulity to the bright light of faith.

Valeria remained beside her father while he engraved the epitaph on her mother's tomb, and as each word, appeared, her emotion increased.

Her heart was filled with happiness, and tears of joy fell from her eyes ; she thanked God and her mother, for her tenderly loved father had already felt the first touches of divine grace.

Sophronia's prayers before the throne of God had already begun to produce fruit.

The *fossores* had finished their work ; before leaving the cubiculum, the bishop, priests and Christians once more approached the tomb to salute the dead in the customary manner : "*Vade in peace!*" They then left the catacombs.

The sun had begun to appear behind the hills and its bright rays gilded the soft, fleecy clouds in the east. The orb of day continued its course, which had been traced by the hand of Him who had created it by a word, it shone on the wicked as well as the good, on the sumptuous palaces of the great city as well as the humblest homes of the poor, on the superb, public edifices where worldly joys and deceitful pleasures reigned as well as the dark tombs where all passions and strife, all pleasures and

sufferings, all love and hatred, lay buried in an eternal silence !

Rufinus had not left the Christians ; he walked close beside Meltiades. An imploring look from the young girl had made the bishop begin a conversation with the Prefect who had appeared to be completely absorbed in deep thought. The time was short, but the prelate employed it to good purpose and spoke to Rufinus of the principal dogmas of Christianity, and explained the fundamental truths of our holy religion, as to a catechumen. In Rufinus, Meltiades had a pupil who was as docile as he was intelligent ; but the cause was not yet completely won, at the moment of parting when the bishop expressed the hope of soon tracing the sign of the cross on his forehead and receiving him among the number of catechumens, the Prefect drew back, alleging the difficulties of his high position and the impossibility of an official rupture with the religion of the state at that moment. It sufficed for him, he said, to first venerate the GOD of the Christians in his heart, until his duties, and better times allowed him to do more.

Meltiades, who was pained, did not insist further, but he did not lose confidence. He trusted much to Valeria's influence, though a sad presentiment made him fear that the young girl would not have much time to gently lead her father into the pale of the Church.

The holy old man's fears were but too well founded. . . GOD was about to touch the Prefect's heart by means which were more painful, but not less efficacious.

Not far from the Palatine, Valeria took leave of her father, and accompanied Irene across the Emilian bridge to the Transtiberian quarter. The two women, in their thoughtful charity, found it necessary to go and assure

themselves that good Rustica, her old mother and the baby had not suffered by going out in the middle of the damp, cold night.

Rufinus returned to his palace, and his surprise can be imagined when, on arriving at the door, his *Vivareus* (doorkeeper) apprised him of the perquisition of the house which had just taken place. He understood only too well the motive of this proceeding and the consequences that would follow. Maxentius being in need of money, had determined to ruin him and secure his wealth ; but he had not had much time to think this over, when the tramp of soldiers and the clashing of their arms were heard in the *atrium*, and immediately after the emissaries of the Emperor entered the Prefect's room.

At this moment all emotion disappeared, to give place to the noble pride of the Roman patrician, to the feeling of dignity which was heightened by the remembrance of his saintly wife's heroic death ; with contemptuous intrepidity he said to the chief of the Emperor's messengers :

"I know very well why you are here ; I will follow you without resisting, but I will not allow you to put me in irons. Know that the Senator, Arcadius Rufinus, the Prefect of Rome, will not tolerate the manacles before he has appeared at the tribunal !

"I have orders, however, to take you bound to the Mamertine prison," replied the chief somewhat embarrassed "but since you promise to follow, I shall not employ force."

The distance to be traversed was somewhat long ; it was necessary to pass before the Coliseum, up the *Via sacra*, by the arch of triumph of Titus and the Forum. Although it was still very early, this strange cortege

could not but attract attention. By degrees people gathered along the route. The gloomy look of the crowd, and the strange silence which reigned, showed clearly enough the sympathy of the people for the Prefect and the feeling of rebellion that this brutal act had excited ; but fear of the tyrant's spies and of the tyrant himself rendered the most courageous, mute. They knew only too well that on such occasions a simple sign of disapproval might have to be paid for with their lives.

The Praetor and his officials already awaited the noble prisoner in the court of the pretorium of the Marmertine prison. Heraclius was there also, under the pretence that, as Prefect of the imperial Chancellor's office, he had not only to examine the writing of the confiscated papers, but in reality to watch the proceeding awe of the judges by his presence.

An unholy joy shone in his eyes as the Prefect entered surrounded by the imperial guards.

After the customary questions, the examination turned on the correspondance of the accused with Constantine and several of his generals. Rufinus replied to all with noble frankness. He did not deny that he was still closely united to them by the bonds of an old friendship. Several letters, said to have been found among his confiscated paper were then presented ; Heraclius examined the writing carefully and declared them authentic.

The Praetor then ordered these letters, — forged as we know, — to be read aloud. They were most compromising to the Prefect of the city who indignantly denied receiving them. Then looking searchingly at Heraclius he said slowly and sternly in a voice of perfect conviction :

“ The Prefect of the imperial Chancellor's office could, if he wished, let the judges know who forged these letters ;

he could also tell them how they came to be found among my confiscated papers."

Notwithstanding his villany the calumniator could not bear Rufinus' look and his joy was momentarily marred; he soon regained his self-possession however and, with apparent calm, asked the Praetor to kindly make a notary take down Rufinus' declaration. He then added :

"As a servant of the divine Emperor, I am above being affected by a shaft thrown by the hands of a traitor; the prisoner's words serve but to convict himself of his crime."

The Praetor, influenced by the crafty, hypocritical Heraclius, without giving Rufinus time to reply, pronounced this iniquitous sentence.

"The Prefect of the city is arrested: 1st, because of communicating with the enemies of the state, a crime which is proved by letters found in his possession; 2nd, because of insults offered to the representative of the most powerful and most noble Emperor."

According to justice, this decision should have been submitted to the supreme court, which alone had the right to condemn for the crime of high treason; but there was no question of this.

The jailer and his men were about to lay hands on the Prefect, when proudly drawing himself up to his full height, he said in a tone of supreme authority which made them draw back :

"Stop, I have something more to say." He then addressed the Praetor: "Thou knowest as well as I do that the Emperor has decreed my death, and that his will is the only law which condemns me; thou mightest then have avoided the forging of these letters. I must die because I am wealthy, because, and for this more

than any other reason, the virtue of my noble wife was too much above the perverseness of the tyrant, — Worthy of such a wife, I shall go to death without any fear ; but let Heraclius transmit to his lord the last words of his companion in arms ; let him tell the tyrant from me, that crimes cannot uphold thrones ; let him beware ! because he with criminal pride, spurns both human and divine rights, his feet will slip ! ”

Heraclius and the Praetor whom the Prefect's words had exasperated, made a sign to the guards to remove him, but Rufinus stopped them with a look and imperious gesture.

“ Let me finish, ” he said to them, then with his right hand raised to heaven and his eyes uplifted he calmly continued :

“ Yes, the sighs of the widows, the tears of the orphans, the indigence into which Maxentius has plunged those whom he has despoiled and exiled, the moaning of the poor, harassed, crushed people cry vengeance against the parricidal usurper, and no Praetor will be able to protect him against that vengeance ; his end will be misery, shame, contempt.

“ And thou Heraclius, as also all you vile, base souls, who pander to the tyrant's vices, your hour is nigh ; soon the most terrible and richly merited chastisement will overtake and mercilessly crush you. ”

In a paroxysm of rage, Heraclius cried :

“ Praetor, guards, how can you longer support this odious, criminal language ? Seize the traitor, bind him, and throw him into the deepest, darkest oubliette¹.

1. A dungeon with an opening only at the top for the admission of air, used for persons condemned to the perpetual imprisonment or to perish secretly, and existing in some old buildings.

Then turning to the notary :

“Have you written all that this miserable wretch has said ? The smallest part of it alone would suffice to condemn him lawfully to death.”

The jailer and his worthy aids had brutally seized Rufinus, who made not the slightest resistance, and after having handcuffed him with heavy irons and a chain, mercilessly dragged away the unfortunate captive.

Heraclius, agitated and mad with anger, hurried home. His vengeance was fully satisfied ; his cleverly concerted plans had succeeded even beyond his hopes, his enemy was condemned to death, a cruel, shameful death, what more could he desire ?

Nothing surely. And yet, far from feeling the satisfaction he had so counted on, the stern menace of him whom he had crushed with all the weight of his hatred rose before him like a hideous phantom. — In vain did he try to persuade himself that the Prefect's death had already been determined on by the Emperor himself ; in vain did he tell himself that the threats pronounced by such a man at such a moment were harmless ; in vain did he hasten to get away from the scene of this horrible drama ; in vain did he try to occupy his mind and his imagination with what pleased and flattered him ; all his efforts were unsuccessful. That strange, horrible spectre hovered, over and around him ever more menacing, and though he endeavoured not to listen, these words constantly rang in his ears :

“Your hour is nigh ; soon the most terrible and richly merited chastisement will overtake and mercilessly crush you !”



CHAPTER V

THE VICTORY

AFTER leaving her father, Valeria went towards the town accompanied by Irene ; the latter too had noticed with unmixed pleasure, the change in Rufinus, and the two women sought together a means of protecting this still feeble germ of faith from the blight of a worldly life and the absorbing business of state. They asked themselves how they could make it grow, slowly but surely.

While thus exchanging their thoughts, the matron and her companion arrived at the Emelian bridge, where they perceived a large ship that had cast anchor at the foot of the Aventine ; it brought the wheat that was so anxiously expected by the Prefect, glad news that they were happy to be able to take him. They hurried their steps and soon found themselves in the centre of the Transtiberian quarter which was then, as it is to-day, inhabited by the poor. Very few patricians, if any, would have ventured into the streets, which were as dark as they were narrow, still less would the noble Roman ladies have done so ; but true charity does not hesitate, and that is why the miserable residents, accustomed to the charity of our two Christians, were not surprised to meet them. And with what respect and love did they salute them !

The *fossore* Mincius lived in this quarter with his mother, his wife and child. Rustica knew how to hide the poverty of their little home by order and cleanliness and that

exquisite taste which makes one love simplicity. Flowers adorned the narrow windows, and the sun's rays passing through them brightened the modest interior. When visitors entered, the old mother was spinning so swiftly, that on seeing her, no one would have thought her blind. Mincius' young wife, seated before a large weaving frame threw her shuttle backwards and forwards across the threads stretched on the frame. Beside her, lay a beautiful child in a cradle.

"What! already at work?" cried Irene, in an affectionate tone of reproach, addressing Rustica; "but this work is too hard for you; you are imprudent."

"I have been idle for four long days," replied the young woman smiling, "must I not make up for lost time? When I feel tired I look at my child in his cradle, and my delighted thoughts fly to the crib at Bethlehem, where the Infant God reposed. Oh! how sweet work then becomes to me!"

And, leaving her shuttle, Rustica looked with ineffable tenderness at her sleeping babe.

"I have in spirit, placed my first-born at the foot of the crib," she continued, her eyes fixed on her treasure; "I have prayed to the sweet Virgin MARY sometimes to cast a glance at my son. This glance will be imprinted like a seal on his young heart; and the faithful Joseph who watched over the Divine Child will also stretch out his blessed hand to protect mine."

Mincius entering inopportunately, interrupted the touching scene. His brow was clouded and he grew pale and drew back when he perceived the visitors. Immediately recovering himself however, he said, though not without embarrassment and hesitation, that he thought the Prefect wanted them as quickly as possible.

"My father!" cried Valeria, pale as death, "but we left him scarcely half an hour ago at the Palatine! speak, I beg of you, Mincius, what has happened?"

"Noble Lady," replied the *fossore*, evading the question, "excuse me for having frightened you; I have just met one of your slaves who hurriedly asked me if I knew where you were to be found; that is why I concluded that your presence was needed by him who alone has the right to demand it."

Keen anxiety took possession of the young girl; Irene was by no means reassured.

They hastened to take leave of the humble family and hurriedly took their way to the palace. Mincius followed them with anxious tearful eyes.

"Noble girl," he cried at last, "may heaven grant you strength to carry this cruel cross; your young shoulders are still so bruised by the one you have been carrying! It is true that sorrows never come singly."

On his return from his work in the catacombs, the *fossore* had to pass by the *Forum*; it was there that he had seen Rufinus, the Prefect of the town, led by the guards to the *Martinian* prison; his weeping slaves were seeking everywhere for their young mistress.

How can we describe Valeria's feelings, her profound sorrow when, on entering the palace, she heard of the dreadful events of which it had been the scene. Cold as marble, she would have sunk to the ground if Irene had not been beside her and caught her in her arms. In her own deep faith and tender affection, Irene found strong yet comforting words, such as only a Christian mother could find to sustain her child. It was difficult however to reanimate Valeria's courage, for she knew, but too well, poor child! that to be thrown into the

Mamertine prison by Maxentius meant to be condemned to death. It was but yesterday that she had lost her mother, and to-day the father was torn from her, under the most painful circumstances ; could her poor heart be more cruelly tried ? Could she survive so much suffering ?

“ Yes, ” murmured her faithful friend gently in her ears, “ yes, for GOD tempers the wind to the shorn lamb and with the cross gives the grace necessary to bear it. At the crucial moment, in his infinite tenderness, He bends his heart over each wound and applies to it a balm which He chooses with god-like skill in behalf of the privileged ones whom He has touched with His cross, the sceptre of mercy.

A terrible doubt added to the tortures of Valeria’s loving, filial heart. Would Rufinus die without becoming a Christian ?

He had just taken the first step after a resistance several years ; would death cut him off before he had fully entered on the path that leads to salvation ?

Divine love united to filial love soon filled the young Roman girl’s heart with hope and an indomitable energy ; she would save her father, she would save his soul, cost what it would ! It was her Lord and her GOD Who inspired her with this determined resolution ; it was the Virgin MARY, the Mother of the afflicted, she who is strong as an army arrayed for battle, who would combat for her.

Irene advised Valeria to bribe the guards and enter the prison ; but it was in vain that she displayed gold before their covetous eyes ; they were too terrified by Heraclius’ menaces, and remained inflexible. Touched however by some extraordinary feeling of pity they

advised the young girl to address herself to Heraclius the Grand Chancellor.

"If you obtain his permission," said the jailer, "I will immediately take you to your father, though it would be preferable for one so young as you, never to penetrate into those frightful dungeons!"

He shook his head, while speaking, and a look of compassion came into his barbarous face as he watched the poor girl who stood imploringly before him. Irene shuddered on hearing the name of Heraclius. She knew how little was to be expected from this dishonourable, heartless man.

"Dost thou know the Chancellor?" asked Valeria of the matron.

"Yes, unfortunately," replied Irene sadly; "I know him only too well. He is none other than the unworthy renegade who, with his apostate companions, wished that the pope, Eusebius, should receive them again into the Church but would not submit to the penance imposed by the holy Canons. Thou knowest how revenge and hatred brought them amongst the Christians who were united to celebrate the mysteries and how they profaned the holy place and poured out the blood of our brethren."

Valeria hid her face in her hands, then looking up to heaven said:

"But did not the Emperor exile him from Rome at the same time as his victim, our Pontiff?"

"Yes; Maxentius, however, knew his man, he had too great a need of him to realize his own shameful plans, for none better than Heraclius would lend himself to them; that is why pardoning and recalling him, he soon took him into favour and made him secretary. This, however, did not satisfy the insatiable ambition of the

traitor, and, a few *months* later, he got himself made Prefect. Actually he is the greatest power in Rome, for he rules Maxentius. If this unhappy man had employed his extraordinary intelligence and rare talents in the service of the Church of God, he could have done immense good ! But, alas ! alas ! the thirst for gold and the most shameful passions have taken possession of his *heart* and cast him at the feet of idols, — at the feet of Maxentius, whom he rivals in baseness and cruelty. His persecutions against the Christians are the more to be dreaded as he hides them so skilfully.

In spite of the horror and repugnance, with which such a man could not but inspire her, Valeria determined to attempt this the only means left to her. If Heraclius did really possess the influence over the Emperor that he was credited with, a word from him would suffice to save her unfortunate father ; could she buy this word too dearly ?

The poor child asked herself anxiously, however, what chord she could touch to succeed in winning Heraclius' good graces and how she should behave in his presence. But strong in her love, and more still in her unshakened trust in Him Whose infinite goodness equals His power, Valeria hoped against all hope ; she resolved to spare neither tears nor prayers to soften the renegade's heart. Neither Irene nor Valeria knew however of the deep, implacable hatred he cherished against Rufinus nor did they know that the latter's arrest was the work of the wretch that Valeria wished to move to pity, that it was the fruit of his vengeance. Irene accompanied Valeria to the door which the latter entered resolutely, but not without a glance of supplication towards heaven.

The offices of the Chancellor occupied one of the wings

of the palace of the Cæsars which commanded the Aventine.

"May I speak to the Prefect of the office of the Chancellor," she asked timidly of the *ostirius*.¹

He eyed his noble visitor from head to foot, and, after some hesitation, shortly replied :

"The master has given orders to let no one pass."

"I must speak to him," said Valeria imploringly ;
"oh ! do let me see the Prefect ?"

The rough *ostiarius* shrugged his shoulders but made no reply. He then leaned carelessly back against the wall, and Valeria drawing out her purse took from it some pieces of gold ; at sight of them, the barbarian's eyes brightened and he changed his mind. He eagerly stretched out his hand and the precious metal the young girl offered him soon disappeared under his garments.

"You wish to speak to my master," he muttered, "well, I shall take you, not to him, for that is impossible, but to his son, Sabinius. Try to soften him, for he alone can introduce you to Heraclius' presence just now. See, he is just passing through the atrium with his friends."

The pure, gentle dove advanced towards the group of young libertines whose riotous mirth contrasted singularly with the deep sadness and dignified manner of our heroine.

At the sound of her voice, Sabinius lifted his head in

1. The doors of the palaces were guarded by a porter or *ostiarius*, armed with a rod ; his severe orders generally softened under the influence of a piece of gold quietly slipped into his hand ; he would then easily allow the visitor to enter as far as the atrium. This court, surrounded by a colonnade, gave access to the apartment by a door which was called *noble*. The *ostiarii* were justly noted for their boldness and their insolence.

surprise. His elegant dress, the perfumes he used, bespoke the man of pleasure. He became respectful however, in spite of himself, and advanced towards Valeria who was on the point of retiring ; she had recognized the young debauchee whose impudence had disturbed her mother's funeral the night previous.

" To what may I attribute the honour of your visit, Madam ? " asked Sabinius bowing politely.

Valeria briefly explained that she was the daughter of the Prefect of Rome and that urgent business brought her to see the Chancellor, of whom she implored an interview immediately.

" Thou art then the daughter of the brave, noble Roman who died at her own hands ? If it were only through veneration for this new Lucretia, I would oblige her beautiful and noble daughter. It is not my father's hour for receiving, besides he has strictly forbidden that any one should be admitted, but I shall do all I can that an exception be made in your favour. "

Valeria, who was entirely absorbed in her sorrow and her desire to save her father, heard only the words of admiration of her mother and the promise that no effort would be spared to obtain for her an interview with Heraclius. She followed Sabinius, glad to escape from the bold looks of his companions, and was soon in the presence of the Prefect of the Chancellor.

He was a man of about fifty years, with small piercing eyes ; his thin lips marked by deep lines at the corners, gave his face an indefinable expression which repelled all feeling of trust or confidence.

Sabinus presented the young girl to his father but did not withdraw ; he was curious to learn the object of her mysterious visit, and some strange powerful in-

terest urged him to remain there ; he would have wished to help the young patrician whose severe beauty subdued him.

Valeria, lifting her eyes to Heraclius' face, said immediately, in a voice full of emotion yet firm :

" Deign to excuse me, noble Heraclius, if I dare to importune you by an injudicious visit. "

Without allowing her to finish her sentence, Heraclius interrupted her brusquely to angrily rebuke her for having disregarded his orders. His voice was harsh and abrupt, his look fierce, and, in spite of himself, he turned away his head at sight of the gentle girl.

It was not surprising that Valeria's visit should be particularly displeasing to the persecutor ; more especially at this moment when he was choosing from a long list of patrician names, those whom he wished to implicate in Rufinus' pretended conspiracy. Who better than his victim's daughter could awaken in his unprincipled heart filled with unquiet hatred the remembrance of the Prefect's bitter reproaches ! the contemptuous epithets which the latter had made use of in condemning his deceit still rang in his ears while at the same time remorse made itself felt like the increasing darkness of night, and he trembled in spite of himself at the thought of the terrible menaces hurled at him by his victim. Valeria was ignorant of all this and bravely began again :

" Pardon an unfortunate daughter, Heraclius ; it is my father's life that I wish to save ; it is in thy hands. Thou hast only to will it and he can be saved ! "

With eloquence which would have been irresistible to any but this heart of bronze, she begged, she wept, she implored for the life of her father. Emotion over-

came Sabinius who was more frivolous than wicked, and he could not but show his compassion when Valeria, falling at Heraclius' feet, entreated him with all the strength of her filial love to grant her father's life. But this man whose very soul was depraved, feigned to see nothing, not to understand, and turned away his head. Tired at last of her supplications he replied coldly that she need expect nothing from him.

"Know," said he scornfully, "that a woman's tears have no weight in the balance of justice. It is in vain that thou disquietest thyself, it is useless to importune me longer."

And with an imperious gesture he ordered the unfortunate girl away.

Valeria crushed, heartbroken, rose slowly and without another word, without even turning her head walked towards the door; Sabinius followed her.

"By Jupiter!" he cried when they were alone, "the old man treated thee with contempt; but believe me that if thou hadst offered him as many gold pieces as thou didst shed tears, I am hippopotamus, if he would not have allowed thee at least to see thy father in prison."

"I have a purse full of gold," said Valeria blushing; may I ask thee to obtain me this favour at least?"

Sabinus reflected a moment, then covetuously taking possession of the purse, he hid it hurriedly in the folds of his toga and replied:

"Listen, noble lady, it would be useless to present thy request at this moment, my father is too badly disposed, but I will take thee myself to the prison, and I shall neglect no means of obtaining access for thee to the noble prisoner who is shut up within those hor-

rible walls. We shall see later what can be done to offer thy presents."

Valeria, deeply affected, thanked him gratefully, but the young man's covetous looks when he saw the gold, aroused suspicions which she could not forget. She again saw him hiding away the purse with but ill-disguised delight. Valeria followed him however.

When they crossed the atrium together, the Chancellor's son whispered something in a low voice to his companions, who greeted it with loud, unseemly laughter. But, without waiting longer, he went with Valeria towards the large state bridge leading to the Forum. Passing from there before the Julius Basilica, built by Julius Cæsar, they found themselves opposite the Mamertine prison which stood at the foot of the Capitol.

With a studied elegance and affectation which could not escape the young girl's notice, Sabinus had tried to begin a conversation with her along the way. He endeavoured to console her by telling her that the tribunals could not condemn one whose innocence was known to all; he sought to divert her attention by telling her of his travels and his stay in Egypt; he expressed his surprise at never having met her at the fêtes of the high Roman aristocracy. Could any one understand how a flower so exquisitely beautiful could conceal itself in such a hidden retreat.

Valeria entirely absorbed in thoughts of her father, paid scant heed to his vain flattery, yet more than once she would have rebuked the young worldling whose frivolous conversation and indiscreet questions roused her indignation, if the remembrance of her father's danger had not restrained her. Could she wound him who might help her to realize her most earnest wish?

The *præpositus*, or prison guard, first raised serious difficulties in opposition to Sabinius' request, for he was forbidden to do anything without a written order from the Chancellor. However, by dint of reasoning and entreating, Sabinius obtained permission for the young girl to be admitted to see her father for half an hour.

Valeria's rare beauty, her mother's tragic end, her lively gratitude towards him, had all charmed Sabinius, had all excited in him the greatest interest in the young patrician, and while walking along, a thousand projects passed through his mind.

The spring previous he had terminated his studies at the University of Alexandria and he had returned to Rome, not to devote himself seriously to the service of the state, as his father had hoped, but to give himself up unrestrainedly, in the capital of the world, to the pleasures of which Alexandria had given him only a foretaste.

Heraclius, finding that all his efforts to get his son to enter the office of the imperial Chancellor only served to keep him further aloof from it, turned his thoughts elsewhere, and obtained for him, from the Emperor, the post of general superintendent of state buildings, although he had not the slightest notion of architecture. The Chancellor had hoped that the turbulent nature of his son would delight in a charge which required so much activity ; such was not the case however. New complaints about Sabinius were being continually brought to him, but the young libertine only replied by saying that it was much better to eat a roast than to cook it. The son of the rich courtier easily found friends among the youth of highest rank, and it is needless to say that these latter always took his part. With them, he spent

his nights at banquets, in debauchery and gaming.

This conduct displeased Heraclius, and Sabinius, who would not endure his reproaches, avoided his father and endeavoured to shake off his authority.

Things had come to this when he met Valeria for the first time ; the thought of the young girl haunted him. He told himself that with her, happiness and good fortune would take up their abode at his hearth.

Would Rufinus find that he was paying too high a price for his life, his position, his wealth, by giving Sabinius his daughter's hand ?

As to himself, the son of the *parvenu* could he hope for a more brilliant, a nobler match ? His father was powerful enough to save the prisoner. While turning these thoughts over in his mind Sabinius told himself that his mother would help him to oblige his father to intercede with the Emperor. He remembered however, and not without a certain fear, how deeply Heraclius hated the Prefect of the town. Yet again he began to hope that his lucky star would bring events about as he desired, that some good genius would cloud the "old man's" memory, or better still, extinguish his hatred, and that he would willingly become the father-in-law of the rich and beautiful heiress.

Carried away by these golden dreams, Sabinius quite forgot the deplorable incident of the previous evening, his meeting with Sophronia's funeral cortege.

The young man reached his home in joyous mood and directed his steps towards his mother's apartments.

The noble lady received her son in a dazzlingly rich and luxurious room. The most costly paintings ornamented the ceiling on which gold had been profusely used, while thick oriental carpets spread on the floor deadened the

sound of foot-steps. On tables of scented wood, cleverly inlaid, stood candlesticks of pure gold ; and all around the eye met a profusion of statuettes which came from the hands of the most famous sculptors, precious bowls with exquisitely painted figures on them, caskets of carved ivory and gold vases of precious stones. Rich curtains, elegantly draped, allowed an artistically softened half-light to enter and disclosed, outside, a magnificent verandah, where the rarest plants and flowers charmed the eye and perfumed the air.

In a basin which occupied the centre, rose an immense silver cup supported by three graceful cupids, and from it fell jets of water, in cascades which then spread themselves out like silvery sheets.

More than once had Heraclius stained his hands with blood to amass all this wealth. Alas ! in her mad passion for luxury had not his wife a heavy share of accomplicity ?

When Sabinus entered, his mother indolently stretched on a bed of purple and gold, was reading a drama by Plautus, a more than frivolous author and one unworthy to be read by any sensible woman.

Proud of her birth and the nobility of her family, she held high the sceptre of authority. Her capriciousness was often a cause of suffering to her numerous slaves ; yet there might have been found in Rome many noble ladies more harsh and cruel ; this was an excuse in her own eyes.

The brilliant position occupied by her husband filled her with proud satisfaction, and she would have been perfectly happy if her son, whom she loved with devoted tenderness, had given her a daughter-in-law of senatorial rank and ancient nobility.

Consequently, she listened with delight to Sabinus'

confidence, and quickly entered into his views.

"Yes," she said imperiously, "thy father must set the prisoner at liberty, for it is hardly possible that we should meet a better match. Come then, my son, let us go to him without further delay."

She half rose from the divan, and thoughtfully lifted her delicate, jewelled hands to her forehead. A sudden joyous exclamation showed that she had found the solution she sought; clapping her hands in a way peculiar to herself, she called her confidential slave.

"Send a messenger at once to the Mamertine prison," she said, "to ask the young patrician, the daughter of Rufinus, to come to the office of the Chancellor where Heraclius' wife wishes to speak to her."

Then leaving her couch Sabina went to see her husband, leaning on the arm of Sabinius.

"My son," she said, "thou must expect a terrible resistance; but we shall conquer. Speak first and I will come to thy assistance at an opportune moment."

However unfeeling Heraclius had shown himself in Valeria's presence, we have seen that the unfortunate young girl's tears and entreaties had roused in his heart not only dreadful remembrances but even remorse. Rufinus's dark menaces passed and repassed through his tormented imagination and froze him with terror. In order to calm this febrile agitation, he told himself that it was too late to undo the injustice, that the Emperor had spoken and would not be shaken by any consideration, for Maxentius' covetous interests were at stake.

Wishing to banish these thoughts, he began anew to consult his list of names. At this same moment the door opened to admit his wife and his son whose unexpected

visit surprised him. He looked at them and waited.

Sabina sat down and affecting an air of assurance, signed to her son to go on speaking. At the same time, she gracefully waved her *flabellum* (fan) of peacock feathers. The young man then set about explaining to Heraclius the object of his visit and began by reminding his father that he would soon be twenty-five years old and that it was time for him to think of settling down and that he had chosen one to be his wife.

"By Bacchus," cried the Prefect, "that is the first sensible thing I have heard from thy lips during the years that have seen thee grow up."

"Father," continued Sabinius, not at all disconcerted, "I have found the woman of my choice. She is beautiful, virtuous, young and noble, she is the sole heiress of a widower whose wealth is envied by all Rome."

"Rich, noble, beautiful, sole heiress and she wishes to unite her lot with thine?" said Heraclius in an incredulous, mocking tone.

Sabinus felt deeply the cutting reply, but dissimulating, he replied with a smile with which he sought to hide his vexation :

"Fortune has fixed the bait on my line, and the little fish, though slowly, will bite, I hope. Thou alone can prevent it by troubling the waters."

"I do not understand," answered Heraclius. "In truth, if divine Fortune has chosen to weave the web of thy happiness, it is not thy father who will entangle the threads."

"Strong in this promise, I shall tell thee my secret. It is on the daughter of Rufinus that I have placed my affections ; considering the circumstances, I hope that she will give me her hand and her immense fortune ; all depends

on thee to stop the proceedings against her father !”

The head of the Medusa herself could not have been a greater shock to the courtier of Maxentius. As if riveted to the ground, he fixed on his son his small eyes which were abnormally dilated, but did not say a word. Coming to himself at last he cried in a stifled voice :

“Sabinus, art thou mad ? — Yes, the money thou lovest in gaming has also made thee lose thy head. — Listen well : let there never be a question of such folly again. I will not hear another word. Never, no never, shall I consent to receive as my daughter-in-law the daughter of my mortal enemy, of him who has so often and so deeply wounded me. — Besides, know thou that Rufinus, accused of high treason, is already condemned.”

Sabinus was not at all troubled by this torrent of wrath, and replied in a peculiarly sly, meaning tone :

“And who would prevent thy writing the name of another innocent person on the list of proscription ?”

The reflexion of the voice was such, and so well expressed Sabinus’ conviction on the subject of the innocence of Rufinus, that in spite of his craftiness, the Chancellor could not succeed in hiding his uneasiness.

“Dost thou think then,” he stammered at last, “that this noble patrician would carry her heroic filial devotion so far as to redeem her father’s life at such a price ! Would she espouse thee ? — Thee, Sabinus the debauchee ?”

The young man who preserved the self-possession which his father had lost, replied calmly :

“Valeria assured me that she would recoil from no sacrifice to save her father ! As for my appearance, remember that I am the living picture of my father, all Rome says so.”

Quite beside himself and raging like a lion, Heraclius bounded from his seat, when Sabina interposed.

Romans of high birth gave their wives the title of *Domina*, Heraclius had adopted this usage ; but in his home it was not merely an empty title of good breeding. If Sabina, of very noble birth, had chosen to unite her destiny with that of a *parvenu*, she meant at least to carry the sceptre, and shake off the conjugal yoke which weighed as heavily on many noble Roman ladies as on the lowest of their slaves.

She closed her fan, a movement which always signified that she would not be contradicted, then looking at Heraclius as if she wished to fascinate him she said in an insinuating voice :

“ Consider, my dear husband, that it is a question of our son’s happiness ; if the noble Valeria gives him her hand, her father *must* be set free, it *must* be so, cost what it will. ”

Heraclius was beside himself.

“ *Domina*, ” he cried, “ canst thou then forget that this man had me banished, that he has often wounded me cruelly ? It is he, always he, the wretch ! only this morning again, in open tribunal, he insulted me, threatened me, with such freedom of language that everybody was shocked. And now, we must embrace each other like the best of friends ! — no ! — that shall never be ! ”

Sabina, wrapping herself up in a majestic calm which contrasted with Heraclius’ rage, said :

“ The union of the children will reconcile the parents. ”

“ Are there not then in Rome, ” roared the unfortunate apostate, who was exasperated beyond measure, “ are there not then hundreds of young girls who would

be happy to unite their lot with that of the son of the Chancellor? Must my son, he to whom I gave life, espouse the daughter of the man whom I hate?"

Then turning towards Sabina, Heraclius added:

"If my son is unnatural enough to remain insensible to the insults with which I have been loaded, my wife at least —"

As we have said, Sabina had her fair share of craftiness; she cleverly interrupted her husband to show him that to be the arbiter of Rufinus' destiny would be the Chancellor's greatest triumph.

"Let the Prefect of Rome receive his pardon from thee! let him by this be placed under an obligation to thee! — Will that not be a master-stroke?" she asked, at the same time making use of all her powers of fascination with which she had long known how to influence Heraclius.

The crafty woman had aimed true; Heraclius dazzled by the perspective which Sabina held out before his eyes, went still further than she. He said to himself that, already possessing such great influence over the Emperor, there would be no man more powerful than he in the capital of the world, if he had the Prefect of Rome at his feet. What would the war or its issue matter to him then? He would be assured of having nothing to fear for himself, for his own or for his wealth.

However, he did not wish to show that he was so easily won over by his wife's reasoning and he replied:

"Dost thou know also that the first enquiry of the Praetor has given publicity to the most crushing proofs of the Prefect's guilt? and dost thou know," he added in a low voice, "that the confiscation of his wealth is a necessity? The coffers of the state are empty, they

must be filled by some means. I ordered and signed this confiscation myself. I cannot go back on that, the thing is done. Yes, the thing is done, let us say no more about it."

"Thou art free to efface what thou hast signed," rejoined Sabina; and her shrewd smile showed what importance was to be attached to the pretexts of her lord and master in this shameful affair. "Provided that the confiscated goods fill the treasury, what matters to the divine Maxentius the source from whence they come? The sentence is not yet pronounced; hasten then to find some mistake in the proceedings, some inaccuracies, revise the documents."

"The second enquiry will prove more strongly the innocence of the accused than the first did his guilt. Heraclius, it is only a matter of thy killing it, as our son has already told thee, and the cause will be gained. As for the divine Maxentius, it is quite unnecessary to teach thee how to take him; show him that sedition is at his doors, that revolt is in the palace, in a word, frighten him; nothing is easier. That done, the magnanimous Heraclius will give back to Rufinus life, liberty, and even his position itself!"

"Adorable lady," again replied the Chancellor, "thou dost not think at all of the difficulties in which thou placest me. What of Sophronia's death?—and the accusing letters?"

"That is all smoke," replied Sabina.

She was about to continue when a slave announced Valeria's arrival.

"This matter concerns me none," said Sabina in a tone which admitted of no questioning; "I mean to act independently of everybody. You are too clumsy, both of you, to catch our dove."

A half hour later, the young girl left Heraclius's house taking with her a letter addressed to the *præpositus* or prison guard. This letter ordered him to prepare the best cell for Arcadius Rufinus and to treat him with the greatest respect. He was also ordered, at the same time, to convoke all the judges for a new meeting that very day!

When the young girl found herself alone in the street, she stopped a moment as if crushed beneath the weight of a frightful nightmare. Her eyes sought the heavens and gradually became more peaceful.

She had already consummated, in Sabina's home, the sacrifice which was to save her father's soul at the same time as his life. God alone knew what it had cost the unhappy girl! But, when alone in the street, she had again, for the second time, measured its greatness; it was for this reason that she had lifted her eyes filled with anguish to heaven and sought strength and courage by fervent prayer. She then signed her forehead with the sign of the cross and bravely continued on her way to the Mamertine prison.

In the catacombs of Saint Peter and Marcelline, a half effaced painting represents the chaste Susannah under the figure of a lamb and the two old men who impugned her as two infamous wolves. Was there any hope of a new Daniel coming to deliver this new Susannah from the jaws of these other wild animals who were not less cruel than those notorious old men? No, alas! The court of Maxentius had no Daniel, Valeria felt it only too well. If she opened the prison to her unfortunate father, if she gave him his liberty, she was loading herself with chains whose weight and intolerable galling would but increase from day to day.

But had she not drawn from GOD Himself the courage for a life of martyrdom? Had she not derived it from His side which had been opened through love? Yes, the young Christian felt it, nothing was too much for such a cause, she would be the victim for her father's soul and the salvation of that dearly loved father would become the recompense of her holocaust.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE MAMERTINE PRISON

THE Mamertine prison, built by Ancus Martius, fourth king of Rome, was situated at the foot of the capitol, opposite the Forum, and was reserved for prisoners of state, and for criminals condemned for leze-majesty or high treason. This horrible dungeon was composed of two parts, as may easily be seen even now. The first is readily reached by a staircase leading into the street ; the second, a sort of a cave cut out in the rock of the capitoline hill itself, is a little higher than the height of an ordinary man, about six feet and six feet wide. No door, no window admits either light or air. By the help of strong cords, the unfortunate condemned are let down into it by an opening in the centre of the flat ceiling which was formed of free stone. It was through this opening that their food was passed to them and they were drawn up again when they were to undergo the final sentence, when they were not destined to die of hunger in this horrible living tomb. Never did the faintest ray of sunlight penetrate this dungeon. Damp, cold as the breath of death, this horrible grave was plunged in perpetual darkness. The air never being renewed was filled with offensive, putrid odours which were not the least of the tortures of the prisoners.

Tradition tells us that the chief of the apostles languished in this narrow, underground dungeon, and that in the midst of his sufferings he had the consolation

of there winning several of his guards to JESUS CHRIST. The pious pilgrim, visiting this sombre prison, may even now drink of the spring which then burst forth miraculously, for the regeneration of the new converts, at the prayer of Saint Peter.

At the church of Saint-Peter-in-chains, the chains the Prince of the Apostles wore in this prison, and those with which Herod loaded him at Jerusalem, are venerated.

Tradition mentions several other apostles of the Gospel, who, in the course of the following centuries, were shut up, like Saint Peter, in this dark Mamertine prison, when cruel persecutions devastated the Church of Christ.¹

Thrown into this frightful prison, Rufinus did not deceive himself in the least ; he knew that he would die alone, abandoned, or that he would be taken out only to be led to death. Buried alive in this hideous hole, his only companion henceforth would be absolute solitude. A blacker night than the thick darkness which surrounded him, had now entered his soul. He first coldly measured all the horror of his situation ; then a nervous excitement gradually took possession of him and he fell into a violent fit of anger. He ground his teeth

1. Among these martyrs might be mentioned those whose Acts have been published by the chevalier de Rossi (Decree of the Vatican. 1877. *Roma soterr.*, III, 201). The Pope Damasus says : "These martyrs, come from Greece, died during the persecution of Valerien. Chained and thrown into the Mamertine prison, they persevered in their faith, and were condemned to death. Their bodies, taken up by the Christians, were buried in the Catacombs of St. Calixtus. They were seven in number : Hippolite ; his nephews, Marie and Leo ; their parents, Hadrias and Pauline ; the priest Eusebius and the deacon Marellus."

and shook his heavy chains in despair ; his whole being was agitated and he writhed in violent convulsions. Vainly did he look around for help, even the slightest, in this excess of misery ; he fell back crushed : the cold, hard stones of the dungeon, the only witnesses of his groaning, were deaf, dumb, insensible. The silence of death alone responded to the appeals of his immeasurable grief. Sometimes it seemed to him that he heard, in the clanking of his chains, a satanical laugh and a cold sweat broke out on his trembling limbs. He leaned his burning forehead against the damp wall holding his head between his hands, he sought with feverish eyes to pierce the dense obscurity which enveloped him : vain effort ! and his voice hoarsely asked :

“Rufinus, art thou going mad ?”

Gradually, however, he grew more calm, his thoughts carried him back to the past, the happy past which had now fled. Once more he saw himself rich, honoured, the object of Sophronia's devoted, thoughtful affection, of the love of his children, particularly Valeria.

“What ! is all at an end ?” he cried at last ; “was all that given to me only to be taken from me at one stroke ? That Supreme Being Whom I perceived for a passing moment yesterday, like some bright ray of hope, in the darkness of my first night of sorrow, does He exist ? But how does He rule the destiny of mortals, He who is said to be so good ? No, no, He does not exist. Would He permit that virtue should succumb and crime triumph ? Did the world contain two creatures more noble, more pure, more faithful to this GOD than Sophronia and Valeria. And did this GOD protect them ? Did He not allow my beloved wife to be exposed to the odious outrage of the Caesar ? And my daughter Va-

leria, has He not allowed floods of suffering to overwhelm her? How eagerly did my poor heart, broken by grief, read the inscriptions engraved on their tombs by the Christians! Those inscriptions were for me like so many cries of hope. I was about to embrace their faith. Was I not thereby already a Christian by desire, by conviction?—And it was at this moment, at the time when, believing and hoping, I lifted up my hands towards the light, that I was thrown alive into this tomb of the dead, into this utter darkness? Oh! truth, truth to which I aspired with all the powers of my being, truth that I wished to adore, truth, thou too, thou art but a name! That light then was fallacious, my feelings, illusions, falsehood!”

Plunged into ever increasing despair Rufinus suddenly started; every fibre of his being vibrated, he almost stopped breathing. He distinctly heard the voice of Valeria calling him:

“Father! Father!”

Was it the spirit of his darling child hovering around him because she wished him to feel how near her heart was to her beloved father?

While thus lost in wonder and trying to explain the mystery, he heard a sound above his head, the voice of the jailer and, nearer still, a second call from his darling child:

“Father! Father! Father!”

His emotion was great, and he tried to think how Valeria could have so quickly found a means of reaching him.

On a written order from the Chancellor brought by one of Sabinus' slaves, the *præpositus* had immediately told the jailer to take the young girl to the bottom of

the stairs which gave access to the first prison and, in her eager affection, she had called out to her father while descending the stairs.

When she had reached the last step, the jailer took her by the hand and led her a few steps towards the middle, in profound obscurity ; then he stopped suddenly and called out :

“ Sir, thy daughter is here to see thee. ”

The poor girl felt faint on hearing her father's loved voice coming up from the lower dungeon, as out of a sepulchre, and mingled with the sound of the heavy chains.

“ Kneel down here quite close to the opening, ” said the jailer to Valeria, “ and take care not to fall through to the bottom. Thou canst speak to thy father from here, and I shall come for thee in half an hour. — I do not know, however, if thou wilt be able to remain so long in this frightful Tartarus. ”

Valeria knelt down and, leaning on the pavement with one hand, tried to find the opening in the ceiling with the other. At last her trembling fingers encountered the cold stones which bordered it, and lying down on the pavement, she put her head over it and tried to distinguish her father ; but the darkness was too great.

Rufinus whose eyes were beginning to be accustomed to the obscurity, could see his daughter, but only like a dark shadow.

“ Oi ! what a consolation ! ” cried the poor father, “ to see thee once more, thee, my daughter, my sweet child ; to speak to thee once more before passing from this horrible dungeon to the banks of the Styx ! Give me thy hand so that I may know that it is really thee, my darling child. ”

Valeria stretched out her arm and shuddered at the

contact of her unfortunate father's cold, damp hands.

"Tell me, my daughter, how didst thou succeed in gaining admission here," asked Rufinus.

"I tried in vain to bribe the guards," replied the girl, "but God heard my prayer nevertheless, for it was the jailer himself who showed me the way by giving me the Chancellor's address."

"The Chancellor! that wretch!" cried Rufinus passionately; "it was he, he himself who, with forged letters, urged on the Emperor to ruin me. I did not fear, before the whole tribunal, to reproach him for his odious knavery! He could only have repulsed you disdainfully, the infamous wretch!"

Without replying to this Valeria said:

"When I had lost all hope, the Lord sent me a guide, in the person of Sabinus, the Chancellor's son. It was he who brought me to thee."

"His son!" exclaimed the Prefect utterly surprised; "but how can a rotten tree produce a healthy branch? Doubtless, Sabinus was more susceptible to the influence of thy gold than the jailer. However that may be, I thank him with all my heart for procuring me the inexpressible consolation of seeing thee again, my beloved child. I could not have hoped for it. Believe me, my child, if I were not so uneasy about thy future, I would descend, with a light step, from the ruins of my happiness and from my vanished dreams into the tomb of nothingness, into eternal oblivion."

These last words made Valeria shudder. She understood in an instant that this appearance of resignation hid the deepest despair, and she felt, with anguish difficult to describe, that her father's little bark, fastened the day before to the Saviour's cross had had its cable broken

by the frightful tempest which had burst over it ; but she did not lose courage. Seizing the broken chain with consummate tact, tact inspired from on high, Valeria with all her Christian faith and filial tenderness, set to her task without losing a moment. It was necessary to reunite the bonds that had been so quickly broken, she must, at any price, guide safely into the harbour of salvation the skiff so tossed about by the storm amidst the fury of the waves and whirlpool of waters.

Doubtless, the fervent prayers of Sophronia the martyr, at the foot of the Eternal's throne, assisted her daughter's efforts.

The young girl was surprised herself at the facility with which she spoke of divine doctrine while explaining to her father the principal truths of our holy religion ; one would have thought, she said later on, that an all powerful hand suggested it to her. A bright light filled her mind, love lent wings to her words, and she too was able to say : " did I not then feel my heart burning within me ? "

At first Rufinus listened, not without bitterness and incredulity, to his daughter's explanations ; only the happiness of hearing her loved voice made him overcome his reluctance. Gradually, however, incredulity and opposition were defeated ; the violent storm that trial had raised in his soul was gently calmed, and bright rays came to dissipate the darkness of night. His attention increased, Valeria's words seemed to him to come from some sublime, powerful, invisible being ; and as a plant that has been scorched by the burning sun, revives and gently lifts its head under the cooling dews, his soul, athirst for comfort, revived under the influence of divine grace which descended abundantly while Valeria spoke.

When the young girl reminded her father of her mother's letter and her promise to pray fervently for him at the foot of God's throne, the last remnants of resistance vanished. Vanquished by the love of Him whose merciful love holds in His hands the hearts and wills of His creatures, a flood of tears fell from his eyes ; but they were tears of sweetness.

"Oh ! my child !" he cried, "how good the God of the Christians is ! I believe in Him, I believe all that thy mother believed. I believe all that thou believest, my child, and I am ready to give my life for this faith which I embrace, for the God whom I adore."

If there is pure joy on earth, it is that of saving a soul that is dear to us ; if there is intense happiness, it is to find God after a life spent in error, it is to come out from the dark, cold night of doubt to plunge oneself into the luminous splendour of eternal truth, it is to quit the empty, arid desert of incredulity to become intoxicated with the heavenly perfume of the blooming garden of the Church. Then the sharpest sorrows lose their bitterness, the thorns and the briars of the way their sharpness, and death itself its terrors. At the touch of this supreme joy, the souls of the father and the daughter forgot for a moment the horrors of the dungeon and lost themselves in an outburst of gratitude.

Remembering the avidity with which Sabinus had seized her purse, Valeria told herself that with the help of more gold, she would certainly succeed in returning to see her father, and, who could tell ? perhaps bring to him a priest who would pour the regenerating waters over Rufinus' head. This hope softened the sorrow of parting when the jailer came to say that it was time for Valeria to leave.

Rufinus, returning to his solitude, threw himself on his knees, and a long fervent prayer rose from his heart to heaven.

When he rose, he was another man ; the things of this life were to him no longer what they had been, even the heavy trials which had darkened his existence, now left his soul calm, happy, peaceful. It was not difficult for him to acknowledge that he would have never known the truth if a storm of sorrow had not burst over him to overcome his indomitable pride with its heavy hand, and if trial had not broken the bonds of human respect.

If then an unjust sentence had deprived him of earthly goods and this present life, he had found eternal life in the faith which now illumined his soul. The inscriptions of the catacombs came back to his memory, and were better understood by him now than on the night of Sophronia's burial. His thoughts dwelt on his noble, gentle wife and he asked himself, surprised at his own haughty obstinacy, how his pride and prejudice, could have so blinded him and raised such a barrier between himself, and his own happiness. At the thought of Valeria, he shed tears of sweetest joy. With a full heart, he thanked heaven for confiding this treasure to his care, for sending this consoling angel to him at the moment of his darkest despair, when all seemed to crumble away beneath his feet.

The heavenly doctrine that he had learned from his beloved daughter, came back to his memory with such clearness, such simplicity, with such a power of truth, that it left no doubt in his enraptured soul.

At this moment the jailer's attendant let down, into the obscure prison, a loaf of bread and a jar of wine that Valeria had hastened to buy from guards, for Rufinus'

strength had been exhausted by his suffering and his long fast.

He had already begun to feel the tortures of hunger of which the damp walls of the dungeon had, alas ! been so often witnesses for so many unfortunates.

Rufinus had not yet finished his frugal repast, when he thought he again heard the loved voice of his daughter ; but no !—it was his weakened imagination, thought the Prefect. How could Valeria so quickly have obtained another interview ? While the unfortunate Prefect thought himself the prey of a vain hallucination, he distinctly heard, without being able to doubt it, that silvery, well-known voice saying :

“ Father, father, thou art free ! ”

“ I free !— free !— no !— fever and excitement are affecting my tired brain ! ”

But the light of a torch penetrated into his dark dungeon ; the voice of his daughter who bent her head over the opening, repeated :

“ O father, thou art free !— I have come for thee. ”

The jailer and his assistants were beside Valeria at the opening above. A slave, setting down a ladder, came down to saw off the Prefect's chains so that he might be able to go up ; but he found him almost insensible, so violent had been the feelings which had rushed over his heart.

He followed the slave mechanically, scarcely understanding what he was doing.

But when he felt his daughter throw her arms around him and lay her head caressingly against his heart, convulsive sobs shook him violently and it seemed as if emotion would crush his strong frame. Abundant tears then fell from his eyes ; Valeria kissed them away and

led her father out of the prison while he asked :

“ But is it really true that I am free ? ”

The jailer soon put an end to this moving scene and all remounted the stairs. When Rufinus came into the light, he could scarcely bear it ; looking at his daughter he repeated : ”

“ Is it really true that I am free ? My child, my saviour, tell me, what didst thou do ? ”

It is not possible that thy love has conquered. ”

“ I will tell thee later, ” replied Valeria ; we have not the time now, let us hasten to get out from here. ”

“ Is it the Emperor ? ” continued Rufinus, “ didst thou throw thyself at his feet ? Did thy tears then soften him ? ”

“ Later on, later on, I will tell thee all, ” replied the girl again ; “ let us get away from here, let us breathe the fresh air, let us give ourselves up to the joy of feeling that thou art free. ”

But the Prefect redoubled his questioning when Valeria persisted in observing silence, and full of anxiety, he began to move more slowly. Finally he stopped altogether and cried in a voice which betrayed that he had been accustomed to command :

“ Valeria, I will not take another step until thou hast told me thy secret. I adjure thee by thy mother’s memory, hide nothing from me. ”

The poor girl was obliged to give way ; she bowed her head and acknowledged how she had promised her hand to the son of Heraclius, to purchase, at that price, the life of a loved father.

Rufinus grew pale, he at first remained speechless, then, at last after a supreme effort, he said :

“ No, no, never, my child, never. ”

Tears flowed down his manly face. Valeria had imploringly thrown her arms around his neck and the tears of the daughter mingled with those of the father.

Rufinus gently disengaged himself from her embrace and looked at her with indescribable tenderness.

"Listen to me, my child," he said; "liberty is a divine gift, life spent with it would be sweeter than the fêtes of Olympus, but I would never sell thee, thee, my daughter, to these infamous wretches; that is too high a price for my life. Wouldst thou then condemn me to endless remorse? May thy God, who is my God, reward thee for thy filial devotion; child, He alone can measure the extent of thy sacrifice; but thy poor father will never consent to it; rather a thousand deaths, a thousand martyrdoms! Guards, give me back my chains, lead me back to my dungeon."

Valeria threw herself at his feet and implored him, but in vain.

The Prefect raised her with infinite tenderness, but his love itself rendering him the more inflexible, he forbade her peremptorily to insist further. Then turning to the guards he said in a firm voice: "Jailer, I will not leave this place; go and tell thy master, Heraclius, that the Prefect of Rome absolutely refuses to buy his freedom at the prescribed price. Tell him besides that Rufinus and his daughter adore the GOD of the Christians."

Valeria's sobs prevented her speaking. Only too happy to save her father, she had not for an instant thought he would oppose her heroic sacrifice and refuse the liberty that her filial love had resolved to purchase at any price.

The jailer was overwhelmed with astonishment, and looked from father to daughter; this was altogether a mysterious problem to him.

"Well," said he at last, recovering a little from his amazement, "because it pleases you to remain here, so let it be; I shall go and apprise the *præpositus*, who will himself inform the Chancellor. We shall then see what is to be done."

"Leave me with my father," implored Valeria; "I wish to share his chains, his prison, I wish to remain beside him till the hour of his execution."

"That is a thing which is not in my power," said the jailer rudely; "but while awaiting the Chancellor's reply I shall put you both in a place where you will find much to amuse you."

While speaking he seized a large bunch of keys, and, preceding Rufinus and his daughter, led them through a long corridor to a heavy door which he opened to allow them to pass in, saying with a frightful laugh:

"There are some toys that you may examine at your leisure."

He then shut the door brusquely making it grate on its hinges.

The prisoners found themselves in the room containing the instruments of torture. During the persecution of Diocletian, the Prefect had assisted, more than once, with perfect calmness, at the torture of the martyrs; but, to-day, standing before these horrible implements, still red with the blood of the victims, he shuddered. Axes, swords, scourges, whose leathern thongs were armed with balls of lead or sharp points of steel or iron and even with scorpions, hung on the walls. Further on were to be seen iron rods, enormous pincers, hooks, and large metal combs, which tore away the flesh. On the floor were arranged in order, gridirons, to which the victims were tied and slowly burnt. Beside these were laid the heavy

equleus or racks so often spoken of in the acts of the martyrs. The unfortunate who was to be tortured was bound to it, and his limbs dislocated by a wheel that the executioner set in motion. But in order to prolong the torture, the final turn, which would have caused death, was delayed. Sometimes, while the martyr was thus stretched on this horrible bed, the *lamina*, or plates of red hot iron, would be applied to his sides. Near by the *equleus* stood enormous bronze caldrons; into these, boiling oil or lead was poured and the victims plunged into them.

Rufinus felt a cold perspiration break out over him at the thought of the tortures which he might perhaps have to suffer in order to confess his faith; Valeria's eyes, on the contrary, shone with heavenly joy; she pressed her lips to one of the instruments on which she venerated primitive heroes of the church: "Fear not, beloved father; our God upholds those who combat for Him. The blood of so many martyrs has made sacred these arms of Satan and changed them into trophies of victory. There, on high, the confessors of the faith sing their songs of triumph amidst eternal splendours. The clouds of the heavenly Jerusalem open above the blood stained rocks; the blessed contemplate the soldiers of Christ, who himself assists them in the fight. From the throne of His thrice holy majesty, the Eternal reveals to them the ineffable delights promised to the victors.

"The warrior is proud of the scars which the combat brought him; why should we fear, we athletes of the king JESUS? Why should we fear wounds, suffering and death? If we fall, we shall rise again; if we die, it will be to live above in the eternal mansions.

"Oh! let torture come and destroy this miserable,

mortal envelope ; what matter if torments crush thee, my poor body ! Christ awaits us, He will clothe us with glory and immortality. ”

Thus spoke the ardent virgin, carried away by an enthusiastic love which affected Rufinus. Struck with admiration, his eyes fixed on Valeria, he looked at the frail, delicate creature whose courage was superhuman. Influenced by her burning words, he listened as the disciple listens to his master, the child to its mother. A prey to indescribable emotion, the pagan of yesterday threw himself at the feet of the Christian Virgin and asked her, the bride of Christ, to bless him, he who was unworthy, her poor father.

With trembling hand, Valeria traced the sacred sign of the cross on his forehead, then she also knelt down and the two prisoners threw themselves into each other's arms. His daughter's pure em' race imparted to Rufinus some of the celestial joy with which her soul overflowed, and thence forth all tortures lost their terrors for him. From her dwelling on high, Sophronia doubtless watched over them, and blessed the GOD who in infinite goodness poured His graces out abundantly on her beloved ones.

If Valeria's filial tenderness and her desire to save her father had prevented her foreseeing Rufinus' opposition, Sabinus and his mother had still less prescience of it ; their souls were too base to understand such noble feelings. Neither had the slightest doubt as to the accomplishment of their object ; they were convinced that the prisoner would eagerly grasp this only hope of escape. He would marry his daughter to the son of the Emperor's favourite, to one of the first functionaries of the court, and, at that price, he would purchase his

liberty, his life, his old office. Sabina, proud of her ability, congratulated herself on having so cleverly arranged matters and so quickly bringing about the realization of her most cherished desires.

The Chancellor's wife found the young girl singularly pleasing. During a second conversation with her husband, she had so dazzled Heraclius with the advantages of this union, that he promised her his assistance and gave her, though not without serious trepidation, the letter that Valeria took to the prison. The object of this letter, however, was only to ameliorate Rufinus' condition and to make his captivity less severe. If he left his frightful dungeon, it was to be put into another part of the building and under the surveillance of the *præpositus*.

Heraclius saw many and great difficulties in his way.

How was he to present this new state of things to Caesar, he asked himself ? How, after working so hard to depose the Prefect, was he to go back on what he had done ?

These questions which he asked himself, and others besides, remained unanswered in his mind ; but, trusting to his lucky star which had served him so well up to that time on more critical occasions, he said to himself that it would help him again by means of his two favourite weapons : cunning and prudence.

Before all else, it was necessary to revoke the sentence of the confiscation of the property, that was the most pressing. Sabinus who had wished to accompany Valeria to the Mamertine prison, was obliged to give up his desire in order to hasten to the palace of the prefecture where the employers of the public treasury were already affixing the imperial seal. When the young man had transmitted his father's orders, he directed his steps towards the prison. Going along, he thought how best he might present

himself to his future father-in-law, with what fine words he should begin their first conversation. It was whilst he was preparing his discourse, therefore, that the messenger from the *præpositus* stopped him to deliver to him the prisoner's decision. Sabinus was astounded at this news and could scarcely believe his ears — Rufinus the Prefect of Rome a Christian! — he refused him Valeria's hand! — he renounced his riches — his liberty — his life! — No! — it was impossible! — To believe it, Sabinus must hear it from his lips. And running rather than walking, a prey to feverish excitement, he arrived at the prison. There was no question of the fine speech that he had prepared.

Sabinus was conducted without delay to his father's victims; but when his eyes fell on Rufinus who remained calm and dignified, he suddenly remembered the attack on Sophronia's funeral cortege, and he became quite confused. He changed colour, drew back a step and stammered out a few unintelligible words.

Valeria, whose face still shone with the enthusiasm that had animated her while she had been speaking to her father of the glory of the martyrs, looked at Sabinus whose confusion increased. Thus might the soldier of Christ, in the arena, have fixed his tranquil gaze on the wild beast that was preparing to devour him.

Sabinus, however, soon regained his usual audacity, and, coming forward with all the politeness affected by the society of that period, obsequiously saluted the daughter.

"Pardon me, most noble Rufinus," he said, "if I dare to approach thee under the present circumstances. I desire thy daughter's hand. I have come to tell thee that it matters little to me if you are both Christians.

It is not a religion that I wish to espouse, but the adorable Valeria. But a short while ago, in presence of my parents, she assented to my most ardent wishes. I have hastened to lay, at thy feet, my wedding gifts, thy liberty, thy reinstatement in thy possessions, thy dignities and thy honours. It is the son of the first magistrate of the court of Chancery who implores thy consent, O noble Rufinus ! thou wilt not refuse it to me ? ”

Rufinus remained silent.

After a pause of a few minutes which must have seemed long to him, Sabinus continued, making an almost imperceptible gesture towards the instruments of torture :

“ Thou must know that if love has incomparable sweetness, vengeance also has hers which is sometimes terrible. Learn then that thy fate is in my hands. ”

The Prefect had recognized Sabinus as the chief of the band of libertines who had stopped Sophronia’s funeral procession ; his personality, his speech, everything in this creature, inspired him with deep disgust and made him understand how heroic had been his daughter’s sacrifice.

The proud and noble demeanour of the Prefect contrasted strongly with the affected attitude of the frivolous libertine. Fixing on him a look in which mingled the quiet calm of the Christian and the dignity of a man of noble descent, Rufinus said :

“ Young man, there are abysses across which bridges cannot be thrown. That which separates us cannot be crossed. Thou dost menace us with death, with a cruel death, but we do not fear it ; neither do we fear the torture thou dost suggest by glancing at these hideous instruments of a revolting barbarity. ”

Shame at being thus coldly repulsed filled Sabinus

with wild rage, and, uttering a frightful blasphemy, he cried :

“ So let it be, you shall die like dogs. ”

Then he dashed out of the prison, loudly slamming the heavy doors.

The Chancellor's son ordered the guards to throw the prisoners into the most horrible dungeon and went home hurriedly.

On his way, he met the wild band of his dissolute companions ; Sabina, elated with triumph which she believed assured had just announced to them her son's approaching wedding. They had hastened to meet him in order to congratulate him and to invite him that very evening to a gay banquet.

Sabinus's rage then reached its height.

“ May the falling-sickness seize you all, ” he shouted gnashing his teeth. By Bacchus and all the gods ! Do you think I would marry a dog of a Christian ? Let her marry if it pleases her, her father's executioner, and I will give her the wretch's head as her marriage portion ! ”

He did not stop in his headlong course as he uttered these coarse exclamations, and leaving his astonished companions in the street, he entered his mother's apartments.

While he informs her of all that has happened, let us return to our prisoners.

When Rufinus and his daughter arrived at the entrance to the frightful dungeon we have already described, the Prefect felt as if he would die at the thought of his child who was to be his companion in that living tomb.

Valeria pressed her father's trembling hand in her own and sought to encourage him with words which to him were as heavenly music.

"Father," she said in her most winning tones, "how happy I am to be with thee! How much do I now thank thee for having rejected Sabinius's offer! Each word that fell from that man's lips inspired in me an inexpressible repugnance, and I asked myself in horror how I should unite my life with that of a being so degraded. Thou didst not make a mistake, father, when telling me that a good branch could not spring from a rotten trunk. Dost thou know that unhappy Heracius has been marked with the sign of holy baptism? Vile interests urged him to apostatize and the poor renegade has become the worst enemy of the Christians.

"And we, father, we shall die together! Oh! what unspeakable joy for thy daughter's heart! How mercifully good our God is! The Mamertine prison has been sanctified by a great number of martyrs who have preceded us into heaven. They intercede for us on high, they will obtain patience and victory for us; we shall soon share their eternal blessedness."

While saying these words, Valeria bravely approached the opening of the underground dungeon, and her father, with unspeakable anguish of heart saw her disappear into its awful depths. Immediately, it was his turn.

Who could tell their feelings on finding each other in that place of horror! Each suffered for the other. They remained for sometime in a tender embrace, then, falling on their knees, their gratitude and their love arose to heaven on the wings of fervent prayer, as does the smoke from the incense of the evening sacrifice. And the Lord, bending over these loved souls, shed His consolations abundantly over them.

"What singular creatures these Christians are,"

murmured the jailer as he withdrew ; " what courage we must employ each time we are obliged to throw a prisoner into this toad's hole ! They throw themselves into it with delight, one would say, as if endless happiness awaited them there ! It is said that they are all sorcerers, that they change cold into gentle warmth, and heat into coolness. By all the demons, there is some truth in this ! However when their bodies come out of this hole, hanging to the hooks which have drawn them up, they are really lifeless, as are other mortals, and it is easily seen that they suffered the same pain, the same tortures ! I cannot understand it."

When Sabina and her son reached Heraclius's rooms, the latter was walking up and down full of anxiety and trouble. He had not yet succeeded in cutting his Gordian knot. He remembered that it was he himself who had excited the anger of the savage Cæsar against the Prefect, and he could not now, without danger, calm the wild beast and inspire him with more humane feelings towards the prisoner. What was he to do with the forged letters which had so well proved Rufinus's guilt ? It was not possible to acknowledge that they were a tissue of falsehoods. The Emperor counted so much on the Prefect's immense riches to fill his own empty coffers. Would he ever renounce so productive a confiscation ? The longer the Chancellor reflected the more did he question the possibility of tearing the prey from the jaws of the voracious wolf without being torn asunder himself ; was not Maxentius as suspicious as he was cruel ?

Besides, the wily Greek asked himself if it would be prudent to unite himself by such close ties to him whom he had hated and persecuted so cruelly, to the man who,

he felt, despised him, who had not long since sent him into exile, who, that very morning, had overwhelmed him with accusations which were the more cutting because they were well founded, and that in open court. Heraclius trembled with rage and clenched his hands at the mere thought of it.

"My wife forces me into the lion's mouth," he said to himself; "if I do not give the cruel animal a good feed, I shall, without the slightest doubt, be devoured myself first."

Never had he found himself with such a difficult problem to solve.

The surest way of obtaining pardon for Rufinus, was to procure gold for his master; and to do this, was it not best to hatch a new plot and draw up another list of so-called conspirators whose goods they could confiscate?

After much thought, after countless schemes conceived, rejected and taken up again, Heraclius thought that he had at last found a favourable one.

"I will present another list to our hyena. I will tell him how I found out the real plot. I will tell him that if Sophronia committed suicide it was not at all because she wished to escape from His Majesty's power. The proud matron, far from being a model of conjugal fidelity, had engaged herself, unknown to her husband, in a vast conspiracy the chief of which held secret communication with her. I can say that she aimed at nothing less than getting rid of her husband in order to become empress. But the proofs! — Yes, the proofs!" added the Chancellor striking his forehead. "Proofs are necessary."

It appeared as if he wished to elicit them from his brain.

He had reached this point in his reflection when Sabina, flushed and quite beside herself with anger, burst into the room followed by her son who was wild with rage also.

"Let them die, let them both die!" she cried in a voice trembling with passion. "Ah! let them die the most cruel of deaths!—the infamous wretch who puts us to shame!" And she paced up and down the room like a fury.

The Chancellor could scarcely believe his ears. He approached his wife to soothe her, but she interrupted him and cried out more loudly:

"Can any one imagine a more odious, a more outrageous affront? Rufinus, our prisoner, dares to refuse his daughter's hand to our son!"

Then throwing herself impetuously into a chair, she violently used her fan; she was quite out of breath and her face was flaming.

She had imprudently divulged her secret; she had announced her son's marriage with a young and beautiful lady of the highest rank; and now the proud Roman trembled with rage not only because her dearest hopes were shattered, but because she foresaw the mocking and sarcastic remarks which, *sotto voce*, would pass round among the many jealous enemies that her insolent haughtiness had gained her.

With what impatience had she not awaited Sabinius's return! Not the slightest doubt had come to trouble her mind; in imagination, she had seen her son and Valeria coming to her, hand in hand. A thunderbolt falling at her feet could not have so terribly affected her as the words of Sabinius: "her father refuses!" and her fury was at its height.

Heraclius, too, felt deeply wounded by Rufinus's reply and the proud attitude his enemy maintained even in prison.

"What!" he exclaimed, "his pride will not bend even in face of a cruel death? Well, he shall learn, to his cost, the consequence of resisting the Cæsar's powerful confidant."

"Oh! it is not pride only that influences him," said Sabinius; "the Prefect wishes thee to know that he and his daughter are Christians."

"Christians!" exclaimed Sabina, "Rufinus and Valeria Christians! Oh! how infamous! quick, give me the essence of the roses of Cedar!"

And her face wore an expression of the deepest disgust, while she threw herself back on the divan.

At the name of Christians, a hideous sneer escaped Heraclius.

"The Prefect of the city a Christian!" he repeated, "that is something which is not wanting in interest and occurs admirably in the nick of time. What mortal can now doubt of the conspiracy entered into by him and Constantine!"

Sabinus consoled himself much more easily than his parents, and, with his accustomed levity, and without any effort, overcame the shame of this rebuff.

"If the turtle dove has escaped me," he cried laughing, "I have at least made a fine capture of Christians, and I hope my dear father will see them generously paid by his imperial master, will you not? I shall celebrate a joyous holiday in honour of the gods who have preserved me from a cursed marriage with this execrable disciple of the Nazarene. What shall we do with the father and the daughter? I gave orders that, for the

present, they should be thrown into the dungeon of the Mamertine. ”

“ Let them there die of hunger ! ” cried Sabina whose anger was still at its height.

That was not Heraclius’s idea ; he was forming other plans of revenge.

“ That will be well enough for the old man who has baffled our projects, ” he muttered, “ but we shall make a beggar of the daughter. Besides it is the Cæsar who will decide what Rufinus’s fate is to be. ”

While the Chancellor, without further delay, went himself to see Maxentius, he sent a slave with his orders to the *præpositus*. He was in a hurry to tell his master the great news of the day and make known that Rufinus was a Christian. At the same time he wished to present the list of pretended conspirators.

At the head of the list, appeared the name of Antonius Valerius, a man of honour, connected with the court, who made no mystery of being a Christian. The fervour with which he practised his religion had sufficed to mark him as an object of the Chancellor’s hatred.

While these events were rapidly taking place, Valeria, in the Mamertine dungeon, was actively employed in instructing her father in the Christian doctrine. Ignorant of what the future might have in store for them, she yet knew that each moment might bring a sentence of death, and she was determined not to lose any of the time that was so precious.

Rufinus himself ardently desired baptism ; he longed to break down the barrier that still separated him from the God of truth, and when he learned that, in case of necessity, any person might pour the regenerating waters, he begged his daughter not to wait longer.

The girl hesitated at first, but her father implored her saying :

“ O, my child ! if it is in thy power to make me a Christian, I ask it of thee in the name of the Lord JESUS ; do not longer delay my happiness. From what hand could I with greater joy, receive the gift of the all-powerful ? Dost thou doubt of my courage, of my will, to die for my faith ? Give me holy baptism and supernatural strength will fill my soul, that strength which recoils before no obstacle. When I shall be purified, invigorated by this sacred bath, what will death matter to me ? Let them make me suffer the most cruel torments, let them crush me under the most frightful torture, I shall be strong with divine strength and as long as I have a breath of life I shall say : I believe in GOD, one in three persons, I believe in His only Son, JESUS CHRIST our Lord, Who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I believe that by His death He has merited eternal life for me. ”

Rufinus was ready then. To hope to see a priest was illusive ; death was perhaps already awaiting its prey. Valeria understood that she should no longer hesitate but hasten to baptize her father.

Then remembering that it is customary in the Church to interrogate the catechumens, the young girl asked her father the usual questions after having led him to the blessed spring.

“ What dost thou ask of the Church ? ” she murmured. “ Faith and eternal life, ” answered Rufinus with emotion.

“ Dost thou renounce Satan ? ”

“ I do. ”

“ His works and pomps ? ”

“ I do. ”

"Dost thou believe in GOD the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"

"I believe."

After having addressed these questions to the author of her life, Valeria traced the sign of our redemption on the old man's forehead, recited the *Pater noster* and asked again:

"Dost thou wish to be baptized?"

"I wish it, I desire it with all my heart," replied Rufinus in a voice of deep feeling.

He then knelt down, while his happy child, taking water from the spring in her hands and pouring it over the head of her beloved father, slowly pronounced the sacramental words:

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, I baptize thee."

The girl's voice and hands trembled, while tears of inexpressible sweetness mingled with the regenerating waters. Her father was a Christian!

Rufinus caught his daughter's hands and, notwithstanding her resistance, covered them with his tears and kisses.

"O Valeria, O, my child, how happy I am!" he cried. "I can now call the GOD of the Christians my GOD: I also can now call Him my Father Who art in heaven!"

Valeria, carried away by deep powerful feelings that filled her soul, seemed in an ecstasy. Her soul, freeing itself from earth, already perceived the delights of heaven and burning words escaped her lips.

"See," she said, "that venerable old man with the long white beard, it is the Shepherd among His sheep; His face shines like the sun, His garments are whiter than the snow on the high mountains. Troops of Virgins

also dressed in white, surround His throne, as the princes do their sovereign. A little further, I see my mother dressed in a long tunic ; she is crowned with flowers and carries a palm in her hand. A rich necklace of rubies sparkles on her breast and two angels are leading her, to the glorious old man. She prostrates herself at His feet but He kindly lifts her up, His smile is that of a father while He gives her a delicious milk to drink from a golden cup."

Rufinus kneeling held his breath so as not to lose a single one of the inspired words which fell from his daughter's lips and he trembled with emotion.

After a moment's silence, Valeria continued :

"O, my sweet Mother ! ask the holy Shepherd to let us also drink of this mysterious cup. It is cold, it is dark in this black dungeon, how will my father endure it if he is not strengthened by a divine beverage ? From thy beautiful dwelling didst thou see me baptize him ? Dost thou know that he is a Christian ? Thou callest us, darling Mother, O, how I long to go to cross the unfathomable depths which still separate us ! Who will protect us against the frightful monsters, the terrible black dragons whose eyes dart forth hideous flames and whose claws seem ready to seize us ?"

She had scarcely finished these words when the jailer's rough voice rudely awoke Valeria from her ecstasy. He ordered the prisoners to seize the cord which he threw down to them so as to go up to the upper prison.

Valeria, full of joy and convinced that the hour of martyrdom had struck for Rufinus and herself, threw herself affectionately into his arms and cried out in a transport of delight :

"Let us advance fearlessly, beloved father, let us crush the head of the infernal dragon beneath our feet

while invoking the sweet name of JESUS. This divine name puts him to flight and annihilates all his power. Let us hasten, my Mother calls us, the combat is short, the glory is eternal."

Arrived in the first prison, the *præpositus* communicated to them the Emperor's sentences. The Prefect of the city of Rome was condemned to work in the imperial basilica and his daughter was to be set at liberty.

Valeria, a prey to the deepest sorrow, burst into sobs. If her father had been called to a speedy martyrdom, her grief would have been less keen; but this condemnation to a slow, cruel death, afflicted her beyond measure. In these works which were reserved for slaves, he would be exposed to the bad treatment of the keepers, to the most brutal coarseness. To her tender heart, was not this inexorable sentence harder to bear than any torments. Oh! why could she not go with him!

Rufinus guessed her excessive anguish.

"Beloved child," he said, "console thyself, I implore thee; my heart now soars above this world and the divine will is my sole happiness. It is thou thyself who didst show me the way; I shall fearlessly cross the abyss which separates me from my God. He now dwells in thy soul and will soon unite me to thy mother in the heavenly courts."

The pitiless warders brutally separated the Prefect from his daughter and, tying his hands behind his back, led him through the streets. Valeria followed him as far as the gates of the workyards. In her long, lingering look, Rufinus could read all the sorrow and tenderness that filled his daughter's broken heart, then the heavy gates of this school of all cruelty closed ponderously upon the poor condemned man.

Valeria remained long as if rooted to the spot, cold and insensible to all that was passing around her. She had to go away at last ; she slowly took the way to her father's palace, but just as she was about to cross the threshold, the coarse employees of the public treasury insolently and contemptuously drove her from the old home of her ancestors.

Valeria made no complaint, not a sigh escaped her, but, lifting her eyes to heaven she thought : " The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests : but the Son of man had not where to lay His head. "

" Shall I not be one of Christ's privileged ones, if He prepares a place for me at the foot of the cross ? The lamb does not open its mouth when the shepherd leads it away to be shorn, then bound and taken to be slaughtered. And I, Lord JESUS, I shall not complain either. "

The more the waters of a spring flow over rocks and sand, the more clear and limpid they become. Thus does the love of GOD grow sweeter yet stronger in the soul in proportion as it is purified by tribulation and suffering.

Certainly it was not the loss of her immense wealth that Valeria wept over. What mattered to her the things of earth ? However her heart clung to two dear relics : the *arco* and the robe steeped in her mother's blood¹.

1. The veneration of relics is as ancient as Christianity itself ; writings of the first centuries give us proofs of it. The acts of Saint Ignatius, torn by the teeth of wild beasts in the year 107, tell how the Christians had collected his bones and preserved them like inestimable treasures. The remains of Saint Polycarp, who confessed the faith of Christ in the year 155, were also thus collected.

The Church of Lyons, in a circular dated 177, deploras the loss of the relics of the Martyrs which were burned by the pagans who threw the ashes into the Rhone so as to leave the earth without relics they said.

In vain did she implore the hard, heartless men who guarded the palace ; they rudely refused her the precious remembrances which to her would have seemed a talisman. The gentle lamb was silent once more ; was it not the hour for perfect resignation ?

Whither was she to direct her steps ? The peaceful days of childhood, spent so happily in her father's palace, returned to her memory, and the tears filled her eyes ; but that daughter of holy hope and heavenly charity, loving submission to the divine will, filled the heroic soul of the young Roman Virgin.

"God of my heart," she murmured softly with uplifted eyes. "You see my soul before you like a garden laid waste by the tempest ; all the flowers have been stripped off, all the stalks are broken, there remains, at the foot of the cross, but one only bare vine shoot ; oh ! grant that it may entwine itself more closely around that cross, for here below there will be no more bright, warm rays for it, no more spring, no more warm breezes, no more flowers, no more fruit. O, my God, let me suffer ; but let your refreshing dews descend on my father."

She clasped her hands, and her eyes, bedimmed with tears, looked far beyond the vault of heaven while her trembling lips murmured : *Fiat voluntas tua sicut in cælo et in terra !*

CHAPTER VII

PAGAN FRIENDS

THE *prefectus urbi*, the chief magistrate of the city which was mistress of the world, was then condemned to the hard labour which was usually reserved for the vilest slaves. The illustrious descendant of ancient Roman nobility, the most loyal, the most disinterested of the officers of the court, was henceforth to live amongst the worst criminals, amongst the scum of the city which Rome would not acknowledge. In the eyes of all, this unheard of act of violence surpassed all that the crowned tyrant had hitherto allowed himself.

The patricians of ancient race and the proud senators felt themselves deeply wounded by this barbarous and cruel condemnation.

If Heraclius's spies had been more numerous, they could have told their master what a wave of anger stirred all ranks of society and agitated even the lowest of the people. This act roused strong feelings of revolt everywhere. The crafty Greek would perhaps have shortened his long list of proscribed names, had he been better informed of the general impression, for if Maxentius passed the decree it was at the instigation of his odious Chancellor.

The unjust condemnation of Rufinus filled the measure of dark hatred that Maxentius had accumulated, and all hopes now turned towards Constantine. The young hero of Gaul appeared to all eyes as their only saviour,

their only liberator from the increasing tyranny of the monster who held Rome in terror.

Pagans and Christians, nobles and plebeians, all had the same thought, all eagerly desired to see Constantine enter Rome soon and put an end to the despotic, sanguinary rule.

It was remarkable that while all hearts pitied Rufinus's fate, no one thought of the unfortunate Valeria; not one family offered the poor girl the shelter of a roof. The Church alone, with all a mother's love, had taken care of the orphan.

When the pope, Miltiades, heard of the Prefect's arrest and the confiscation of his property, he sent the deacon, Severinus, in search of the young girl, and charged him to find a shelter for the poor child so hardly treated by fate. But why say fate; was it not rather the love of the Spouse who invited her to share His sorrows so that she might one day reign with Him?

The Christian families of Rome would have contested the honour of receiving her, but the daughter of Rufinus had but one thought: snatching her father from the works of the imperial basilica. She could find peace nowhere until she had tried almost impossibilities to deliver Rufinus from that odious, lingering death.

If the Church held martyrdom in high honour, she however counselled the employing of every lawful means for saving the lives of her children and rescuing them from the cruelty of their persecutors. Thus it was that we see Saint Cyprian proclaiming blessed, those who had been called to confess their faith with their blood and speaking with enthusiasm of the glory of martyrdom, while he himself fled to preserve his life for his flock, until such time as God manifestly called him to the honour of martyrdom.

The indomitable courage of the Christians in the face of death did not prevent their using a thousand ingenious means of defeating the sanguinary projects of their enemies. For them there was but one insuperable barrier : offending God.

Valeria recalled, one by one, the names of all her unhappy father's friends, but could not find one among them who might save him. One had not the required influence, another had not the courage ; others, such as Symmachus, for example, were too much prejudiced against Christianity. For the first time the young girl sadly realized that the friends of the happy ones of earth cannot give them any help when misfortune has changed their fate. Grieved, but too Christian to give way to discouragement, Valeria determined to apply personally to the Empress.

Maxentius's wife, treated infamously by her royal spouse, had drunk of the cup of all bitterness. The young girl hoped that trouble would have made her compassionate, and, however feeble this gleam of hope, she directed her steps towards the Palatine.

All Rome knew what was the lot of the unhappy sovereign who, repulsed by her lord and master, lived in the most secluded part of the palace. She was obliged, however, to appear in all her magnificence at the public fêtes, the tyrant thinking thus to blind people as to her domestic happiness ; but no one was deceived, and in this the poor Empress found new suffering.

When it was announced to her that the noble daughter of the Prefect Rufinus, and Sophronia, begged an audience, her heart was touched, and she ordered that the young girl should be admitted without delay.

The flower of compassion does not generally bloom

in the gardens of happiness ; stony ground covered with the thorns of suffering, is generally more suited to it.

The Empress, lying on a divan, had for all company, the two only slaves her autocratic spouse allowed her. She was tall, and on her pale face, disfigured by suffering, there remained traces of great beauty. However, the havoc made by sorrow was so deep, that the paint on her cheeks and the *stibium* with which her eyebrows were decorated, did not suffice to restore her much vaunted youthfulness and lost attractions.

After the death of Romulus, her only son, she enveloped herself in long mourning robes and for some year refused to be comforted. Gradually, however, this great sorrow became less keen and the Empress sought to forget and to cheat herself with trifling amusements. She might have been seen, for hours together, being dressed by her slaves in her most gorgeous robes, and adorned with the rarest pearls and most precious stones.

Still young, the unfortunate sovereign felt an imperious desire for joy and pleasure, she thirsted for affection and vainly tried to fill the void which enclosed her.

The two women, the fair Syra and the dark Numidica, were most assiduous in their attentions. Both practised magic and pretended to see particular signs in the near future, luminous rays, certain indications of hope and happiness ; but, alas ! it was a mirage which ever retreated and of which she could never obtain possession.

The profound seclusion in which she lived weighed heavily on the heart of the Empress : seeing no way out of it, not being able to draw from the source of truth the hope of a better life, she sometimes gave herself up to paroxysms of dark melancholy and the most frightful despair.

Such was the state of mind of Maxentius's wife when Valeria presented herself. With her eyes fixed on vacancy, she did not even perceive the steel mirror that Numidica held towards her that she might admire the artistic manner in which the slave had just braided her beautiful hair.

All in the palace had left their mistress in complete ignorance of the political events which were taking place in the empire. Each one said, in an undertone, that the situation was becoming more critical each day; she alone was never given any news. What then was her astonishment when an imprudent word gave her an insight into the state of affairs and showed them to her under quite a new light, just at the time of Valeria's visit. It was not difficult for her to see the extent of the misfortune which threatened her. The future appeared so dark, that a horrible terror took possession of her, and her fears increased when she remembered that on the evening before, a large flight of owls had settled on the Palatine¹.

She wished however to see Valeria; as soon as the young girl entered, she sent away her slaves, and, attracted by the gentle but noble bearing of her visitor, she listened to her attentively.

Nevertheless, when Valeria had explained to her the object of her visit, the Empress shook her head.

"Poor child! dost thou then not know Maxentius?" she asked with a bitter smile. "If I dared to ask him to

1. Roman superstition, as widespread as it was deeply rooted, attached great importance to certain fortuitous events. Gallicanus, in a pamphlet on Constantine, says that the avenging owls drove Maxentius from his palace. Zosimus says that these malevolent birds, presage of evil, settled, in considerable numbers, on the walls of the city.

spare thy father's life, he would immediately see a rival in him. Alas ! I am only an unfortunate woman, altogether powerless, useless to all, unable to soothe any sorrow. My hands are loaded with chains ; they seem to be of gold, but their clasp is none the less cruel. Amidst the riches which surround me, dressed in purple and adorned with jewels, I envy the poverty of the lowest beggar ; the diadem I wear seems to have been placed on my forehead by pitiless fate but to weigh the more heavily on my sorrow and to make me feel all its implacable irony. ”

The Empress paused. Everything about her breathed the most frightful despair. Valeria, moved to the depths of her soul, forgot for an instant, before the dark waves of so much bitterness, the heavy cross which oppressed her, and she tried to raise this poor soul to hope in a God Who is infinitely good.

“ What the poets say of father of the gods is a beautiful illusion, ” replied the sceptical Empress ; “ but it is only suited to the children of happiness. Learn, like me, to bear the hatred of fate with contemptuous indifference. This advice is the best I can offer thee. When the burden of life becomes too heavy, poison or poniard can rid us of it. ”

While saying these sad words, the Empress rose, and, dismissing Valeria, gave her her hand to kiss.

Valeria's Christian soul was overwhelmed, and inexpressible anguish wrung her heart.

“ Poor paganism ! ” she murmured, “ and is that all that thou canst offer thy adepts in their sorrow, despair and suicide. ”

According to her gentle habit, her eyes sought heaven, to draw thence a more lively hope and to send up a hymn

of tenderest gratitude. Her own trials seemed now but a light cloud, half veiling for one only instant, the dazzling orb which pours down on us both light and warmth.

The deacon, Severinus, awaited the young girl outside the palace ; Irene accompanied him.

"Valeria," she said, "many of our wealthy families lovingly offer thee their rich homes, and yet I dare ask thee to share my modest dwelling, for I feel that I love thee more than all the others."

"Noble Irene," replied Valeria, "thou knowest that nowhere more willingly than under thy roof, would I eat of the bread of Christian charity."

"It is then unnecessary, noble Lady," said Severinus, "that I should make any offers ; I shall go at once and tell the holy Father what thy choice is, but I wish to say that everywhere the brothers would have esteemed it a favour to receive thee at their hearths."

When Heraclius presented himself at the palace, shortly after Maxentius's repast, with his list of proscription, he knew that he had arrived at a propitious moment. It is easy to divine that the condemnation the Chancellor most desired was that of the Prefect. His thirst for vengeance had been further increased by Rufinus's stern refusal of all Sabinius's entreaties and he burned with the desire of satisfying it.

He had hastened to tell Maxentius that the Prefect of the city was at the head of an odious conspiracy. The most irrefutable proofs left not the shadow of a doubt. At the same time, Heraclius placed in the hands of his master the minutes of the proceedings which related the offensive expressions, injurious to the Emperor, said to have been uttered by Rufinus during the course of the preliminary examination, and lastly he made known that

the accused himself acknowledged that he was a Christian.

“Cursed race!” cried Maxentius in a rage and striking his fist on the table, “will they increase till they overwhelm us! The club must crush them! The Prefect of Rome a Christian! Every nook and corner of my city is gutted with the miserable brood. On one hand there is Constantine who continues to advance, and on the other this dog Rufinus who dares to insult me in open court! Ah! he shall pay dear for it; I will stop his barking in his throat! Cursed traitor! Infamous wretch! Let him be immediately employed on the hardest work of the vilest slaves at my basilica! Let him be placed among the most criminal! Dost thou hear? Before evening I wish thee to present me another list of conspirators, a long list. Seize them, these birds of prey, in the farmyards, among the lords and senators. Christians or not, it matters little to me; in my eyes they are all guilty. If I do not hasten to twist the necks of these proud cocks, if I do not pluck these horrid fowls, they will fly over my shoulders.”

Heraclius had no need of a stimulant to make him forward his dark work. We have seen how he had executed the imperial decree without any delay. A few hours later the Tullian¹ prison was full of unfortunate prisoners, so called conspirators, of whom a great number were Christians. At the head of them was Antonius Valerius, one of the highest personages of the imperial court.

The *Acta diurna* announced, that same evening, the two-

1. After the Mamertine prison the Tullian prison was the hardest, the one that inspired more terror. It was situated near the Tiber, and its ruins now form the crypt of the church of Saint Nicholas. It is often spoken of in the *acts of the martyrs*.

fold news of Rufinus's condemnation as a conspirator, and the avowal, made by himself, that he was a Christian. On reading this, the Romans shook their heads saying that the Prefect of the city could not be a Christian; but a few days previously he had offered incense to Jupiter, in the temple of the Capitol, during the festivals of the *Ludi-Romani*. All Rome so well knew the fidelity and loyalty of the Prefect, that each one spoke in an undertone of a tale invented by the courtiers of the tyrant.

On the other hand, the companions of Sabinius had all been witnesses of his mother's rage when her hopes of the marriage had been shattered. The coincidence was all too evident, and jeering remarks soon passed round. All were of one voice in accusing Heraclius whose old animosity, as a matter of fact, was well known. The *Acta diurna* announced also that Annius Annitus was named *prefectus urbi* to replace Aradius Rufinus.

That evening, an armed band, paid by the Chancellor, went through all the streets shouting a well known cry: "The Christians to the lions! The Christians to the lions!"

Symmachus was one of those whom Rufinus's condemnation incensed the most. He might have been able to explain to himself the accusation of high treason, for he knew Maxentius's cupidity, but he would not believe that the ex-Prefect had renounced his gods. Did he not know him thoroughly? Had he not been a witness of Rufinus's fidelity to the traditive religion of the state, notwithstanding the solicitations of his wife and daughter?

A friend of the condemned from childhood, he thought it was his duty to make an effort to save him. Overcoming then his repugnance for the unworthy Cæsar whose court he proudly refrained from frequenting, the powerful

Senator determined to go and see him that very evening.

Maxentius was surprised but flattered by the visit, and he received him with a politeness not usual to him.

Symmachus adressed him without any preamble.

"Sire," he said, "I hope I shall not excite thy anger by calling thy attention to a serious matter, a flagrant mistake. It is a question of an accusation which doubtless would merit the greatest chastisement, had it any foundation, but..."

"Thou dost mean the condemnation of Rufinus to hard labour," interrupted the Emperor; "but if thy intervention in favour of one of thy peers does thee great honour, noble Senator, I know that Symmachus would never approve of treason, and that a conspiracy with the enemies of the empire would in his eyes render the traitors worthy of death. Besides, does not the denial of the gods, who have made Rome great and powerful, merit the most horrible torments?" added the Cæsar hypocritically and craftily. "Be assured, noble Symmachus," he continued with a still more feline manner, "that 't will be sweet to me to discover the innocence of thy friend."

"I know Aradius Rufinus from childhood," replied the Senator, "and I vouch for his loyalty towards our gods; I am acquainted with his most intimate convictions and I know that for him the greatness of Rome depends entirely on her fidelity to the religion of the state."

"And if I tell thee that this very day he cursed the gods, that he openly declared himself a member of that infamous and trebly villainous sect of Christians? Will it be difficult for thee after that, to believe him guilty of high treason?"

"Pardon me if I make a request which is perhaps presumptuous," replied Symmachus nobly; "would it be possible for me to hear this avowal from Rufinus's own lips?"

"The dog of a traitor has already been led to my basilica; I ask for nothing better than that thou shouldst, with thy own ears, hear him insult the gods, I even desire it. Thou shalt also see around him the scum from which I have delivered Rome."

"And if he is really a Christian," still persisted Symmachus, "but declares himself ready to renounce his errors, what will thou do, Prince?"

The Emperor, with difficulty, repressed a gesture of anger; his savage eyes flashed fire under his thick eye brows; however he repressed the words which would have betrayed him and replied with ill-concealed vexation:

"I will spare his life. I give thee my word as an Emperor for it. Go then; I will send one of my centurions with thee, so that thou mayest be able to approach the prisoner."

At a sign from the Sovereign, the centurion Martial came forward. Of Herculean height and strength, he towered head and shoulders above Maxentius. Holding his enormous club in his hand, he bent one knee to the ground.

"It is the *pumilius* (dwarf) whom I give thee for a companion," said the Emperor laughing; "see how tiny his key is, it opens all doors without any trouble and that of Tartarus quite easily."

And he pointed to the large club with a chuckle.

Symmachus replied only by his silence to this coarse jest and took leave of the tyrant. Followed by his strange

companion he directed his steps towards the basilica but not without some vague uneasiness. The Emperor's confident manner when he affirmed that Rufinus was a Christian made him thoughtful. But he told himself that even if the Prefect had had a moment of weakness, he could not resist his reasoning nor the hope of recovering his liberty. This God of the Christians, had He protected his wife against Maxentius ? Had he preserved his daughter from sorrow ? Had He sheltered him from the Emperor's despotism, from the cruel vengeance of his enemies ? Yes, it would be easy for Symmachus to convince his dear Rufinus of the gross errors of this impious sect, even if he had been foolish enough to allow himself to be seduced.

Even while he gave himself up to these reflections, his eye sought for the ex-Prefect among the slaves who filled the vast workyard ; he finished by finding him loaded with heavy chains, covered with rags and working at an exaggerated task, although the shades of night were already falling in this place of horror¹.

Symmachus's heart was wrung with inexpressible anguish at the sad sight, but overcoming his emotion and approaching the prisoner he said :

“ Rufinus, thou art the victim of an odious calumny ;

1. The Julian Basilica, whose ruins have been found in the searches made in our days, is consecrated by the glorious confession of countless martyrs. It was there that they found themselves before their judges, there that they heard their condemnation, there, in fine, that they endured the most frightful tortures, the most cruel and yet the most glorious of deaths.

If the stones could speak, what would they not have to tell us of the invincible courage of these martyrs of the faith ? We may then fearlessly say that the Julian Basilica is one of the most hallowed places of ancient Rome.

my noble friend, I come to tell thee that thou art free, for it is not true that thou, Rufinus, art a Christian. Tell me, hasten to tell me that thou wilt follow me to one of the temples of our immortal gods, there to offer sacrifice and to give the lie, in the most unequivocal manner, to the infamous detractors. Maxentius has given me his word as Emperor that on this condition thou art free."

"Symmachus," replied the prisoner, "what thou hast done affects me deeply, for I understand what a sacrifice thou hast made for our old friendship's sake, by going to the Emperor to solicit my pardon; but all is useless, for I am a Christian. It is the Lord JESUS whom I adore. Him who is the Eternal Truth! These chains make thee sigh, I would not exchange them for a kingdom, for they prove my love and fidelity to Christ."

Symmachus stood amazed; astonishment, sorrow and something akin to indignation agitated him.

"Is it true, is it really true?" he questioned, "am I the sport of a wild dream? But, no, that cannot be. — It is thou, my poor friend, whom sorrow has led into error; Sophronia's death has affected thy mind; I beg of thee, drive away these dark thoughts, be reasonable again. How canst thou worship as thy GOD, a criminal, a crucified who could not save Himself from a shameful death, who was not able to rescue thy wife, who cannot protect thee?"

"Trial," replied Rufinus in a calm and affectionate tone, "trial, my dear Symmachus, has torn away the thick veils which enveloped me; I now understand how beautiful Sophronia's and Valeria's faith is. It is that faith which delivers us, it is that faith which, ere long, will deliver all mankind. I am ready to suffer everything to confess it, and the more cruel my death

shall be the more joyfully shall I hasten to meet it, for to save me Christ suffered still more. I thank thee, Symmachus, I thank thee for thy faithful friendship. May my God, the only true God, reward thy noble devotedness by giving thee a share in the love of the Lord JESUS. ”

Symmachus turned away his head, and, without a word, without a look of farewell towards his friend, he retired dismayed, as if the Medusa had appeared to him. According to orders, the Centurion had assisted at the interview between the friends ; with his eyes fixed on Rufinus, silent and recollected, he allowed Symmachus to withdraw.

“ Noble lord, ” he then said to Rufinus, “ tell me who can instruct me in the faith of the God whom thou dost adore ? ”

Rufinus had heard the faithful repeat Tertullian’s words : “ The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians. ” They came to his mind now and he understood that his sacrifice had already borne fruit ; a flood of consolation flowed in full waves over his generous heart, while he explained to the soldier that he should go along the Appian way as far as the second millstone, and there ask for Miltiades, the bishop of Rome.

“ Go to him, ” added the martyr, “ he will teach thee all that it is necessary to know to become a Christian. Tell him that Rufinus is happy, very happy to suffer for Christ, and that he recommends his beloved daughter, Valeria, to the Pontiff’s fatherly care. ”

He could not say more, as one of the guards of the workyard roughly pushed the ex-Prefect, telling him to continue his work.

The Centurion’s eyes sadly followed the poor prisoner,

but he saw his face brighten with heavenly joy when they struck him, and, filled with admiration, he said to himself that the religion which Rufinus had embraced must be very beautiful, the evidence of its truth very powerful.

"How," thought he, "can one calmly give up the rank of Senator, the position of Prefect of the town, of the first magistrate of Rome, renounce immense riches, a luxurious life, the pleasures of home life, and come and lead a life worse than death in this prison, and at last end one's days in the amphitheatre in the power of the wild beasts, before a threatening mocking crowd! Is it possible, without some strength that is more than human, without the assistance of a God who gives, while still on earth, as a reward for the sacrifice, the courage and energy which are the preludes of future joy? I too wish to have a share in this manly virtue, in these endless rewards. Not later than to-morrow I will go and seek the Pontiff of the Christians so that he may initiate me in this marvellous faith.

The Centurion then hurriedly returned to the palace to take up his duty.

The arrests, the rumours of conspiracies spread throughout the city, the outcry raised by Heraclius's band, had struck the faithful with consternation. These were surely the forerunners of a persecution.

All the Christians, alas! were not animated with the noble thirst for martyrdom that we admired in Valeria, when, with holy enthusiasm, she had gazed on the instruments of torture still red with blood.

Numerous apostates had denied the faith during the last persecution, and the maternal heart of the Church still bled painfully. It was then an imperious, a pressing

duty for Miltiades and his clergy to assist the brethren in prison, to strengthen them in the faith, to succour them by an ingenious and fruitful charity, and to surround them with love and holy veneration.

The deacon Vincent, had by means of gold, obtained entrance into the Tullian prison every evening, and, up to the present moment, his heart had always been filled with the purest consolation. Joyous and hopeful, the Christians bravely awaited the hour in which they were to lay down their lives as a testimony of their faith. Resolved to endure every torture, they lovingly relied on the divine strength that the Christ had never yet denied to humble trusting souls. All persevered in prayer and in sweet charity, when an order, as strange as it was unforeseen, was brought to the prison from the Emperor. A decree of Maxentius freed all the prisoners of noble birth.

We shall soon learn the reason of this extraordinary decision that no one could explain.

But notwithstanding this unexpected release, the number of Christians still lying imprisoned in the Tullian prison was very great ; and new victims came unexpectedly to fill the places left empty by the decree.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRISONERS

HERACLIUS's hatred made him forget his customary prudence and cleverness. Either because of his eagerness in preparing his list of proscription or because of the frequent interruptions during his diabolical work, the Chancellor had inscribed in this pretended conspiracy, names that his craftiness should have reserved for more favorable circumstances.

He had bitterly to regret having comprised in it Antonius Valerius for whom he had a deadly hatred, because of his proverbial loyalty, which, many a time, had brought about the failure of his shameful underhand practices.

The Emperor was aware that Antonius Valerius was a Christian ; but his straightforwardness and his noble qualities compelled Maxentius's esteem and confidence. The Greek, as we shall see, paid dearly for this arrest.

Surula, Valerius's worthy mother, was a noble type of the Christian widow, fearing God and knowing no other fear ; one of those Roman ladies who, despising the corrupt society of that period, shrouded themselves in the practice of austere chastity, and martyrdom, which stood ever before them, gave their virtue an indescribable vigour. Surrounded by their children and their grandchildren, they bore on their brows the halo of peace which reigned around them. Thus does the orb of day, at his setting, brighten with his rays the clouds around him and the entire west.

Heraclius's archers had come and seized the fervent Christian in the midst of his family, and had violently torn him from the arms of his weeping young wife, from his little ones who held him and wished to follow him.

In her brave soul Surula would have found the courage to offer her son up to a bloody martyrdom ; but the high-spirited Roman matron would not allow that the honour of his name should be tarnished by an infamous calumny ; she would not permit that her beloved son should be considered a perjurer and a traitor, a cowardly conspirator. She took with her the eldest of Antonius's children, Jason, a boy of ten years old, beautiful as the day, and went to the imperial palace where the audience she asked for was immediately granted.

" Emperor," she said, throwing herself on her knees, " if my son had merited thy disfavour for not having fulfilled his duty, I would bow my head before the just sentence, but . . . "

" Of what disfavour dost thou wish to speak ? " interrupted Maxentius raising the matron, " thy son has my entire confidence and I know that the noble Antonius is worthy of it. "

A gleam of joy brightened Surula's features.

" Thanks be to thee, august Emperor," she cried rising, " I can then be certain that the doors of the Tullian prison will open for my son, and his chains be broken. "

" By Jupiter ! what dost thou say ? " asked Maxentius surprised at an arrest of which he was ignorant ; " who then has dared to lay his hand on one of the first officers of my court. What accusation can be brought against the most honourable of men ? "

"If even the shade of a fault hung over him," continued Surula, "his unfortunate mother would not be bold enough to present herself before thee; but thou sayest it thyself, and all Rome knows it as well. Antonius could not be a conspirator, his loyalty is far above such infamous calumny."

These words recalled to the tyrant's memory the orders that he had himself given Heraclius, and his brow clouded.

"Thy son is a Christian!" said Maxentius, "and he has thus himself provoked the accusation of which thou dost complain. Birds of a feather flock together."

"Alas! how can I, O Maxentius! prove to thee that the Christians are thy most loyal, thy most faithful subjects," said the matron sadly. "See this child, the picture of his father: dost thou recognize him? Thy clemency willed that he should be brought up with the child which heaven took from thee! It is over his innocent head, it is by the memory of the son Romulus that I swear that Antonius has not betrayed thee; none have been more faithful to thee than he."

Maxentius looked at Jason, his angelic face framed with the thick glossy curls, his large eyes still humid with weeping, his delicate intelligent look captivated the barbarian and subdued him as nature had the eye tame wild beasts.

In his *prætexta*, his neck ornamented with the *bulla* or golden ball, which was attached to a chain of the same metal, like all boys of noble birth, Jason looked beautiful, beautiful as a vision.

The Emperor could not take his eyes off the handsome child. He had preserved an idolatrous love for his only son whom death had taken from him but a short while ago. It was in his honour that he had built the magni-

ificent circus on the Appian way ; it was to his memory too that he destined the *basilica* which was being constructed on the Forum at very great cost and which was to bear the name of Romulus. Everywhere in the palace the eye met busts and portraits of the young prince imperial ; and now, before him, stood his son's companion, he who had shared his studies and his games, so handsome, so amiable.

"Such doubtless would Romulus have been," he said to himself, "if hostile fatality had not robbed him away from his father."

At this remembrance, the rude barbarian, the hard, unmerciful, cruel man was softened and tears filled his eyes.

When Surula again fell on her knees, with a spontaneous movement, Jason knelt too beside his grandmother, and, lifting his small imploring hands, said in tearful tones :

"Lord Emperor, I implore thee, give me back my father !"

Maxentius thought he heard an echo of his son's words in this childish voice, he thought he felt Romulus's arms about his neck.

"Yes, my child," murmured the tyrant who had for a moment become a lamb, "yes, thy father shall return to thee."

And he left the room without turning his head and saying :

"Go, go, do not thank me. Yes, Antonius shall return to you."

Alone and deeply affected, he stopped before a bust of Romulus, looked long at it, and, while the tears fell silently down his rough face, murmured :

"Why, why did perfidious fate take my child away

from me ? Without doubt he would have soothed my wild passions, he would have made his father a good and merciful sovereign ; but the hour which deprived me of him, brought somber darkness into my heart, it excited my temper as the hunter's dart irritates the bears of our forests. His smile would have softened me as the light of the stars silvers the leaves of the young elm. — But for thee now, Maxentius, every object is illumined only by the lurid light of the lightning and the fulminant thunder which rumbles and bursts with a crash. ”

A chamberlain came to rouse the Emperor from his reverie and to tell him that Heraclius wished to be admitted to his presence. He came to present to him the list of the members of the pretended conspiracy hatched by Rufinus.

The courtier's studied smile soon faded from his lips ; Maxentius came to meet him with frowning brows, eyes dark and wild.

“ Wretch ? ” he cried angrily, “ who allowed thee to cast an officer of the imperial court into prison ? By Pluto and the infernal regions ! I swear that I who raised thee from the dust shall crush thee under my heel like a vile insect ! — Give me that list ! ”

And he violently tore the paper from the hands of the Chancellor who was as pale as death. While glancing over it the Emperor became more irritated, and Heraclius trembled in every limb.

“ Two Valerius ! — Two Cornelius ! — Five Annitius ! ! — The cursed Greek ! He is decimating all the Roman nobility ! — Where are the deacons and Christian priests that I commanded thee to deliver to me ? Oh ! miserable fox ! thou hast succeeded in changing thy fur, but thy skin remains still the same ! Go immediately and set all

the nobles free, and if before to-morrow evening thou hast not imprisoned the archdeacon who has the key of the treasures of the Christians, and also a half dozen other chiefs of this infernal sect, I will show thy former brethren how the Emperor will treat thee, vile, mangy dog !”

Heraclius made off without giving the Emperor time to add another word, and he was seen to slip noiselessly out of the palace like a hurled cur.

When he felt himself safe from all observation, he gave free course to the rage which consumed him.

“Cursed tyrant !” he exclaimed, “did he not tell me himself to lay hands on the nobles ? To plunder the senate particularly ? Who then could have made him change his mind ! — Ah ! I have it ! It is Symmachus ! He was seen to enter the imperial apartments. The wretch has succeeded in intimidating Maxentius, and now that odious barbarian blames me for it all. Why is it that after so much careful calculation and cunning, after so many crimes that I have accumulated in order to open a way to a safe and brilliant future, fate makes use of my own hands to pile up the stones which close every means of egress, and what is more, to erect the scaffold for myself perhaps. I wished at any price to avoid this new persecution of the Christians, since Constantine began to threaten us. I have wished to reserve for myself a bridge of safety to lead to him whom Fortune seems to favour. But I dare not hesitate now. Victims must be thrown down the monster’s throat, to prevent him devouring me in his rage. If I could at least lay hands on one deacon and one priest and thus satisfy the glutton’s appetite ! If I could but prevent a real persecution, I would succeed no doubt in gaining Meltiades over and thus obtaining his protection when necessary.”

Heraclius well knew where the dignitaries of the Church lived ; but it was well known that the Christians had already placed them in safety, as also the priests and the deacons. The best thing would be to go to the cemeteries where the mysteries were celebrated.

He decided that those on the Appian way would be best, and gave orders that at the earliest hour, the next morning, the most expert of the archers should be sent there.

The emissaries therefore found themselves, before sunrise, watching at the entrance to the catacombs of Saint Calixtus. They had just arrested an old man, the deacon Severus, but they were soon compelled to let go their hold and make off as fast as their legs would carry them, if they did not wish to pass from life to death themselves. The fact was the more curious as the Christians never defended themselves by force of arms.

They came all bruised to relate their adventure to Heraclius.

" We were already rejoicing because we had laid hands on an old deacon," said the chief of the band, " and we were arranging to bring him to you when a Centurion of the imperial guard, as tall and strong as a giant, seized us by the chest and lifting us up, one in his right hand and one in his left, began to play with us as if we were ossicles, knocking our backs together ; all the bones in our bodies cracked. Then, throwing us half dead into a corner, the monster fell on our companions, and if the prisoner himself had not restrained him, they would not now be of the number of the living. It was thus that this Centaur delivered the old man and then accompanied him into the town himself."

Heraclius made the unfortunate archers feel all the

weight of his anger ; he called them cowards, even though they showed him the wounds and bruises that attested the veracity of their story.

The Chancellor was sure however that the adventure would put Maxentius into a good humour ; he knew of old how much the Emperor delighted in the feast of prowess of his Hercules and to what a pitch they could raise his mirth and amuse him.

“ When you are called before the Cæsar, ” he said to the archers, “ do not fail to explain how this fellow almost reduced you to powder, omit nothing ; reproduce the scene to the life and show him how you have been bruised. . . It is the only way of getting out of the trouble and saving your heads. ”

When the Chancellor was obliged to present himself before the Emperor in the evening, he had posted his men in the vestibule, ready to answer the first call.

Heraclius began by complaining bitterly to the Emperor that one of the centurions of his guard had prevented the execution of the orders of his divinity ; and he then recounted how the archers had been constrained to let Severus go after he had been arrested.

As the wily Greek had foreseen, Maxentius was highly amused at the exploits of his Hercules, and his loud bursts of laughter reassured Heraclius as he was telling the barbarian of the misadventure of the soldiers.

“ Well, ” said the Emperor laughing, “ I must question my criminal to be able to judge from my own knowledge of the case ; send for him. ”

Martial soon entered, and saluting the Emperor, stood motionless before him like the pillar of Hercules. Without any obsequiousness as without any ostentation, he waited in silence till Maxentius had finished inspecting him from

head to foot. The tyrant laughed, showing his large teeth ; it was evident that he was proud to possess this athlete of extraordinary height and strength, and he looked at him with a complacency that he did not try to dissimulate.

"Go on now," he said to Heraclius, "do your office of accuser."

Heraclius complied, being careful not to omit any comical points. Martial listened unmoved, and his face betrayed no emotion.

When the Chancellor had ceased speaking, the centurion, with a sarcastic smile that did not escape the Emperor, said in his turn, slowly and with imperturbable calmness :

"As these men refused to release the old man, quietly and without any violence, I put them a little aside ; but as thou canst see, Cæsar, I took great care not to break either their arms or legs, a thing I could have done much more easily than a cat can crush the bones of a mouse, if I had not been careful."

"But," replied Maxentius, laughing still more heartily, "thou didst knock these two men together, so much and so well, that they did not recover consciousness till about an hour after escaping from thy grasp."

The poor archers, desirous of obeying Heraclius's injunctions, enforced the Emperor's words by such a piteous expression of face and by representing Martial's exploit with such comical gestures and contortions, that Maxentius was more than delighted.

"Well," said the Hercules, turning towards his victims with unmoved coolness, "perhaps I seized you a little more roughly than I meant to do ; one cannot measure such a thing quite exactly."

Maxentius's formidable bursts of laughter so terrified the complainants that they fled and the Emperor did not

think of recalling them, so captivated was he by the charms of his barbarian.

Martial added :

“ The companions of these two, seeing what I could do, scampered away ; and that was the best thing they could have done, for I might have lost my calm self-possession, and it would have been easy for me to send the toads flying over the garden wall. ”

“ I must punish thee, however, ” said Maxentius, “ for thou didst prevent these archers from doing their duty. ”

“ My Lord, ” replied the centurion, “ he whom I accompany is under my protection, under that of a Hercules, and therefore under that of the Emperor. ”

“ By the club of Hercules, thou art right, my gallant centurion, ” exclaimed Maxentius, “ and the rogues should thank thee for not having crushed them like fleas, between these two great cudgels that Jupiter gave thee as hands. ”

Quite pleased with the diversion that the gods of Olympus had procured him, Maxentius continued to look proudly at Martial.

“ By Jupiter ! ” said he, “ a hundred guards built on this model would put Constantine’s legions to flight. ”

Heraclius hastened to take advantage of the tyrant’s good humour to efface the recollections of the previous day’s anger ; he presented a magnificent programme for the imperial fêtes, written in letters of gold on a purple tinted parchment. The Emperor was satisfied, and, Martial’s story contributing to it, he forgot his anger against the Greek, who was restored to his good graces. The fox had aimed well.

Maxentius pushed forward the work of the Basilica with

feverish activity however ; one might have said that he was struggling against some secret apprehension, and that fate showed him another master of Rome who would finish it for another purpose¹. The immense ruins of this edifice may be seen to-day ; the original entrance looked on to the coliseum. The *absis*, opposite, was transformed into a storehouse for hay, and is quite separated from the other ruins. The building consisted of three parts ; eight Corinthian columns, upheld by enormous pillars, supported the central dome which was eighty-two feet in diameter.

Paul V placed the last of these columns on the square of *Sainte Marie Majeure*. The dome, the nave (also divided into three parts), and the steps leading to the Forum have also been preserved. Quite near the basilica, towards the Capitol, the temple of Peace and the office of the *praefectus urbi* were situated. A plan of ancient Rome was found there, engraved on marble, and is preserved in the Capitoline Museum.

The first rays of the morning sun scarcely gilded the peaks of the Latium mountains, when thousands of slaves and prisoners began to lift the stones and marbles, while others prepared the mortar or raised the scaffolding. The pitiless guards overwhelmed them with blows, and the backs of these unfortunates, furrowed by the long leather thongs, often streamed with blood. Nightfall did not put an end to their tortures, and their labours continued far into the night, in order to fulfil Maxentius's orders ; many among these unfortunates succumbed under the work and the tortures.

1. The *basilica* was in fact finished by his conqueror who gave it his own name.

The Christians tried in a thousand ways to soften the lot of those of their brethren who were condemned to these terrible labours. They did not retreat either before sacrifices or dangers to obtain this end, and God blessed their endeavours¹. They won the guards with gold, and succeeded in relieving the sufferings of their dear martyrs, with the exception of one. The merciless orders given by Heraclius exacted such vigilant watchfulness on the part of the overseers that it was impossible to approach Rufinus. How much did the ex-Prefect, whose faith and love increased in proportion to his fidelity under his trials, envy the happy lot of three of his companions in misfortune on whom the priest had been able to confer baptism and give holy Communion. He was consumed with the desire of eating of this Bread of the strong ; but the orders were so severe that all attempts failed.

Each day, poor Valeria took her place on the lowest step of the Palatine staircase, opposite the works of the *basilica* ; she spent long hours there, following her old father with her eyes, and her heart was crushed with grief at sight of the cruel treatment to which he was subjected. How joyfully would she have taken his place.

1. A letter of Saint Cyprian's witnesses to the touching zeal of the Christians for the prisoners. The holy bishop of Carthage moderates their ardour : " Do not ask in-atiably so as not to lose all. "

" Take care, " he continues, " be cautious. To be more safe, let the priests who celebrate the holy Mysteries in the prisons, beside the confessors of the faith, go there one at a time rarely accompanied by a deacon ; let them even change both time and place, so that by these changes in our assemblies, we avoid being discovered. "

In five other letters, the holy Bishop gives still clearer counsels for the conduct of the Christians towards the prisoners.

The treasures of the Church were specially intended for their relief.

But, alas ! not only could she do nothing, but no deacon, priest or Christian soldier, not even the good centurion Martial, could succeed in exchanging a simple word with Rufinus. Seated then, with her eyes fixed on the prisoners, she watched every opportunity to show the most dearly loved of fathers, by a gesture or a sign, how much his daughter shared his sufferings. An hour came however, though all too short, alas ! when Rufinus' sufferings were mitigated, thanks to an unexpected intervention.

Valeria's daily visit to her father had not escaped Sabinus. As superintendent of the imperial works, he visited the workyards and had noticed the young patrician watching her poor father. He understood the greatness of her grief ; his frivolous, inconstant heart could not remain altogether insensible before the deep misfortune of the father and the daughter, and, profiting by the latitude allowed him by his office, he gave orders that the prisoner should be less hardly treated. He even went so far as to allow Valeria to have short interviews with her father, and in the greatest secrecy, with his help, she obtained some comforts for him. The poor child thanked him with tears, and Sabinus resolved to do more.

The next day, without the young girl suspecting it, he followed her at a distance, and when he saw the miserable dwelling which the once wealthy patrician entered, Sabinus could not help but feel deeply moved.

That evening, fortune having smiled on him at play, he sent a slave to Valeria with the sum he won. She was absent ; Irene received the messenger, and, learning whence the money came, she indignantly refused the purse filled with gold.

"Go and tell your master," she cried, "that the ex-Prefect's noble daughter will have nothing to do with

his gifts. Is it not sufficient that he has had her father condemned to the lowest work, of the vilest slaves, that he has reduced her to indigence ? Must he now insult her misfortune by this revolting alms, with this money stained with blood and mire ? ”

The slave retired and faithfully repeated her words. Sabinus, stung to the quick, swore to be revenged.

He soon discovered who Irene was and asked his father to tell Maxentius that he could inform him as to the place of abode of the mother of the young centurion who carried Constantine's standard, that standard under which the enemy was marching from victory to victory.

Maxentius ordered Irene to be cast into prison and condemned her to be immolated in the circus, at the same time as the other Christians, for the anniversary fêtes of his coronation, that was to say two days later.

This was not sufficient to satisfy Sabinus's rage ; he turned again on Rufinus like an infuriated viper, and ordered the guards to give him neither peace nor rest, to redouble their inhuman treatment and to lacerate him with the whips.

But quiet by no means reigned in the palace of the Cæsars ; the news of the war was ever more alarming. Constantine was marching on Rome, and Maxentius's legions were retiring before the victorious advance of the young Cæsar. The dark omens which had terrified the empress troubled also the optimistic hopes of her imperial spouse ; and he asked himself, not without terror, if the augurs were not deceiving him. His legions were superior in number to those of Constantine and their position was really stronger, but notwithstanding these advantages, would he be vanquished ? — If the “ Gaul,” who was pursuing the retreating imperial army, penetrated

into Rome, would he not take possession of his sacred person? — After conducting to the triumph of his enemy, would he not be exposed to the vengeance of the Romans who were exasperated by his cruelty? — or perhaps strangled in the Mamertine prison, or condemned to die there of hunger?

These thoughts tormented his alarmed imagination like so many Furies.

"I can flee by the Appian way," he said to himself, "that is still free."

Then he fought with stubborn resistance against these terrors and his own projects.

His fate bound him to Rome, the pagans would have said. . . we, Christians, we would think that God's justice awaited him there.

To know with certainty what would be his fate, Maxentius resolved to resort to a means as frightful as it was criminal. By it the augurs affirmed, the spirits would be forced, in spite of themselves, to unveil the future without dissembling or deceit.

Orders were given to prepare everything with the greatest secrecy for the following night.



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CHAPTER IX

SAVED

THE Christians who were called to martyrdom considered their sacrifice a very small one when death immediately followed upon condemnation, but this was very rare. Ordinarily the confessors of the faith languished in frightful prisons or worked with the slaves on the public works. Their sufferings were atrocious and surpassed all measure. The prison as well as hard labour meant slow death, a death so cruel that bloody martyrdom seemed a deliverance.

When we look at the imposing ruins of the grand monuments of ancient Rome we forget too often, alas ! what sighs, and tears, and blood they cost. Multitudes of confessors perished on these works where they suffered unspeakable torments to remain true to their faith.

From the first moments of his Christian life, Rufinus, as yet but scarcely initiated into our holy religion, was subjected to this trial doubly painful to a privileged child of fortune who had so rapidly fallen from the highest pinnacle of honour to the lowest degree of sorrow.

We have seen how Sabinius's revenge had rendered his condition still harder ; it had become intolerable and the once strong powerful man was soon reduced to a skeleton. The certainty that his end was approaching would have filled him with joy, had he been reassured as to the fate of his beloved daughter.

Valeria herself was much changed. She was like a

flower that has been cut down by the scythe and withered by the burning rays of the sun. Irene's maternal compassion was without doubt a support. This grand Christian opened before her eyes vistas of faith and radiant hopes which strew the royal way of the cross with heavenly flowers. With that prescience that God has placed in the hearts of mothers, with that second sight which seldom deceives them, she assured the young girl that Constantine would enter Rome and set Rufinus free. The Roman matron trembled with emotion at the thought that Candidus, her son, bore the *labarum* which was to deliver the eternal city and convert it. Her burning words, her deep conviction touched her companion's aching heart and roused her.

It was two days before the imperial fête ; as she did every day, Valeria ascended her calvary and, seated on the Aventine stairs, sought with anxious gaze her father's form. For two hours her eyes vainly wandered over the crowd of unfortunate prisoners, Rufinus was not there.

A thousand fears assailed her ; had he fallen powerless in some obscure corner ? Had he succumbed to the blows ? Had death, far from every compassionate heart, closed his eyes ? Was he lying ill and abandoned, without food, without care, or alas ! worse still, having beside him barbarous guards who were happy to add tortures to the sufferings of illness ?

Her heart torn by mortal anguish, the poor girl felt herself growing faint ; cold perspiration bathed her forehead and mingled with the tears that flowed down her cheeks. Indifferent to the cold curiosity of which she was the object, the daughter of the Valeri slowly descended the long stone steps, when she was stopped by Rustica, the young woman from the Transtiberian quarter.

Under pretext of gathering the shavings let fall by the workmen, the poor weaver penetrated into the workyards, and profiting by the slightest circumstances to escape the eye of the guards she carried help to the Christian prisoners. More than once the distrustful warders had driven her away with blows from their whips ; but the brave woman would not be discouraged and with admirable perseverance, began again her work of mercy.

Very lively and spirited, she baffled the guards, and her replies, which amused them, put them on the wrong track.

When Valeria told her of her great anxiety, Rustica formed the project of snatching Rufinus from his horrible life. Charity is ingenious and can work wonders. The thoughtful brow of the Transtiberian suddenly cleared, she had soon conceived a plan. "Yes, yes, GOD will help us," she said joyfully, while Valeria trembling, looked questioningly at her. "My project is a bold one, even perilous," continued the young woman, "but heaven will be propitious. We must have the darkness of night in order to succeed."

Rustica was about to tell Valeria what her idea was, when she thought that she would perhaps give her false hope. Interrupting herself therefore she said that she would have to consult her husband first and, with him, think over the best means to adopt for succeeding in her enterprise.

"You cannot think," she added with sweet complacency, "how intelligent and yet how prudent Mincius is."

Valeria did not dare to question her and full of gratitude gave her the last piece of gold she possessed to help her in her enterprise and enable her to procure some cordial for the prisoner.

The waggons bringing the materials had no right to pass, during the day, through the streets of Rome, which were then so narrow, and in order not to impede traffic etc., they came in during the night. It was thus that the carters engaged for the works of the basilica were exclusively employed during the night.

"Mincius must know a great many of them," said Rustica to herself, for the sand quarries were just beside the catacombs; "why should he not get one or other of them to lend his cart to the *fossore* for one night? Doubtless the man will ask for nothing better than to sleep, if he is well paid for his rest."

While maturing her plan Rustica arrived at her home; she found Mincius engaged in engraving an inscription on a marble slab. His tool was defective and his unskilled hand did but very imperfect work in spite of the good will and patience of the worthy *fossore*. The epitaph destined for a child, bore these simple words: "Eugenius, thy soul has fled there where it is good to be." This brief sentence told of the only hope of the weeping parents.

The letters were fairly well done, but the dove which Mincius had tried to add was scarcely recognizable. The young wife smiled on seeing it, and her husband laughed in his turn.

"The olive branch can be made out," he said, "that will help to make people understand that my bird is intended to be the dove of the ark."

Rustica did not try to continue the pleasantry, she was too much absorbed in her great project.

"Thou hast returned very late this evening," said the *fossore* noticing her preoccupied air; "is there anything new?"

Rustica told him of her meeting with their young bene-

factress whose anxiety was heartrending, and then she explained the plan she had formed. To her great joy, Mincius approved and, with his accustomed zealous charity, promised to set to work at once to see what he could do.

There was no time to lose, the *fossore* there for directed his steps immediately towards the sand quarries on the Appian way. During 'his time, Rustica returned again to workyards, where she appeared to have nothing to do but make an ample store of shavings. While s'e bent down, seemingly altogether absorbed in her work, her eyes sought to find the place where she could meet Rufinus at the hour she wished.

When, the following night, the long train of carts laden with earth, stones, bricks, etc., entered the enclosure of the basilica, by the great gate, Rustica might have been seen seated on one of these heavy vehicles, reins and whip in hand. She was almost concealed by an ample mantle of coarse material and her pretty face was hidden by a large Phrygian cap such as was then worn by workingmen. Beside her she had placed a *hydria* (amphora) full of good, old wine.

"Hoa!" mockingly cried the guard who stood at the gate to identify the carters, "hoa! a handsome amazon as a driver! where then is the carter?"

And he held his resinous torch up into Rustica's face.

"Where is the carter, where is the carter?" repeated Rustica not appearing at all put out by being stopped. "If fortune smiled on him and threw him into the arms of Morpheus, while filling his purse as if he had worked, why should he deprive himself and not sleep like a dormouse and snore at his ease? Tell me, my good man, wouldst thou not be content to do the same?"

"It is thou then who dost drive this handsome hack instead of thy husband ; but by Epona (the goddess of horses), " cried he, suddenly lighting up the young womans' pleasant face, " by Epona ! I recognize thee in spite of thy red cap, which for that matter suits thee perfectly. Come, let me see if thou art not carrying anything to the Christian prisoners. "

" Ah ! " cried Rustica with a frank laugh and mockingly showing him her jar, " the drinkers' wick is dry and he wishes to have some of my oil ; but I have too much need of my oil which protects me from the cold of the night, thou shalt not have it. Be off ! Take thy copper coloured face quickly to where they strike money ; there thou canst procure thyself a *hydria* full to overflowing to refresh thy throat ; as for my wine I mean to keep it. "

The carters burst out laughing, and Rustica, giving her horse a vigorous stroke of her whip passed by at a gallop ; before the guard had time to reply to her jeering words, the Transiberian was far away.

Arrived at the place for unloading, good Rustica left her work to an obliging carter, and, supplied with a small dark lantern, anxiously began her search for the ex-Prefect.

Notwithstanding her precautions to avoid any meeting, she found herself, unexpectedly, before a number of slaves lying one over another, and thus taking a miserable rest under the eye of a vigilant sentinel. His eye, accustomed to the obscurity, saw her pass in the darkness of the night and a formidable, " who goes there " made her start. More quickly and lightly than the mountain roe she slipped behind a heap of stones, and the sentinel thought that he was the victim of an hallucination.

God watched over the brave woman and guided her ; was it not in Him she trusted and did not her unceasing

prayers rise up to His throne ? Rustica at last discovered the unfortunate prefect, but, great GOD ! in what a state !

Attacked by a violent fever two days before, he had fallen in a corner and would have succumbed to the blows if the guards had not reminded the infamous Sabinius that the prisoner was to enhance the attractions of the circus games. The libertine therefore restrained his vengeance in order the better to satisfy it, by the sight of the proud *prefectus urbi* stripped and exposed to the wild beasts in the Flavian amphitheatre, before the eyes of all Rome. He already saw in anticipation, the blood of his victim flowing under the teeth and claws of the wild animals or under the sword of the gladiator and, a wild beast himself, he delighted in his shameful victory.

Rufinus, laid low by the burning fever, shaken by violent fits of ague and having nothing but a ragged mat to cover himself, awaited death ; he would have wished to see his daughter once more, to press her to his heart that would soon cease to beat, but he knew that was an idle dream. Perfectly resigned he piously accepted all the bitterness of his abandoned state, when a faint light fell on his eyes.

Rustica, her little lamp in hand, was kneeling beside him.

" Noble Rufinus, " she said in a low voice, " thy daughter is well, I bring thee all her love, she sends thee this strengthening drink. "

While saying these words the young woman lifted the prisoner's head with angelic charity and the solicitude of a mother.

" Hasten, and drink, " she said, " thou must get up some strength, for all is prepared for thy escape and we have not a minute to lose. Come, courage ! thy daughter awaits thee. "

She put on him a Phrygian cap, wrapped him up in an old *Sagum* of goats' hair, helped him to rise, and putting out her lantern drew him, with a thousand precautions, in the darkness, to the place of unloading.

The prisoner's weakness was so great that the had often to stop and it was with great difficulty that he could go forward at all.

A few words sufficed for Rustica to acquaint with her project several of the carters on whom Mincius could depend. Besides, the people of Rome esteemed and loved Rufinus for his justice and his integrity. These good fellows therefore, wished for nothing better than to lend a helping hand and favour his escape.

Rustica's cart, filled with rubbish, was waiting, she made the prisoner get in, after telling him that he would find his daughter with Irene. Our heroine told him to leave his cart in the hands of the other drivers when he arrived there, and then the train started.

Rufinus thought he was the plaything of a dream and mechanically allowed them to do as they pleased. God helping, he passed unnoticed and arrived at the Aventine without any adventure. There the carters helped him to get down.

"Noble Rufinus," they said, "thou hast always been compassionate towards the poor, thou didst always see that bread was not wanting in Rome, thy worthy spouse sought the poor and wretched in their dwellings, to comfort and help them, be thou blessed then and may fortune guide thy steps."

With anxious eyes, Rustica followed, as far as she could, the cart that bore Rufinus away, and her heart filled with emotion, beat as if it would burst when she saw it quietly pass the guards that watched at the gate. Then with

what a feeling of gratitude did not her hymn of thanksgiving rise up to heaven !

Finally she took her seat on the last cart, ready to avert the suspicions of the porter who greeted her with a coarse jest according to the custom of such persons.

He was rather surprised to see her sitting there.

" Well, that is curious," he cried, on seeing her, " thou art on the last cart now ! And what didst thou do with thine own ? "

" If geese and soldiers know how to run in a file, the one behind the other, thinkest thou that my poor hack is less clever than the old inhabitants of the Capitol ? "

" That is impossible," replied the *ostiarius*, " I looked too well, each cart had its driver ;" and then he angrily cried : " May the executioner do away with thee, thy wine and thy senators ! "

One would have thought that he suspected Rustica of the trick she had just played him.

The empty cart moved away rapidly and Rustica laughing cried out :

" Oh ! Oh ! how thou dost speak of senators ! However it is not long since thou wast porter at the palace of one of them, wast thou not ? "

But Rustica was already too far away to hear the threatening reply the man called out after her.

It took a long time for the Prefect to awaken the *ostiarius* of Irene's house. At last he opened the door stealthily, but not without precaution and distrust. On seeing an unknown with the Phrygian cap and strange countenance, instead of allowing him to enter, he asked him what he wanted.

Rufinus simply replied that he had an important message for the matron Irene.

"The matron Irene," said the *ostiarium*, "was arrested yesterday by the imperial archers who had orders to cast her into prison."

This was a thunderbolt to poor Rufinus, and quite distraught, he cried :

"And my daughter, my daughter ?"

"What do I know of thy daughter?" replied the porter who was in a bad humour and angry at being disturbed from his sleep; and thereupon he shut the door rudely without troubling himself further about his interlocutor.

While traversing the distance between the basilica and the Aventine, Rufinus had thought joyfully of seeing Valeria again, of taking her in his arms, and it seemed to him that blessed moment would make him forget all his past sufferings. The nearer he approached the more did this joy fill his heart. Alas! it had vanished even before he could seize it. No doubt his darling daughter had accompanied Irene to prison. Was this a new vengeance of the Chancellor? When his escape should be discovered, would not the two friends be surely condemned to death?

Everything seemed to fail the unfortunate Prefect whose past greatness but rendered his present reverses the more terrible. A few minutes had sufficed to crush his dearest hopes; had he then been delivered from captivity, and death only to be a witness of his daughter's sufferings?

His strength was spent; hardly conscious of what he was doing, Rufinus said to himself that he had but to return and give himself up to the guards, to death; that was the only hope left to the unfortunate Senator!

It was the hour in which he was utterly forsaken, the hour which the enemy of souls awaited to attack the soul of the new Christian with greater fury.

A flood of bitterness filled the afflicted soul of the Prefect ; profound darkness enveloped him and struck him with fear.

"See then," said Satan, "see and understand once for all that chance directs events here below ; the fickleness of blind fate trifles with the happiness of men. Poor fool ! wilt thou still believe in the God of the Christians ? Would He forsake thee if He were good and powerful as they say He is ?"

It was the first time since the holy waters of baptism had flowed over his brow, that God had allowed the spirit of evil to tempt Rufinus as to his faith.

Hunger, the lash, the tortures of the basilica, he had borne all bravely, and even with sweet consolation, remembering the love of his God Who had died on the cross for him. Burning with fever, he had thanked heaven for thus shortening his life and allowing him already a foretaste of the eternal reward, and the joy of seeing Sophronia again. But at this moment a too lively hope giving place to a cruel deception seemed more than he could bear. Illness which had broken down his bodily strength, appeared to have deprived his soul of the power of resistance.

However, his own angel guardian, with Sophronia's and Valeria's fought against Satan, while the young girl's prayers rose ceaselessly to the heavenly throne and fell again in showers of grace on her poor father's bruised soul. If in the Mamertine prison, while still a pagan, Rufinus had almost fallen a prey to despair, now, fortified by baptism and prayer, enriched with the merit of his sufferings and by his faith, he was to triumph over the suggestions of the infernal enemy.

The Prefect raised his tearful eyes to heaven and cried, with that deep faith and trust which has never failed to move divine mercy :

“ Oh ! my GOD, do not let me fall into temptation ! ”
Divine Providence answered him immediately.

Rustica had followed Rufinus as quickly as she possibly could, and arrived breathless just at this moment, happy at the thought of witnessing the joy of the father and the daughter. What then was her sorrow on learning from poor Rufinus, the events of the day before. The brave woman, however, showed him at once that there was nothing to prove that his daughter had been arrested. Did she not meet her the evening before at the work-yards ? It might well have been that Valeria had not yet returned to Irene's house when the archers seized the noble matron.

After imparting this ray of hope to Rufinus, Rustica pressed him to follow her to her poor home and accept a shelter there, promising him at the same time that she would set out to seek for Valeria as soon as it was day.

Rufinus accepted ; Rustica's words were as a star in the dark night. Leaning on his deliverer, for his weakness was extreme, he walked painfully forward. A thousand times did he renew his act of submission to the divine will.

“ I beg of you, ” said he to Rustica, “ say the *Pater noster* with me, my head is so dazed that I cannot say it alone ; and like a child, the proud Roman repeated the holy prayer after the humble wife of the artisan.

“ Oh ! yes, LORD, yes, my GOD, may Thy will be done, whatever it may be ! ” he continued.

The gong sounding slowly in the distance announced midnight. At this same hour, a mysterious looking individual mounted the staircase in the imperial palace carefully carrying a parcel under his mantle. The guards allowed him to pass notwithstanding the lateness of the

hour, and asked him no questions ; Maxentius awaited him.

Beside the sovereign stood a man with an eastern looking face ; his head was covered with a Phrygian cap richly embroidered with gold and his thick black hair fell down over his shoulders.

"Dost thou at last bring up what we want ?" asked Maxentius impatiently of the newcomer.

"He has not yet drunk his mother's milk," replied the mysterious individual, and with a frightful grin he placed a newborn child on the table.

"Let us make haste then," said the Emperor to the Oriental, "and seek in his young entrails to discover the omens of the future."

An hour had scarcely elapsed when the same dark messenger carried away the mutilated remains of the little being who had been sacrificed to imperial superstition. He concealed his parcel as he had done on entering the palace, and disappeared mysteriously in the direction of the Tiber.

Maxentius who until then had been a prey to the most poignant disquietude, went to take his rest with a mind at ease.

The magian had carefully consulted the palpitating entrails of the innocent victim and had drawn the happiest auguries from them. He predicted signal victories for the Emperor and Maxentius already saw his proud rival beneath his feet.

The next day, in a dark, deserted alley a man was found assassinated and beside him the body of a newborn infant frightfully mutilated. This double murder, enveloped in profound mystery, excited the greatest agitation in all the quarter.

The officers of justice were soon on the spot ; the people of the neighbourhood, when questioned, replied that there had been a great noise during the night, in the midst of which they had heard these words :

“ Kill my child !— recompense given !”

They added in a low voice that this double murder was committed on an imperial order.

This immediately stopped all enquiries. The men of the law suddenly retired and wrapped themselves up in a profound silence with regard to this strange event.

CHAPTER X

BEFORE THE GATES

WE must return a while to past events, in order to better understand those that are to follow.

By order of the Emperor, the Chancellor had posted up the programme of the rejoicings which were to celebrate the anniversary of the coronation of Maxentius. The long list of these fêtes were placarded everywhere : on the grand staircase of the Palatine, the arches of triumph, the columns of the temples, the corners of the streets.

The fêtes were to begin only in eight days, and already a feverish agitation excited by these publications, was felt throughout the town, stirring the whole population from the highest to the lowest classes, old and young people and even children.

Crowds collected before the placards, and those who could not read, waited for an obliging reader.

Everywhere, at the baths, at the forums, in the shops, there was no question of anything but the games, the circuses, the gladiators, the races, the theatres, the names of the actors and the wrestlers, and the bets made on them.

Everyone knew, however, that Constantine was advancing towards Rome by forced marches, and that he was but a short way off, but no one troubled about this ; the approaching fêtes absorbed all thoughts and were the only subjects of conversation.

To speak frankly however, the Emperor's indifference

explained the inconceivable heedlessness of the Roman people at this juncture. Depending on his augurers and astrologers, Maxentius felt certain of victory. He therefore resolutely opposed Rufus's plan of awaiting the enemy between the city and the Tiber, and using the wide, impetuous stream as a natural defence.

This great and clever leader insisted long ; forced at last to yield to the injunctions of the tyrant, he encamped beyond the river, and with difficulty obtained permission to construct at least one bridge more, higher up than the Milvius.

During this time, the most brilliant reunions succeeded each other at the Palatine, the nights re-echoed with the sound of the sumptuous banquets which the Emperor gave to his officers. He was often seen traversing the most opulent quarters in the midst of a joyous cavalcade, dressed as Hercules, a lion's skin over his shoulders, and going towards the camp to take part in the military evolutions.

For one moment, however, his certainty of victory seemed to be shaken, it was when he heard that the enemy's fleet had arrived in the waters of Centumcellæ (Civita Vecchia) ; but he soon tranquillized himself at the remembrance of the auguries. What had he to fear ? The prognostics drawn from the entrails of the newborn infant could not be delusive ; had they not promised him complete triumph ? It was thus that Maxentius consoled himself and drove away his fears.

The Romans, in their turn, imitated the Emperor and remained tranquil ; they had long been accustomed now to leave the care of their destiny to the arms of the legions.

Indeed to fully understand the quietude of the great city, mistress of the world, notwithstanding the military

events of the day, we must remember that the majority of the inhabitants had nothing to lose by Constantine's arrival, and a political revolution. Besides, whether the Emperor was called Maxentius or Constantine, the city reckoned none the less on having the cæsar, and, as we said before, that was the chief point.

However, many of the senators who were strongly attached to paganism, would have looked with an uneasy eye on the accession of the young conqueror ; Symmachus was of this number. Though more indignant at Maxentius's conduct than the others, none counted more than he on Constantine's defeat in the decisive battle.

"The gods," he said to himself, "permitted Hannibal to present himself at the gates of Rome, and Brennus to enter as far as the foot of the Capitol, but there they shattered the might of the enemies. "But, added the noble old patrician bitterly, "if the shades of our fathers were to hear me, they would answer that then our ancestors shed even the last drop of their blood to save Rome from the arms of Hannibal and Brennus. What is Maxentius doing to defend the altar and hearth from the enemy of the gods ? How does he resist his rival ? Why, instead of depending on magic and oriental superstitions, has he not offered sacrifices and libations to the goddess of victory, and made vows to the other divinities of Olympus ?"

After his talk with Lactantius, Symmachus had begun to hope that if the gods employed Constantine to deliver Rome from the odious Maxentius, they would afterwards dethrone the young sovereign to place the empire again in the hands of one of their devoted worshippers. But who could this new master be ? Symmachus passed each one of the Senators in review before his mind's eye, but in

every one he found some obstacle, some weakness. Could he, Symmachus, then be the chosen one of the gods? As for illustrious birth, he could compete with the greater number of his peers; in wealth, he surpassed all. The patrician felt himself sufficiently powerful, sufficiently wise to hold the reins of government and was not astonished at the preference of Olympus. If ever the gods should turn the scales of Empire in his favour and place the imperial crown on his head, he would know how to honour them, annihilate the enemies of Rome, both at home and abroad, embellish the temples and restore the sons of the "Quirites" to their ancient greatness! Thus, like another Trajan, he would live but for the welfare of his people.

While flattering himself with these ambitious thoughts, Symmachus met Lactantius again. It was at the Forum, on a beautiful morning; the sun gilded the roof of the temple of Jupiter Capitoline¹. The Senator, stretching his hand towards the shining cupolas and the superb fortress of the Capitol, cried enthusiastically:

"Master, dost thou think that the Crucified will ever bear sway from there over the ruined throne of Jupiter? Instead of our ever victorious Roman eagles, shall we one day, see Constantine's *labarum* waving? Shall the, barbarians of the north raise their tents on the sacred

1. On the spot where the throne of Jupiter once stood, is now seen the church of the *Ara Cali* which derives its name from a graceful legend. This church was formerly the palace of Augustus.

Quite near the place where the high altar now stands, the Sybil saw a golden circle around the sun; and in the centre of the orb of day, a virgin holding an infant in her arms. The prophetess explained to the emperor that this infant would one day be the sovereign of the whole earth. Augustus had an altar raised immediately in honour of the little child, and forbade the people to adore the emperor as in the past.

rock ? No, no, a thousand times no ! Only to suppose such a thing would be rank folly, a frightful blasphemy against the power of our gods. ”

Previously Lactantius had been silent before the impetuosity of the zealous pagan, but this time his conscience would not allow him to hold his peace.

“ Allow me, O noble Symmachus ! ” he replied, “ to answer the question indirectly ; the supposition thou hast just stated has then presented itself to thy mind ? Consequently, something tells thee that its realization is not impossible ? As for myself, I will go further, I am convinced the all powerful God of the Christians will establish His throne above the lying gods of Olympus, above their vain idols and the smoking ruins of their temples. ”

“ I see, ” said Symmachus jestingly, “ that years have not cooled the poetical imagination of our venerable master. ”

“ No, no, I am not dreaming, ” continued Lactantius ; “ as truth always finally triumphs over error, thus the Christ, who is eternal truth, will vanquish the false gods ; it is the empire that is crumbling away. ”

Symmachus drew back a step.

“ How am I to interpret the words ? ” he cried.

“ I searched the teachings of thy philosophers, ” replied his interlocutor. “ I could scarcely discover the faintest, most vacillating light there, I then knocked at the door of Christianity, and there, I immediately found myself flooded in waves of light that infinite Truth sheds in profusion ; the fire of this sun cannot fail to dissipate the darkness in which Rome and the whole universe is plunged. ”

Symmachus recoiled like a wounded lion and, with bitter sarcasm, said that he did not in the least envy Lac-

tantius the light of his sun and the power of a Jew who had been deified by oriental insanity ; to this criminal who had died on a gibbet, he preferred the immortal gods who had made Rome so great.

"The Cross will make her greater," said the old man warmly. Mind and heart will prevail over body and matter. Rome enlightened by infinite Truth, will spread the light of truth over the whole world, and the peoples of all tongues and of all nations will gather together under one sceptre to obey the rule of an only and infinite God."

"Rome at the feet of the crucified Nazarene ! For shame then ! I regret that a man whose intelligence I once admired could have been so led away and fallen into such revolting error," replied Symmachus assuming an air of cold contempt. "I always held the Christians in horror," he continued, turning his back on his old master ; "let not thy shadow henceforth defile my face."

Offended and blind with rage the Senator ascended the steps of the Capitol.

.....

But what had become of Valeria after her meeting with Rustica ? Under the weight of the immense sorrow that wrung her heart, at the thought of the tortures imposed on her unfortunate, dying father, the poor child staggered along as if inebriated with suffering.

In great misfortune, the human heart unfolds itself but with difficulty to hope, and falls easily into excessive anxiety. The young girl seeing Rufinus succumb to his torments, would almost have wished to hear that he had closed his eyes to the light of this world ; it would at least be the end of his martyrdom.

Arrived at the place where the road branched off and

went up towards the Aventine and Irene's home, Valeria stopped.

"To-morrow," she said, "I shall have to bury another martyr, I must prepare him his place of rest near my mother's tomb."

She then at once took the road leading to the Appian Way and the catacombs.

On the way she met a man who lived in the same house she did, and she asked him to tell Irene not to be anxious if she did not return by nightfall.

Valeria was very far then from suspecting that at that very moment, the archers were throwing her dear Irene into prison.

Taken away by the imperial *sbirros*, the poor woman did not even notice the horrors of her dungeon, so much was she overwhelmed by grief. The trials of her life, which however had been so rich in crosses, faded away before the anguish which now oppressed her. Many a time had she visited the martyrs in these corrupt prisons, she had accompanied them to the place of martyrdom or their last home, and her heart had then leaped with joy in the hope of sharing their fate. Why does her hand tremble now on touching the palm held out to her? Why does her soul sink in anguish at the thought of death? Why does the sweat of agony break out coldly on her brow?

Irene was a mother, she was awaiting her son; but a few hours more perhaps, and, conqueror with Constantine, he might be in Rome, in her arms. Was he to go through so much peril only to find the mortal remains of his mother? Was the sword of the executioner, which had been in turns, stained by the blood of his father and all the other members of the family, to be stained with that of his mother, without her being able to give one

last word of counsel, to say a last adieu to her only son.

" Good and merciful God, " cried Irene, her face bathed in tears, " spare my son who is still so young, deign to let me press a mother's kiss on his brave brow. May Thy holy will be done, O my God ! but if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Is my poor child, seeking his mother in the hour of triumph, only to find her robe stained by the claws of the lion ? Will his kisses only fall on the cold stone of my tomb ? And yet, my God, may Thy will be done and not mine ; if the angel of death is to carry me away and break my son's heart at one blow, may it be not as I will but as Thou wilt. Is not the bitterest drop of gall in a mother's chalice that of consenting to the deep grief of her child. "

Irene bowed her head and her will before the divine will, and she bent beneath the weight of the sacrifice. But if nature gave way, the strong soul of the Christian fervently repeated the *fiat* of Gethsemane.

Irene thought also of Valeria, of that delicate flower so beaten by the storm and left alone, without shelter without protection. The girl's heroism had inspired a truly maternal affection in her woman's heart, and thinking of her son, of her beloved Candidus, she dreamed of a union that would have fulfilled all her wishes. Alas all vanished now before the dark future.

During this terrible night, consumed with fever, Irene saw herself plunged in a sea of blood ; she thought she heard the horrible laugh of the hyena and the roaring of the tiger.

At last, towards morning, the God of all consolation visited the heart of his noble servant ; full and entire peace descended on her afflicted soul, and her fervent prayers rose up to the Most High. The heroic mother

asked the Lord to shower His grace as an abundant dew on the head of her beloved child and then thought only of consummating her sacrifice.

Arrived at the cemetery of Calixtus, Valeria slipped unnoticed into the secret entrance that the Christians had made since the soldiers had filled up the old staircase. Accustomed from childhood to frequent the subterranean town, the young girl easily found the *fossore*s already occupied in preparing a *polyandrium*, or common grave for the martyrs who would fall two days later. They would be the first victims that the persecution, after several years of peace, would give to the catacombs.

At Valeria's request, several of the *fossore*s followed her, filled with religious compassion, and began to excavate Rufinus's tomb beside that of Sophronia.

While the girl, through her tears, watched her beloved father's last resting place being prepared, her eyes fell on the inscription that Rufinus, while still a pagan, had himself engraved on the tombstone of his noble wife : *Semper vivet in Deo* (Thou shalt live forever near God). Now that beloved father was a Christian, and he was about to die as a confessor of the faith. The merciful decrees of Providence gradually unfolded themselves before Valeria's soul ; she saw the mysteries of grace and how her mother's death had purchased her father's soul. Could she refuse to humbly assent to her double sacrifice, however hard it might be ? Had God not every right over His new conquest, and did not Christ, the conqueror, offer the palm of martyrdom to Rufinus, in order that he might reign with Him forever ?

Half an hour after Valeria's arrival at the catacombs, Sabinius and several of his dissolute companions traversed the Appian Way ; they were going to see the decorations

of the circus, which were being actively pushed forward for the approaching fêtes, and also the horses that had just been taken there.

Hundreds of slaves carried away the useless material, removed the scaffolding, polished the marble and gave the finishing touches everywhere. Quite a crowd of them were to be seen around the imperial box which they were decorating artistically ; others hung crowns before the entrance, covered the walls with draperies and flowers, or spread over the ground a mixture of sand and brass filings.

All doors opened to the son of the great Chancellor ; he easily obtained access to the stables, where the horses were tied before superb gilded troughs, and talked to the grooms, particularly to those of the green camp, on whom he enthusiastically wagered his head. Then turning round, Sabinus and his companions directed their steps towards the taverns, taking pleasure, on their way, in troubling the pedestrians who, at the close of day, were hurrying back into the town. In the midst of the wild troop, one of them suddenly cried :

“ Let us go to the burying place of the Christians ! ”

All applauded wildly and rushed towards the catacombs, under the guidance of a young lad of the place, who was well paid to traitrously give up the secret of the entrance and be their guide. After procuring lights from a small neighbouring store, these turbulent youths soon reached the clump of small trees and old ruins that marked the descent to the catacombs. Suddenly the leader of the band stopped.

“ How stupid and imprudent ! ” he cried, “ we have forgotten what was most important, guiding thread for the labyrinth. ”

"Let our guide go to the village and buy some for us." said Sabinius.

"That is much too far," replied one of his companions; "I would not trust much to Ariadne's thread that the Christians might cut, and thus keep us prisoners in their burrows, the ugly badgers! Here is something more practical: let us tear down some of Maxentius's big placards and throw small pieces all along our way. We shall thus be able to go fearlessly forward as long as our paper lasts.

No sooner said than done; and the band began to descend the steep staircase which led into the depths of the catacombs between rough walls of masonry.

In the midst of the darkness and silence these young madcaps soon became timid. Sabinius and several others would have gladly retraced their steps, but the boldest went forward, scattering the small pieces of paper and lighting the way with their smoking torches so as not fall into the pits, and the weaker followed, not daring to protest.

After having traversed the sand quarries, they entered the corridors which were no longer simple passages, but regular streets, walled and roofed. From top to bottom, marble slabs marked the tombs; they had therefore penetrated into the necropolis of the Christians.

Sabinus was pale as death; not only did he fear this vast labyrinth, but he trembled at the sight of these thousands of dead. With eyes cast down and not daring to look at anything, he clutched the garment of the one who preceded him. His imagination became the more excited, as he did not dare to look up and only partially saw things.

He seemed to see eyes of flame through the unpenetrable darkness of these corridors which opened before them in endless succession. Certainly those flitting lights were

the souls of the departed hovering over their mortal remains. Some slabs had fallen and laid long skeletons open to view. Sabinius's teeth chattered and he closed his eyes in terror, but the sight of the human bones remained imprinted on his mind, and he cursed the folly that had drawn him and his companions into this frightful abode. A convulsive shudder ran through his frame at the thought that the shades of the Christians might revenge themselves on the son of the apostate, of the infamous traitor, and he involuntarily raised his hand to his neck as if to protect it. The impression made by the silence and mystery of this funeral city began to cool the courage of even the boldest ; they stopped, from time to time, under pretence of rekindling their torches, the smoke of which choked them.

At intervals they saw vaults ornamented with paintings that appeared strange to them. Here there was a man thrown from a ship into the open jaws of a sea monster ; opposite, another fresco represented the same monster throwing up on the shore him whom it had swallowed alive. Further on there was drawn a man standing with extended arms between two lions, and another in the midst of seven baskets of bread. No doubt one of the dead must have been a gladiator and the other a baker. Then they saw an old man lifting his sword above a boy who was bound and kneeling, and they did not doubt but that this picture represented the impious repast at which the Christians partook, they said, of the flesh of a child that had been sacrificed to their superstitions.

However the libertines began to recover themselves gradually : no dead had risen to seize them unexpectedly, no unearthly laugh had been heard. The corridors became wider, the air less suffocating and the conversation was

imperceptibly growing more animated when suddenly the foremost recoiled.

At the door of a vault stood a shade, a spirit that their torches lighted. Rooted to the spot they all looked at the phantom with terrified eyes.

It was the apparition of a young girl ; a sort of veil falling from her head shadowed her pale serious face which was beautiful even in death. Her large dark eyes were fixed with deep displeasure on the adventurers. Without saying a word the spectre of the girl, or the vision, lifting its arm, by an irresistible gesture commanded the audacious youth to flee from this kingdom of the dead.

With one accord all obeyed and hurried as much as the obscurity and the uncertain light of their torches would allow them. They crowded and hustled but without saying a word, and the last one believed he heard the menacing spectre at his heels.

They drew breath a little when they reached the sand quarries, but even in the open air, on the Appian Way, the late noisy band walked silently and no one dared to say a word.

The spirit that had terrified them was none other than Valeria.

After the departure of the *fossores*, unable to tear herself away from her beloved mother's tomb she had knelt down and prayed fervently for her father, and was asking strength and courage for herself when she heard a noise. Believing it was the *fossores* the young girl advanced towards the opening intending to ask one of them to kindly engrave on Rufinus's tomb the same words that the latter had engraved on Sophronia's ; it was then that she found herself confronting the young libertines. Surprise at first rendered her motionless and silent ; then

recognizing Sabinius she became indignant and it was this feeling that made her gesture so commanding that it put the dissolute troop to flight.

When Valeria left the catacombs, night had already thrown its dark veil over all nature. The girl hastened her steps through the streets absorbed in the thought of her unhappy father ; she asked herself if Rustica had succeeded in finding him, if he was still alive. Ah ! if she could but once more have seen his beloved face ! If she could but have received his paternal blessing, his last sigh ! The poor girl looked up to the vault of heaven, she there saw the evening star which seemed to her a messenger of hope caressing her with its light as a mother soothes her child to lull it to rest. One might have thought it the image of the Queen of Virgins, of the Mother of mankind bending over the unhappy ones to pour rest, resignation and peace into their souls. Alas ! this was only a short respite on the way up her terrible calvary, and Valeria almost lost courage altogether when on arriving at Irene's home she learned how her devoted friend had been taken to prison.

" My God ! " she cried bathed in tears, " how can I bear up under so many blows ? Irene was my only stay ; must I see this last drop of sweetness turn into bitter gall ? "

Many a time did the young girl remember her last long talk with Sophronia on the day of her death ; she had drawn strength and confidence from it ; but at this hour bitterness filled her poor heart extinguishing all hope and, it seemed to her, banishing all consolation forever.

" My GOD ! My GOD ! " she murmured low, " how cruel is Thy sword ! It pitilessly hews a too feeble reed so

firmly bound to the cross, and which can only break under this embrace. Oh ! why was I absent when Irene was seized ? How much should I have wished to share the hardships of her prison and her death ! One tomb was scarcely closed when another was prepared and into a third too must my heart descend with the victims."

The sighs of the Psalmist rose to poor Valeria's faltering lips and she repeated with him :

"For thy arrows are fastened in me : and thy hand hath been strong upon me. There is no health in my flesh because of thy wrath : there is no peace for my bones. . . Forsake me not, O Lord my God : do not Thou depart from me. Attend unto my help, O Lord, the GOD of my salvation¹.

These lamentations by which the Holy Spirit Himself prays in us "with unspeakable groanings" brought peace again to this poor bruised heart.

Before all else Valeria wished to have news of her father, and notwithstanding the lateness of the hour she went in all haste to Rustica's dwelling. She moved so quickly, that one might have thought her a shadow, an aerial being. Her feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth, she hurried in the darkness through the narrow, silent streets of the Transtevère, more picturesque then, than in our days.

Here there were broken arches, there the ruins of a temple with its crumbling walls where the pale rays of the moon flitted, while on the summit of the Janiculum the dark cypress lifted their heads to the starry sky and cast their gigantic shadows over the sleeping city. The young girl went forward fearlessly, supported by the hope of hearing her much loved father speak.

1. Psalm xxxvii 3, 4, 22, 23.

When she arrived at the *fossore's* home, she found him alone with his blind old mother who was vainly trying to put Rustica's little son to sleep ; the dear little creature wanted his mother. The modest apartment was but barely lighted by the feeble ray of a smoking lamp, but a bright fire in the fireplace threw its light on the slabs of marble placed against the wall and on the *fossore's* tools. A gentle thoughtful charity had prepared this warmth to welcome the generous confessor of the faith who was so anxiously expected.

Mincius tried to impart his hopefulness to Valeria ; he explained in detail the plan so well conceived by Rustica, not only to procure some comfort for Rufinus, but to attempt to carry him off from his executioners.

Valeria's heart opened but slowly to this hope, she had suffered so much ! However, she closely questioned the good *fossore*, making him repeat over again all that he had already said.

"Can I believe in such happiness ?" she cried at last. "My beloved father found again and hidden in the Transtevère ! I shall be able to approach him, surround him with my care, my tenderness !"

The young girl rejoiced and then trembled again. What if Rustica were to bring home only a cold corpse ? What if she had not found the prisoner ?

Every moment Valeria and Mincius rose in turn and looked out into the dark narrow street listening carefully to catch the slightest sound, and as many times were they disappointed.

The old grandmother at last remarked that in the poor prisoner's state of health a too great joy might be harmful to him ; and it was decided that should Rustica have succeeded in saving him, Valeria should present.

herself only after having taken all the precautions dictated by prudence.

However, hour succeeded hour and the young woman did not return ; the baby had at last gone to sleep in the arms of the old woman who was herself fighting against heavy drowsiness.

Suddenly in the midst of the silence of the night soft footsteps were heard and in spite of his disguise Valeria recognized her beloved father in the obscurity. It needed all the strength of her love to restrain her excess of joy and hide herself from Rufinus's sight.

While Mincius and Rustica helped the Prefect to mount the few steps leading to the threshold, she lighted them, then handing the lamp to the grandmother, the happy girl withdrew to the back of the room.

The husband and wife very carefully led Rufinus who was quite worn out and almost dying to his bed and gave him a cordial that had been prepared beforehand. Valeria, with the tears flowing down her face, watched them with ever increasing emotion.

"My poor children," said Rufinus, in a faltering voice, "may GOD reward you for so much charity, you have saved my life. But what is the use ? What is this life without my daughter, without my darling child who has fallen into the hands of the cruel tyrant !"

"No, no, noble Sir," cried the blind old woman, "heaven has preserved your sweet daughter. It is not long since she was with us praying for your speedy deliverance."

"What ! my daughter is alive, she will be here ! I shall see her again !" cried Rufinus with a flood of tears, "O my GOD ! O GOD ! O GOD ! infinitely good, forever blessed !"

And he fell back on his bed.

"We shall go for her," said Mincius, "a few moments more and she will be in your arms."

"But," said the old woman, "would it not be prudent to wait a little longer; in your weak state can you bear so much emotion, so much joy?"

"Can heaven harm the drooping plant to which it sends the refreshing shower?" asked Rufinus smiling.

"Oh! no, go for my daughter, bring her here, she will give me back life; but first help me to rise, so that she may not be startled at my miserable state."

Valeria could bear it no longer, and coming out of the shadow where she had been standing, threw herself into her father's arms.

"My father! my father!" she cried in a transport of joy hard to describe.

Long did the father and daughter remain in a close embrace unable to utter a single word. Their souls melted in deep gratitude and an immense love of God.

.....

At that same hour, in the palace of the Cæsars, the Emperor tossed on his couch a prey to a terrible dream.

He saw himself at the circus, the people filled the boxes tier over tier, and awaited the opening of the games; but at the moment when he Maxentius, wished to give the signal, a superhuman being of infinite majesty and greatness appeared, and commanded him, with divine authority, to carry on his back the obelisk which stood in the middle of the arena. Maxentius was forced to obey though crushed under the gigantic burden. Groaning, breathless, bathed in sweat he dragged the obelisk along the Appian Way and took it towards the town. Many a

time it seemed as if the immense block that weighed him down would crush him entirely ; but the menacing look of the powerful and mysterious sovereign forced him forward and he was obliged to walk on, notwithstanding his anxiety and terror.

At last he was allowed to stop at Domitian's race course. A young Virgin, a child, was there seated on a throne ; she held a palm in her hand and a lamb of snowy whiteness reposed at her feet ; Maxentius was constrained to raise the obelisk before her. After two fruitless attempts he succeeded, when a dove that had been hovering above alighted on the top of the obelisk ; at this moment Maxentius awoke.

" By Jupiter ! " he murmured drawing a deep breath and wiping away the perspiration which fell in great drops from his forehead, " what an evil dream ! Who is this terrible dominator who thus imperiously constrained me to this work of a slave ? Who can tell me who this child is before whom I was obliged to raise the obelisk ? "

In vain did Maxentius consult his soothsayers the next day ; no one could tell, not even the Chaldean who had drawn his auguries from the entrails of the newborn child.

Who would then have surmised that fifteen centuries later a pope would have Maxentius's obelisk withdrawn from under the ruins of the circus where it had lain, to have it erected before the Church of Saint Agnes, and that he would have his arms, a dove carrying an olive branch, engraved on it ?



CHAPTER XI

THE EYE OF THE BATTLE

IN order to obey the Emperor, the general Rufus had tried but in vain, to embarrass Constantine's march. The most important point for him was to gain time so that the legions from the south might reach Rome. Rufus did not dare however to give battle, as his soldiers were thoroughly disheartened owing to their many defeats. After a feeble defence of the pass in the Appenines, he had abandoned Florence to the enemy without even drawing sword, and followed by the young conqueror, fled as far as the walls of Rome.

Constantine barely gave his troops the rest they really needed, and they themselves, the nearer they approached the term of their desires, the more did they seem animated with superhuman strength.

Their courage was increased by the enthusiasm of the town and villages which hailed their intrepid chief as a deliverer. One and all had suffered under the yoke of the tyrant who ruled over Rome.

A few days before, Maxentius had ordered a general raising of troops ; all men who were able to carry arms, were enrolled with the utmost rigour. The people had also been mercilessly plundered, their cattle, grain and all sorts of provisions had been taken from them by force.

Two days before the great fête, Constantine encamped a mile and a half from the great city, the mistress of the world, in the villa *ad gallinas*. He had decided to wait

there till the 28th of October, the anniversary of Maxentius's coronation, and to fight the decisive battle that day.

The imperial villa, called *ad gallinas*, had belonged to Livia, the wife of Augustus, and derives its name from a legend ; it is said that in this place, a white fowl that had been carried away by an eagle, dropped a spray of laurel on the empress' lap.

Gordien, the pagan pontiff, did not fail to see in this circumstance a happy presage of victory for Constantine.

Candidus who had followed his Emperor now longed to send his mother news of himself ; but how was he to succeed in doing this when the whole of the country beyond the Tiber was in the hands of the enemy ?

One only means seemed practicable : entrust a letter to a peasant of the vicinity who would take it to the Church of Saint Peter called *Memori d'anaclet* near the Vatican, where there would certainly be some Christians who would transmit it to Irene, and at the same time give him some news of the Roman matron. And in truth, that same evening, the messenger returned and assured Candidus that his mother was well. At that moment the arrest of the noble lady was not yet known at the Vatican, which being situated on the other bank of the Tiber, was somewhat out of the way. Heaven thus spared the young warrior much cruel anguish of heart, and he joyfully looked forward to soon holding in his arms the most tenderly loved of mothers.

Ignorant of the terrible truth, our young hero, leaning against one of the windows of the villa, looked down on the valley of the Tiber and across the Sabine hills over which shone myriads of stars. Memories of the past and dreams of the future, all filled his young heart with sweetness and hope.

At that moment a knock was heard at the door. It was the tribune Artemus and the Senator Anicius Paulinus who had come to visit the Christian officer.

Since the day on which the mysterious sign of the cross had appeared in the heavens above the sun, they had felt themselves irresistibly drawn towards Christianity; Constantine's miraculous success strengthened these tendencies every day, by proving the truth of the prophetic vision. They loved to learn from the young soldier of the pure and lofty doctrine which he professed. Each came alone at first, then together, being attracted by the same feeling, after which the three companions in arms entered into a friendship that was but the stronger for being based on noble motives.

On the eve of the great day of the battle, without any prearrangement, the two catechumens met, and, urged by the same impulse, came to tell Candidus that the victory which would be a decisive one for Constantine would put an end to their doubts and would also be the victory of Christ in their souls.

"I feel myself drawn towards Rome by an inexplicable, ardent desire," said Paulinus, "and yet, being a father, my heart suffers anguish. We had scarcely arrived last evening, when I sent one of our faithful servants to bring me news of my children; but, alas! he has not yet returned. I beg the God of the Christians to have pity on these poor little ones and their unhappy father, to guard them for me, and I have sworn that they shall become worshippers of Christ if I find them alive."

"Thou art right, noble Paulinus," said Candidus warmly, "to trust our good and all-powerful God. He is not like the idols which have ears but hear not. In vain do the afflicted cast themselves down and remain at their

feet ; what can vile matter do to soothe their sorrow ? God the Creator alone holds all things in His power, and His heart inclines lovingly towards those who invoke Him in their suffering."

Candidus had long since learned to love his two visitors whose noble feelings he admired the more as he learned to know them better, and consequently it was with great joy that he heard the promises they made. His deep faith saw a work of grace in the great trial of Anicius Paulinus's, and he understood that Providence was leading him and his children to the harbour of salvation through the waves of tribulation.

How much greater would have been his joy at this moment, if, looking into the future, he could have seen Artemus, raised by Constantine to the highest dignities, honour the Church by a glorious martyrdom under Julian the apostate.

To the family of the Anicii belonged not only the first Christian consul of Rome but a pleiad of saints.

From the villa *ad gallinas*, the watchfires of the enemy's army might have been seen on the banks of the Tiber, and the neighbouring hills, and, in the silence of the night, the gentle breeze brought to the ears of our three friends, the noise of the wild feasting with which the soldiers of Maxentius prepared themselves for the morrow's combat.

Gordian, the priest of Mithra, also turned his eyes towards the great city. He might have been seen leaning on a balcony, absorbed in sombre reflections. He could no longer doubt it, each new victory drew the hearts of Constantine and his soldiers more closely to the God of the Christians. The young conqueror seemed but to wait the taking of Rome to bend the knee before the Crucified. The elite of the army, such men as Artemus, had turned

their backs on the gods and no longer tried to dissimulate their preference for Christianity. The hopes that Gordian had founded on the probable successes of Rufus, the clever General of Maxentius's troops, had vanished. Dark presentiments agitated the priest of the sun, his anger was the more bitter as hell itself was forced to confess the power of the Crucified, and the palpitating auguries that he interrogated told him of the approaching victory of the young Cæsar of Gaul, and the irremediable downfall of the gods of Rome and Greece.

Gordian's dark face distorted by evil passions, could clearly be seen in the light of the moon, and one might have heard him grinding his teeth, while he cursed Him Who had passed on earth only to bless. Furious with rage, he said :

"Must our temples and our altars be abandoned and must the Nazarene set His conquering foot on the overturned statues of our idols ? Or is it time for the great conflagration predicted by the Sybils, the gigantic flames of which, according to the eternal decrees of destiny, must consume the heavens and the earth, the worshippers and the gods ?

"Ah !" he cried after a pause, clenching his fists menacingly and striking the ground with his rod, "it is I, Gordian, the priest of Mithra, I, who must perforce flatter Constantine and predict victory for him ! Can it be possible that Gordian should proclaim the triumph of the Crucified over his gods !"

When the first rays of dawn proclaimed the rising of the sun, the revengeful pontiff was still standing on his lonely balcony, but the light of day drove him away as it does the night birds of ill-omen.

The preparations for the great fête of the next day

were now all ended, and Rome spoke but of Constantine, camped at the gates of the city. Five hundred years before, the cry : "*Hannibal ante portas*, Hannibal is at our gates," had filled the nation with horror and fear ; to-day, a like cry excited joy and hope in the greater number of the citizens. The arrival of the young conqueror was hailed with joy, ardent wishes were expressed for his triumph, and the people saw in him the saviour of the city that he was about to wrest from the yoke of the infamous tyrant.

The great Chancellor however was far from sharing in these sentiments. For many nights past now the Greek had not closed his eyes, the wily fox was at his wits' end and asked himself what path he was to follow. He knew that Rufus had made all preparations for the Emperor's flight to the south in case of defeat ; but the Chancellor could not resolve to risk running the dangers attending such a course, he would not even think of it. Rufus might yield and Maxentius might be slain.

"Is not the branch which bears me about to break ?" he asked himself. "Let me then try to seize another on which I can lean as soon as this one fails me ; there is no other than Constantine himself."

But Heraclius had gradually broken all the ties that might have led him to the young conqueror ; he had not hesitated before any means, however criminal or shameful they might have been, to gain the good graces of Maxentius and to succeed in obtaining the eminent position he now occupied. And to hold it, every expedient had been considered good : cruelty, treachery, calumny, murder, spoliation. He had sacrificed all to the savage tyrant, to his cupidity. His own riches were stained with innocent blood that he had shed so ruthlessly. Rufinus

the ex-Prefect, the former companion in arms of Constantine, was one against whom he had contrived an odious plot and accused of lying conspiracies and of writing letters that he himself had boldly forged. What would the brave and loyal Constantine think of his apostasy and his disgraceful intrigues against the two last popes, Marcellinus and Eusebius ?

His conscience which had slumbered so long was now terribly awakened ; remorse, like a serpent, now held him in its coils, and his blood froze in his veins.

He had secretly sent away his treasures to a faithful friend in Naples, hoping to follow himself and to retire into Greece, his native country. But the rapid succession of events barely gave him time to take his precautions. Besides, Heraclius feared spies who might reveal his precautionary measures to Maxentius and thus ruin him.

The apostate had but one refuge, the Church, that mother whom he had so basely betrayed, whose heart he had so deeply wounded. Reconciled to her, once again her son, reinstated in the communion of the faithful, he might hope to win Constantine's favour ; but what means could the proud Heraclius employ to free himself from the sentence of excommunication which weighed on him, without being obliged to submit to long years of rigorous penance.

" I must," he said, " fall back on the project that I have already presented to Maxentius, and as the Emperor Gordian did after Valeria's bloody persecution give the Christians back their churches and their cemeteries."

As soon as the sun-dial had marked the hour of reception at the imperial palace, Heraclius presented himself and approached Maxentius crying :

" Divine Emperor, Constantine is then at the villa *ad*

gallanas. The thing could not have been better arranged ; what a lucky omen ! *Ad gallinas ! Omnia fausta !* ”

“ By Hercules ! ” replied Maxentius with a loud burst of laughter, “ I never thought of that *omen*. Ah ! ah ! the imperial vulture will pounce down on the timid, cowardly fowls to strip them of their feathers ! Rufus, must annihilate these knaves to-morrow ! That will be the finest feat for my feast. What a pity I cannot be in two places at the same time. ”

“ As great Chancellor, ” said Heraclius, “ I have come to take thy divine orders, so, as to organize a service which even while thou art in the circus, will give thee news of the battle. Deign to place the best coursers of thy stables at my disposal ; riders placed a quarter of a mile from each other on the Appian Way. ”

“ On the Appian Way they will bring thee news in the twinkling of an eye. Thou will be as it were on the field of battle ! ”

“ By the club of Hercules ! that pleases me, ” cried Maxentius, “ Rufus will thus be able to send me Constantine’s head while it is still warm. What a glorious triumph ! ”

“ That will depend entirely on the promptitude of the service, ” the Greek hastened to reply. “ I will take all the responsibility on myself. Immediately after the victory, a courser must also carry the news to Naples, and from thence to Africa. ”

“ And other messengers must be sent to Gaul, Britain and Spain, so that I may there be proclaimed Emperor immediately, ” added Maxentius.

The Greek declared that he would presently have the report of the victory published.

“ Very well, very well, ” replied Maxentius with blind

assurance ; “ indeed thou shalt be obliged to give up the games of the circus to attend to all this, but as a recompense, thou shalt receive the government of Gaul, will that not be a fine reward ? ”

“ For months past I have rejoiced at the thought of assisting at these fêtes,” replied the wily Chancellor, “ but can a faithful servant hesitate before sacrifices v there is a question of his sovereign’s good pleasure ? ”

Heraclius had succeeded then in arranging to be the first to have news that was well founded, and that from the best source, he would be the first to be apprised of the issue of events. Besides, he would await, at home, the end of the conflict, thus he had gained two great points ; there was no doubt that Constantine had determined to attack Rome on the day of the fête.

Heraclius then presented the edict that would restore to the Christians their churches and cemeteries, and awaited the Emperor’s signature.

“ We shall take them in the snare like rats in a trap,” he affirmed. “ This masterstroke will be accomplished on the anniversary of the day when the daughter of the Ceciliï paid, with her life, her impiety towards the gods, or on the Nativity of the Nazarene, at the end of the year. ”

“ Art thou sure,” demanded the coarse barbarian, “ that these rats will bite thy lard ? ”

“ There is not the slightest doubt,” affirmed the Greek ; “ the loss of their churches and their cemeteries was a thousand times more painful to them than martyrdom. Indeed, thou shalt see, Emperor, how eagerly they will run towards the trap without in the least suspecting that they will be falling into a snare from which they will never get out. ”

Maxentius convinced, signed the edict¹.

Emboldened, the courtier pushed his audacity still further ; too far this time.

“ Wilt not thy Divinity, ” he ventured to say, “ crown thy magnanimity and free the condemned Christians when they appear in the circus ? ”

The unfortunate Greek pronounced the last words of his request in fear and trembling when he saw the terrible look of the crowned barbarian. Maxentius's heavy black-brows were contracted ; his eyes flashing with a dark, diabolical light, fell on Heraclius.

“ Ah ! Wretch ! crafty Greek ! What designs art thou meditating now, to so suddenly become favourable to these Christians whom thou abhorrest even more than I do ? By the club of Hercules. I will crush thy head, vile serpent, if thou darest to crawl around my feet. Thou mayest thank the gods that the edict is already signed. If thou hadst asked pardon for the old Prefect of the town, ” he added, his anger rising like the waves of the sea, “ I would have understood thee. In the main he was a loyal functionary. It is the misfortune of the powerful to be urged to revenge by envious flatterers, venomous gadflies that sting the horses in the ear and drive them wild with their poison. Yesterday, a big ship laden with wheat arrived from Egypt owing to the care of this Rufinus against whom thou didst rouse me, saying that he had not supplied the town with provisions ! ”

1. Maxentius restored to the Christians the churches and cemeteries that had been confiscated by Diocletian ; the annals of the Empire attribute this act to Constantine, which has given rise to the supposition that the orders of Maxentius had not been carried out.

"But it was because he is a Christian that Rufinus was punished," muttered Heraclius crestfallen.

"By all the gods!" thundered Maxentius furiously, "vile renegade, thou who hast denied thy faith, art thou not still worse? Begone! and do not forget that if the bird which I expected to sing turns out to be an odious toad, I will see that the ugly beast disappears from my gardens and all Rome shall be witness to its death."

More dead than alive, the Chancellor hastened away without daring to utter a word.

"Fool that I am!" he said to himself, "to have interposed in behalf of the Christians of the amphitheatre! And yet the edict would have had quite another significance if, on presenting it to the pope Miltiades I could have announced the pardon of the condemned." However, Heraclius attached a high price to the edict that Maxentius had just signed, he thought that he would thus, without striking a single blow, be reinstated in his former position in the Church. In this way, he would put out of his way one of the greatest stumbling-blocks and succeed, perhaps easily enough, in getting into Constantine's good graces.

"If only the Pope Miltiades helps me," he said to himself, "I could edify the Church by my zeal much more than by hard penance; the edict that I have obtained is a great blessing that far outweighs my past wrongs; besides, the Pope Eusebius because of his excessive severity, must bear all the responsibility of my fall, which he provoked."

The Chancellor, informed by his spies, was not long in finding out Miltiades's place of refuge, a poor hut in the Suburra; but the Christians watched so lovingly over their Pontiff that Heraclius found it a very hard matter to get to him.

When after an interview of half an hour, the Prefect left the Pontiff, his drawn features and dark look, betrayed his anger and his disappointment. Contrary to his expectations, the pope had refused his offers, and before the *non possumus* of the successor of Saint Peter, the offers of the Chancellor had been unsuccessful.

"The Church who is a queen and a mother," the Pontiff told him, "grants pardon to repentance, and lovingly gives her grace, but she makes no compact with crime, she cedes nothing to human scheming."

Remembering too that he was the pastor of this wandering sheep, the pope with holy temerity and strength full of sweetness, showed the renegade the abyss into which he had fallen and the terrible chastisements which awaited the persecutors of the Church.

"Remember, my son," he added in a grave and solemn voice, "that divine justice often overtakes them even before eternity."

Angry because of his failure, humiliated by the reproaches of the pope, Heraclius directed his steps towards the Forum seeking in his inventive brain some means of approaching Constantine. Suddenly a gleam of malicious joy filled his heart and shone in his eyes; he had found it!... He had in his possession the letters that the priest Gordian had written to the general Rufus. If he could unmask before the conqueror the perfidy of the priest whom he retained in his army, it would be placing himself at once in the position of a faithful and devoted servant.

As the Chancellor crossed the threshold of his home, Sabinius accosted him, the bearer of strange news.

"Knowest thou," said the young man, "that the Prefect Rufinus escaped or was carried off last night?"

"Nonsense!" cried Heraclius angrily, "this is a

result of thy intemperance, the fumes of the wine have been rising to thy brain."

"Not in the least," replied Sabinus, "I am not dreaming, Rufinus is no longer among the condemned. Either he feigned illness the more easily to flee, or he is dead and the Christians have stolen his body. In any case he disappeared last night; the thing is clear and certain."

This was another blow for the Chancellor. It seemed to him a thing impossible that the Christians should attempt, in the face of so much peril, the carrying away of a body that they could have easily obtained for a few pieces of gold. The prisoner must have escaped, and, in the eyes of Heraclius no danger was so great as the revelations the ex-Prefect could make, if Constantine came into power.

The Greek did not easily relinquish his hold however, he was soon himself again.

"By the daughter," he thought we shall be able to follow the traces of the father. "Go," said he quickly to Sabinus, "send the archers to the Aventine, to Irene's house; and if Valeria is not there, let her be watched, let her be traced everywhere. Cost what it may, she must be in our hands this evening. Promise one hundred, two hundred *sestertii* to him who catches the bird."

His soul filled with bitter anger, Heraclius strode up and down his apartments; his eyes chanced to fall on the imperial edict and he tore it into a thousand pieces; but he immediately regretted this, for the document could at least prove he was favourably disposed towards the Christians; his anger but increased when he recognized his folly.

Sabinus returned an hour later and announced to his father that Valeria had not been seen at Irene's house

since the morning before. During the night an unknown person, a carter, judging from his dress, had awakened the *ostiarius*, saying that he was the bearer of an important message for Irene ; he also asked for his daughter. The door-keeper hastened to put him out.

On hearing this news, Heraclius stamped his feet angrily.

"It was by denouncing the mother of Candidus," he cried furiously, "that thou didst provoke this arrest which has made us lose the track I now need ; everything is turning against me, everything is turning out badly !"

And an interior voice seemed to whisper : "And it will always be from bad to worse." "It was certainly Rufinus who knocked at Irene's door last night," he said to himself, "and the disguise of which the *ostiarius* speaks proves that he escaped with the help of the carters ; but one will never be able to get any information from that set ; they will obstinately declare that they know nothing. It is the gate-keeper of the work-yard who must be questioned. I will undertake that myself."

The gate-keeper quickly understood from the Chancellor's questions that Rustica had succeeded in playing him a trick and had carried Rufinus off under his eyes.

He knew her perfectly and would have been able to find her easily in the Transtevere. Nothing then would have been easier than to trace the old Prefect. But like an old fox, he thought it better for his own safety to keep that a secret, and he entrenched himself in an imperturbable calm, only saying : "The gods are witness that each cart had its carter on entering and on going out. No cart carried men."

"Wretch !" cried Heraclius angrily, "how then did the prisoner escape ?"

"By Bacchus," replied the porter, "he might very

well have slipped between the openings in the palisades !”

“Impossible,” growled the Chancellor.

“Then,” said the sly old fox, “I can find but one explanation, the Christians are, they say, famous magicians, and they must know, better than the god Mercury, how to set about robbing. I have heard say that one evening, their master passed through closed doors and showed himself to his terrified adepts. Another time when he was shut up in a grotto that had been closed with a great stone that ten men could not lift, he escaped from it, like a spirit, notwithstanding the fifty soldiers who guarded the entrance. What surprises me, is, that being able to move mountains they took so long to free the old Prefect.”

The Chancellor's bad humour increased and his agitation but served to trouble his acute mind which had hitherto always got him out of his difficulties ; he reached home in a furious temper.

On the evening of the day, Sabinius who had been making new researches, told him that he had met Valeria with a woman of the Transtevère.

“Why did you not arrest her ?” cried Heraclius, starting up in a rage.

“Gently, illustrious Lord,” said the young man ironically, “deign to listen to my story. As soon as I saw her, I rushed up to her and took her by the arm. But like a fury, the Transtevérine turned upon me with the cry of a hyena. In an instant the whole of the people of the quarter were around me ; they came rushing from all sides, one would have said they were a cloud of bats or vampires. The women much worse than the men, seemed to be real harpies. These witches screamed like wild cats and I thought that I would descend into dark Tartarus, for,

with my life, you did not give me a crocodile's hide to ward off the blows that fell upon me thicker than hail. I take Pluto to witness that thou wouldst not have seen me alive again if a compassionate being had not come to my rescue."

"Who was it?" demanded Heraclius.

"Valeria herself," replied Sabinius; "with a few words, she transformed the tigresses into lambs and they let me go. But what a disgrace and a shame for the son of a great Chancellor! This then is the vengeance that a Christian takes! By Jupiter! if the Christians are such, I wonder how thou couldst have..."

Sabinus did not finish his sentence; but his malicious, sardonic laugh completed it impudently.

Heraclius flashed on him a look of fury; he bit his lip but did not speak. It was the first time his son dared to allude to his apostasy. Could he have been reproached more cruelly or more outrageously? He found himself defenceless, however, against the poisoned arrow that his own son had shot at him. The last words of the Pope Mil-tiades fell heavily again on his heart, and it seemed to him that they had been heated in a furnace and branded him with infamy. It was divine vengeance which was beginning to make itself felt through an unnatural son.

It needed all Heraclius's strength of purpose to drive away these thoughts and to seek a means, through his spies, of discovering Valeria in the heart of the Transtevère; during the interim, the man to whom the young patrician, on her way to the catacombs, had given the message for Irene, was brought to him.

He declared to the Chancellor that the ex-Prefect had been buried; he had heard this from the mouth of the young girl herself, when she went to have her father's

tomb prepared. This was one sharp thorn less to torture the wretched apostate.

During the afternoon of that day, fifty Christians were chosen from among those in the prisons and transferred to the circus vaults to be there immolated in the games the next day. The others, a very great many, were reserved to be thrown to the wild beasts on the days following.

Among the former was Irene. Valeria heard this, and notwithstanding the danger she incurred, notwithstanding all she owed her father, she resolved to go and say a last good bye to the faithful, devoted friend who had been a second mother to her, to receive her blessing and her last messages for Candidus. Valeria thought that the Mother's sacrifice might be softened by the assurance that she could entrust to a tender faithful heart her last wishes for her beloved son.

Besides, Valeria could leave Rufinus without any fear. Her father, on awaking in the morning, found himself much stronger. On opening his eyes and finding himself in the poor home of the *fossore* for an instant he asked himself if he was the victim of a dream; but he soon rejoiced anew in the happy reality. At break of day, Mincius had been to see Miltiades to inform him of Rustica's bold undertaking and its complete success. The pope rejoiced greatly, and sent the dear patient a doctor and the deacon Severus with all that was necessary for his prompt recovery. The doctor averred that the case of Rufinus was one of those in which sudden joy drives away illness and restores strength. The ex-Prefect was cured. Valeria could then entrust her beloved father to Mincius for a short time.

It cost Rufinus much to consent to the visit his daughter

wished to make to Irene ; but could he refuse this sacrifice which was asked of him by gratitude ?

The Roman custom exacted that on the eve of their death, the condemned should freely see their relations and friends, and a good repast was offered them. It was the *cæna libera*, a feast at which spectators might assist. The Christians loved to change them into *agapes* and, when they could, at the end, into the Eucharistic banquet. This repast thus became for them, as it were, the heavenly token and foretaste of the eternal feast at which they would soon sit down, adorned with the halo and the palm of martyrdom¹.

As the works at the circus were still going on, the Christians had been confined in an adjoining building, and it was there that they took their last repast, seated on the ground. It was composed of bread, wine, cheese and fruits. A crowd of curious people pressed towards the entrance to see the condemned who were guarded by armed soldiers.

The many pagan spectators could not hide their admiration on seeing the Christians so calm, so joyous, on the eve of the horrible death that awaited them. Their pious conversation, the sweet peace shining on their faces, struck the Romans with astonishment ; they could not remove their eyes from a spectacle that was so beautiful and to them so strange.

1. In the primitive Church, the celebration of holy Mass followed the repast of the faithful called *agapes*, that is, act of charity or love the *Acta martyrum* which recount the martyrdom of Saint Perpetua and Saint Felicitas say that the Christians, as far as was possible, changed the *cæna* into *agapes*.

At the end of the repast, one of the assistants turning towards the people would say : " Look well at our faces so as to know us on the day of judgment. "

Towards the end of the repast, however, a certain uneasiness manifested itself in the midst of the profound peace; all eyes were turned towards the entrance as though they feared that they were to be deprived of something they had anxiously awaited.

At last the Archdeacon Sylvester appeared on the threshold accompanied by two children; everyone looked eagerly at them, their faces animated with heavenly joy. "Here he is," they murmured, smiling happily.

On his breast, the newcomer carried the holy Host, hidden in the folds of his ample mantle.

The chief of the guards who had been won over during the morning, with a heavy sum of money, allowed the deacon to enter where the prisoners were, and they received him with marks of profound respect and the most affectionate veneration.

The two children knelt down before Sylvester, holding a silver cup in their hands which were covered with a small napkin of fine linen. The deacon removed the sacred Hosts from the richly embroidered cloth in which he had carried them, and broke the bread of heaven into as many parts as there were members in the group of future martyrs¹.

The confessors having given each other the kiss of peace, advanced with hands crossed on their breasts, the right over the left. *Viaticum Domini*, murmured the deacon,

1. In the time of the first Christians, it was already the custom to carry the Viaticum to the dying. The old man Serapion, feeling his end approaching, sent his young nephew for the priest. The latter who was retained on a bed of illness entrusted the divine Host to the child after taking all necessary precautions. The martyrs never failed to ask for holy Communion, in order to derive from it the strength to resist the tortures.

while placing the bread of life in the open hand of each one of the faithful. These responded, amen, and piously recollected, they communicated with bowed heads.

In fervent and silent adoration, the martyrs offered themselves in anticipation, as holocausts to the GOD who, for their love, had died on a gibbet, and their ardent prayers implored the grace to be faithful unto death.

After the *cæna libera* so solemnly ended, a few minutes more were accorded the prisoners in which to take leave of their friends and relations and to say a last adieu. Those who waited outside could then enter, and Valeria threw herself weeping, into the arms of her adopted mother. Irene, already beaming with celestial joy, pressed the weeping girl to her heart and gently consoled her, and then the latter told her how Rufinus had been delivered from captivity.

"See," said Irene, "the Lord does not break the bruised reed, and while taking thy two mothers, has given thee back thy father."

She wished to say more, but the thought of Candidus choked the poor mother's voice with a sob. This yielding to nature was only momentary, however, Irene raised her eyes to heaven and this act of love brought back to her beautiful face a brighter ray of happiness.

Then she kissed Valeria's forehead, with maternal tenderness and gave her, for Candidus, a golden ball which she had hanging from her neck with a chain of the same metal.

"Tell my beloved son," murmured the matron, "that that is all I have to leave him with my blessing; but it is a priceless treasure; this jewel encloses a sponge dipped in his father's blood. Tell him that at this moment, a tear from his mother's eyes infused new life into the vener-

able martyr's blood, tell him that my last sigh will be a prayer for my beloved son, that from heaven above I shall watch over him and in the hour of danger his mother will always be at his side. Tell him that a mother's love never dies, it is reanimated in heaven in the light of glory, and will be more powerful to help. Tell him that an eternal reunion will follow this short separation. And I shall watch over thee and thy father too, darling child ; the night which separates us from eternal day will be but of an hour's duration ; adieu, my child ; tell my beloved son also . . . "

The guards did not give Irene time to finish her sentence ; the sun had already set and the hour for the visit was already over. But intrepid Rustica, who till now had respectfully remained in the background, forced her way through the soldiers towards Irene and, kneeling before her, her face bathed in tears, begged her to bless her and her little child.

" I wish to be able to tell him one day, " she cried, " that he received a martyr's blessing, and that in his poverty he is thus richer than the great ones of the earth. "

The guards rudely interrupted this touching scene ; Valeria and Rustica retired weeping and saying to the Christians :

" Remember us when you are in paradise. "

The martyrs replied : " Soon, soon, we shall see you again in heaven. "

And then the door was closed on them.

While from the heavenly heights, the angels watched the agapes of the martyrs in the great circus on the Appian Way, and while the latter received the holy Eucharist before going to death, Maxentius invited the Roman nobles and the chiefs of the army to a superb feast.

This banquet, prepared in the most magnificent hall of the palace, was to be for the Emperor also the *cæna libera*, the repast before death.

Golden candlesticks shining with a thousand lights, illuminated the festive hall and made it as day, and enveloped in warm rays the marble statues which seemed to be animated. Gigantic fountains threw their waters up to the roof, and reflecting the fairylike lights, assumed all the colors of the rainbow. All around were faces of arms, and garlands of flowers and sweet smelling plants embalmed the air.

The guests were placed at several tables on raised platforms. Maxentius, proudly seated in the centre, had rid himself of the presence of the Empress by sending her an order to have herself excused on a plea of indisposition. Opposite him, in a place of honour, was Rufus, the general; Annius Annitus, the new Prefect of the town, the old consul, and the most notable of the senators also sat at the imperial table.

Rufus would have preferred to be with his troops at that moment; on the approach of the enemy, his place was at the camp; but, as on so many other occasions, he had to bow before the will of the Cæsar. At his earnest entreaty, however, the Emperor had granted him permission to retire at midnight, with the other chiefs of the army.

Slaves brought in profusion, the rarest viands artistically served on gold and silver dishes. Others emptied the amphores which were filled with generous wine, into cups of gold and silver of marvellous workmanship. To the sounds of soft effeminate music, dancers from all lands, charmed the eyes of the guests with their graceful movements.

The wine had already begun to warm the imaginations, endless toasts had hailed the Emperor's coming victories and the faithful votaries of Bacchus placed no limit to their libations. Rufus himself, influenced by the wine from Naples and Sicily, began to lose the remembrance of the coming battle, when suddenly, unperceived by the guards, who took advantage of the general disorder to indulge in the same orgies, an old woman advanced to the steps of the arial platform.

Quite exhausted, she sank down on the first step, and while the foaming wine was lavishly poured out, while the cries of pleasure mingled with the sound of the cymbals and the flutes, the old woman presented, before all eyes, the bloody corpse of a newborn child, alternately holding it out to be seen and then pressing it to her bosom, while uttering means of indescribable anguish.

"Thy mother is dead, poor child," she said, "thy father was thrown into the Tiber; but thy grandmother will protect thee from the cursed Emperor. The Chaldean magian pretended to draw his auguries from thy entrails and they tore thee from the arms of thy mother who died of grief; sleep peacefully, my child, they say that — But, oh! thou art cold — sleep, my child. — But he is up there, that Emperor who killed thee so barbarously; there they are all of them, eating thy heart and drinking thy blood!"

Then, collecting all her strength the poor demented creature, sighing and lamenting, mounted the steps and stood up in the full light before the Emperor, like a phantom from the bowels of the earth. And she held the little corpse with its gaping wounds out before him.

The slaves rushed forward and carried the old woman away; but it was too late, Maxentius had seen the poor

woman with her wild look and the bloody corpse. He removed the cup from his lips and his face became as pale as death.

“ Ah ! ” said he in terror, “ it is one of the furies come out of hell to reproach me for my crime and to announce to me the hour of vengeance. ”

The Emperor sought to master his convulsive trembling and to hide his terrible agitation ; he seized the cup again but it fell from his shaking hands. The music and the cries rang in his ears like mocking laugh of the demons. With eyes wide opened and staring into space, he stammered some incoherent words, and remained motionless, frozen with sudden dread.

The nearest guests stopped their conversation and looked furtively at the Emperor. The silence of those near him became more and more intolerable to him by contrast with the loud talking at the other tables.

Suddenly, Maxentius arose, and furiously dashing his cup to the ground roared like a wild beast :

“ I want silence ; out of this, wicked vagabonds, noisy blusterers, or I shall have you hacked to pieces by my pretorians ! ”

The amazed guests disappeared as if by magic. A death-like silence succeeded the drinking songs which had filled the now suddenly deserted galleries.

Maxentius was lying on a divan ; Rufus alone had dared to remain with him. He asked himself if the Emperor was going mad and what was the cause of this paroxym of rage. Seated with his back turned to the entrance, he had seen nothing ; neither the mad woman with the child all covered with blood, nor the effect produced on Maxentius by this apparition ; and he could not understand this sudden change.

But now even the silence which reigned around him filled the soul of Maxentius with strange terror and he ordered Rufus to follow him into his chamber. The change of place calmed the tyrant and becoming more composed his wicked nature reasserted itself.

"After all," he muttered, "I sacrifice thousands of men daily to defend my throne; what matters to me then the death of this infant, which was necessary to know the future? If the spirits that announce to me the triumph of my arms are desirous of the blood of newborn babes, how can I help that? Jupiter, I swear, that to satisfy them, I would lay hands, if necessary, on all the children in Rome, and even in the universe. I am master, what signifies, is to assure myself of victory!"

Rufus looked at the Emperor with a feeling of abhorrence; his broken words were an enigma at first, but the problem gradually became clear, and the old soldier trembled with indignation on hearing the imprecations of Maxentius.

"What! Rufus," said he to himself, "canst thou serve such a monster? Is it to his power that thou art sacrificing thy military talent, the lives of thy soldiers, thy whole existence?"

Alone with Maxentius, the general had seized the hilt of his sword; the tyrant was before him, lying on his divan, without any means of defence; but one simple movement of his sword, and Rufus could deliver the empire of this monster, and his legions, he knew it, would immediately place him on the throne with delirious joy.

Ah! if Symmachus had been in his place!

Rufus shook off the thought like an irksome burden.

"No, no," said he, "I have already lost him four battles and the half of his empire; no, no, I will not

take his life !” and he hurriedly left the imperial chamber, without even saluting the tyrant.

“No,” he continued while descending the staircase, “I will not be his murderer ; if the gods wish to raise me to the throne, let them arm another hand than mine with the avenging steel.”

No one noticed the departure of Rufus except a guard who seemed plunged in such deep meditation that he scarcely saluted the general. A thousand thoughts agitated his mind, as a storm does the waves of the sea.

Martial, for it was he, had had a long interview with the Pope Miltiades. The Christian doctrines excited his admiration ; but many of the Christian teachings made the obstinate pride of this wild soldier of the North revolt.

“That a GOD,” he said to himself, “should allow himself to be scourged, buffeted, nailed to a cross, is more than I can understand. I could not worship such a GOD ;” and he shook his head, regretfully it seemed.

Then he continued, as if to justify himself before the divine Crucified who mysteriously attracted his heart :

“For the past three hundred years He has abandoned His disciples to implacable persecutions without defending them with His avenging thunderbolts ; and they do not cease to sacrifice to Him their property, their bodies, their lives ! No warrior flies to the combat with as great joy and courage as these Christians go to death ! If it were a question of striking with the sword or trampling under foot the miserable wretches who dare to insult the Christ, Martial would enlist under His banner ; but can I, as do the Christians, accept affronts and bad treatment without saying a word, without crushing the wretched insulters against the wall ! How could I ever resolve to do this ?”

To shake off these thoughts, the pretorian, whose hour of guard was ended, hastened towards the abode of the Hercules, situated in one of the wings of the imperial palace ; but grace and the struggle followed him even in his sleep. The hour was approaching in which the warrior, so proud of his strength, would kneel before the all-powerful weakness of the Infant God.

When Valeria and Rustica re-entered the town, after leaving the circus and the Christians, night had fallen. They hastened their steps towards the *fossore's* little home, and there found Rufinus quite happy ; he had had a visit from Miltiades who gave him the hope of admitting him to confirmation on the following Sunday, and his soul was filled with holy joy.

The angel of rest had long spread his wings over the poor dwelling of the *fossore*. The silent stars shone in the vault of heaven ; and these faithful guardians of the night softly shed their peaceful light over the eternal city. The evening breeze lightly caressed the trees and the shrubs as a mother caresses the head of her sleeping babe. The light of the dying fires of the two camps was seen through the night air. While all nature plunged itself in sleep, one heart watched, the heart of a mother : Irene's prayer rose to the throne of the Most High, as the evening incense ; for her beloved son, she fervently implored the God to Whom, on the morrow, she was to sacrifice her life. Could she fail to obtain anything from the Divine Heart ?

In the camp of the Gauls a young warrior slept his head resting on his sword ; before his sleeping eyes, passed the sweet, gentle image of his mother. Any one entering his tent, would have seen the smile on his lips and heard, in a soft murmur, the name which tells us of

the sweetest love of earth, the name of mother ; the warrior was Candidus.

It was a solemn night, the last before the great day which was to so profoundly revolutionize the Roman Empire and mark the dawn of the triumph of the Church.

The moon poured her light on Constantine's army, on the legions of Rufus, on the proud city, mistress of the world, and was reflected in the waters of the Tiber.

That same light would shine on the morrow, in the same heavens, the Tiber would roll its yellow waters and peacefully follow the same course as yesterday, the one it followed a thousand years ago. Even so, does unchanging Providence watch over changeable, fickle men and nations.

CHAPTER XII

THE NEW BALTHASAR

THE next morning Maxentius was awakened very early by a messenger from Rufus ; he informed him that Constantine was drawing up his army in battle order, and that the combat might begin at any moment.

“ Very well ! ” cried Maxentius, “ tell Rufus that I shall await news of the triumph at the circus ; let him try to take Constantine alive, in all his strength, as Hercules seized the wild boar of Erymanthus ; I must absolutely drag this infamous wretch behind my triumphal chariot. ”

The recently arrived legions, the pretorian guard and the body guard composed of 6000 men, called the Hercules, were old troops well trained to carry arms. The military forces of Maxentius far superior to those of his adversary as to numbers, were certainly not inferior in training and skill. Besides, these troops were not worn out with fatiguing marches as were those of Constantine, and the discouragement that had taken possession of them after their first defeats, had been dispelled by the arrival of the fine legions from Africa and from Sicily, who showed the most lively enthusiasm on finding themselves under the command of Rufus, their old chief. Moreover the whole army was entirely devoted to Maxentius ; he had always been careful to treat them very well putting into practice the maxim of Septimus Severus who said :

“ Content thy soldiers and then fear no one. ”

Only the evening before, he had ordered to be given to

each man the *donatium* (gift in money) for the anniversary of his coronation, and according to usage, the Emperor had been careful to double the sum. He believed therefore, that he had every right to be absolutely sure of triumph, and, reassured by the happy auguries of the diviners, forgetful of the sad scene of the evening before, he directed all his thoughts to the fête of the day.

The morning promised to be beautiful with all the charms of autumn in the lovely Italian countries; the breeze blew fresh and pure from the Latium Mountains, and the sun shining in the dark azure of a cloudless sky made the rich gold of the military uniform and the bright steel of the arms glitter dazlingly in its light. Maxentius thought that fortune smiled on him in the glorious sun and that this was a forerunner of her benefits, a sweet gift for the fête. The unfortunate, too much occupied with himself, forgot that he was not alone on earth and that Fortune might smile on others.

Bands of peasants had descended from the villages that were to be seen dotting the hills of Latium. Clad in varied colours these descendants of the old Quirives stood in groups all along the Appian way, forming in the distance, as it were, a garland of living flowers, from which rose great shouts of joy.

Two men alone formed a contrast to this noisy delirium and the general animation. The snowy hair and venerable appearance of the elder commanded respect, the younger was still in the prime of life; they stood apart, near the tomb of the Corneli, far from the crowd which they scarcely noticed; their grave, sad looks but grew deeper at sight of all this wild joy. Alas! this immense throng was about to intoxicate itself with sight of blood, and to applaud the death of their brothers in the Christ. The

old man was Severus¹, the holy deacon whom we have several times read of in this story, and his interlocutor, leaning on a heavy pickaxe, was none other than our faithful Mincius, the *fossor*, who had spent the whole night in digging the *polyandrium* of the future martyrs. Severus had just been examining these last sad preparations and tears filled the eyes of both.

"Indeed," said Mincius, "it was a pity we did not close up the way before the return of the impious band who descended into our labyrinths yesterday. A few hours spent underground would have done them no harm, and I should have liked to have been near at hand to see Sabinus, the Chancellor's son, a prey to terror of the dead who surrounded him."

"Let us leave the task of punishment to God, my son," replied Severus, "to Him belongs the measure and the time."

"Thou art right, Father," said the *fossor*, "but when I see these monsters in human shape commit so much crime with impunity and gloat over the sufferings of others, when I see before my eyes all this miserable pomp, all these preparations, all this vain display made by the Emperor on his way to the circus, when I tell myself that his only object is to slaughter the Christians and to

1. The vault of the deacon Severus still exists in the catacombs of Saint Calixtus, it is there that his little granddaughter Severa is buried. The epitaph on the tomb of the child, is one of the most beautiful of the first ages of the Church. It runs thus: "Her body is buried here, in holy peace, until He, Who, by His holy Spirit called this pure soul, so as to keep it as His own for ever immaculate, raise it to the resurrection; and give it to us beautified with a heavenly beauty. She was nine years and eleven months old, when she passed from this earth to a better life."

torment the sacred members of Christ, my blood boils and sometimes would wish. . . .”

The holy old man laid his withered hand on the shoulder of the young *fossor* whose eyes betrayed strong emotion.

“ My son, ” he said in a gentle affectionate voice, “ my son, remember that the Lord JESUS taught His apostles that He did not come to condemn sinners but to save them. Besides that, dost thou know GOD'S designs ? Was not the king Balthasar slain in the midst of the nocturnal feast when he profaned the vases of the temple of Jerusalem ? ”

“ Yes, ” replied Mincius, “ it was then that Daniel translated the three mysterious words traced on the wall ; but at the feast to-day, vases of metal are not to serve to amuse the impious, the vases these monsters are going to break are the living temples of the Holy Spirit. They will not pour out the juice of the grape as Balthasar did, but blood of martyrs ! ”

With the back of his toil-hardened hand, he furtively wiped away a tear which fell down his sunburned cheek, and murmured with a sigh.

“ And then it will be too late, the vases will be broken and the blood shed ”

“ Who knows, my son, who knows, ” said the old man, “ how many times has not GOD in His mercy snatched His own from the gates of death ? To-day, the *labarum* will wave at the head of Constantine's troops ; who can say, but we may have arrived at the hour of the triumph of the cross ? Will not the mysterious sign, but lately seen by the Emperor of the Gauls, make him mount up to the capitol after having led him thus far from victory to victory ? Maxentius would not understand but what matters that ? Mincius, why should not the Christ, this

very evening, reign as conqueror in the capital of the world ? ”

The light of inspiration shone in the eyes of Severus, while from his heart, an ardent prayer of faith and hope rose up to the All-Powerful.

In her dungeon, Irene had spent the whole night in prayer ; in a fervent colloquy with her God, her soul had become purified from all earthly dross. The thought of Candidus was ever present to her heart, but she tasted of deep peace, like the eagle which in its lofty flight, has risen above the clouds and soars, without any movement of its powerful wings, in a pure atmosphere, while its eyes are fixed on the sun.

One of the condemned had questioned the noble matron about the time of the games in the circus, and she had answered him with a heavenly smile and eyes shining with a joy that was not of earth :

“ Ah ! the Christ Who presides at the great combat, has already taken His place, His throne, the Spirit of Love has already anointed the athletes with the oil of His grace and clothed them in celestial armour. Innumerable ranks of spectators await the signal for the glorious combat. The gate of death will be transformed into the arch of triumph, and angels wrapped in light stand at the entrance, ready to lead the conquerors to the feet of Christ, the sovereign judge, to receive the crown of glory from His hands. ”

In the home of the *fossor*, Valeria also had watched ; how could she sleep close her eyes when her friend was near the hour of the great combat ?

The joy of finding her father and witnessing his almost miraculous cure found a sad counterpoise in the thought of her who had been such a tender mother

to her, and whose prison and martyrdom she would have been too happy to share. An inexpressible feeling of anguish filled the girl's heart when she thought of the sacrifice of this generous mother whom only a few hours separated from her son's victory. Alas ! when the young warrior, with beating heart, would joyously hasten to embrace the most dearly loved of mothers, was he to learn that he had conquered too late, and that Irene had fallen under the sword of the executioner ?

Was she, Valeria, to break to him the sad news while presenting to him the sponge stained with his mother's blood ? Where should she find words to console such grief ? . Would she have no other keepsake to offer to him but that ?

"No, it is not possible," thought the heroic girl, "I shall go to the circus with the other Christians, I shall steep sponges and linen in the blood of the heroes of Christ ; with the blood of the martyr Castulus I shall mingle that of the martyr Irene, and I shall thus be able to give Candidus a double relic."

She promised herself also to place the holy remains of her second mother in the tomb she had had prepared close by Sophronia's.

Valeria knew that she could not reach the Amphitheatre without running the risk of meeting Sabinus again, but her love did not allow even this to keep her back ; besides she thought that Sabinus might be in Maxentius's suite with Heraclius at that time, and by taking the necessary precautions, it would be easy to pass unobserved in the crowd.

When Valeria told Rufinus of her project the next morning, he was very uneasy and begged her to do nothing, overcome by her entreaties, however, he acceded to her

desires. In order to reassure him, brave Rustica disguised the young patrician's pretty face with a headdress like those the women of lower classes were accustomed to wear.

At the appointed hour, the Emperor left his apartments, dressed in a tunic of orange silk ornamented with a wide band of gold and precious stones. From his shoulders fell a rich purple mantle. The imperial diadem which encircled his head, sparkled with the light of numerous incomparable diamonds, and his sandals too were thickly set with precious stones. He advanced bearing the ivory sceptre surmounted by the imperial eagle and affecting an air of disdainful condescension for the obsequious congratulations of the senators and officers all of whom wore white togas embroidered with purple.

The bugles resounded in the distance and cries of joy filled the air ; not one in the immense crowd then pouring into Rome, seemed to give a single thought to the enemy. The cortege began to move from the Palatine towards the Arc of triumph of Titus, passing by the temples of *Romanus* and *Venus*. The Emperor carried a palm, and, standing in his gold and ivory chariot, drawn by six magnificent white horses, surrounded by his body-guard, he seemed already a conqueror.

The Empress followed in another splendid chariot, but looking so sad and pale in her rich gold-embroidered robes that she might have been taken for a picture of death crowned with flowers. The inauguration of this circus which bore the name of her son Romulus but increased her melancholy, she could not pardon stern fate that had torn him from her maternal arms. After the sovereign, came the senators, the officers, the priest of the false gods carrying their idols, the white vestals, the

highest dignitaries of the court, dressed in gold and purple, and then all those to whom their title gave the right to a place in the cortege ; the men on horseback, the women in elegant litters.

Notwithstanding his reiterated efforts, Heraclius had not succeeded in dissuading Sabina from assisting at these fêtes of which his dark presentments made him apprehensive ; as for Sabinus, nothing in the world would have made him give up his place in the Emperor's cortege.

The immense crowd that preceded and followed, surged like the waves of the sea. The people were massed all along the route, crowded the stairs, the terraces, and the aparapets of the temples and palaces.

From the dawn of day, thousands of spectators had hastened to enter the circus so as to secure the best places.

The Emperor made his entry by the great gate and the crowd hailed him with frantic acclamations. He was then seen to take his place on the *podium* with the suite of Senators, vestals and dignitaries. Seated on the throne in the centre of the *pulvinas*, he allowed his glance to wander over the imposing edifice, and a smile of proud satisfaction hovered over the thick lips of the crowned barbarian. This circus, raised by his magnificence, would carry down to posterity the glory of Maxentius and make his name live throughout the ages.

Ten galleries superposed in tiers, supported the immense rows of stalls which ran round the vast enclosure, capable of containing 20,000 spectators. Doubtless the threatening events of the day had somewhat cooled the ardour of some of the Romans, and the assemblage was not as great as Maxentius had hoped ; but he barely gave this a thought, his work and the intense pleasure

his vanity derived from it, made him give himself up entirely to almost delirious joy.

In the middle of the arena, and along its whole length stretched the *spina*, an immense rampart, the circuit of which had to be made seven times before the *automedons* of the circus could carry off the prize ; it was ornamented along with statues, small columns, and graceful miniature temples. In the middle of the *spina*, rose the obelisk that Domitian had brought to Rome in the year 90, and that Maxentius had had taken to the circus.

Of this vast edifice which the tyrant was going to inaugurate with the blood of martyrs, when death seized him, there remain only the exterior walls and the tower of entrance. We can still recognize the *porta libitinensis* (the gate of death) by which the remains of the condemned were to be dragged outside. A silence of death now reigns in the deserted, grass-grown place ; in the galleries and under the vaults, filled with rubbish, the foxes have made their holes.

The vast ruins of the temple of Romulus and the edifices that surrounded the circus, alone retain the memory. When standing above the heaps of rubbish, from the heights of the Appian Way, one looks over these souvenirs of a greatness that is no more, the eye is drawn towards the tomb of Cecilia Metella in the distance. One would say that this imposing pile, cold and sad, puts the last mournful touch to the picture of destruction and death that the devastating torrent of centuries has pitilessly traced in the neighbourhood of the great Roman city.

The fête was opened by the apparition of the statue Romulus which was to be solemnly unveiled to inaugurate the circus built in his honour.

A splendid throne with a purple, gold-embroidered cano-

py, had been prepared for the Empress. Oriental carpets covered the steps and garlands of flowers were entwined all around, while on a trivet of massive gold exquisite perfumes burned.

Placed close by the spot where stood the statue of her beloved son, she would be the first to rejoice when, at the raising of the curtain, she should see the image so dear to her ; the unfortunate sovereign, surrounded by her slaves, awaited the moment with feverish impatience. The drapery which enveloped the marble fell, and, trembling, the unhappy mother seemed to wish to spring forward towards the cold, white apparition in which she recognized the lineaments of her child. She convulsively stretched out her arms towards it, and seemed as if she wished to impart to the inanimate image, a breath from her own throbbing heart. But soon falling back on her seat, she looked with wild dark eyes at the throng which she saw not and for which she had no concern. One felt that her sorrow bordered on madness. Her women pressed anxiously about their mistress, but she did not heed them. Alas ! in that immense crowd these poor slaves were the only ones who were touched by the unutterable despair of that mother, of that Empress.

But the religious solemnities had already begun, and the curiosity of the people was attracted towards the imposing procession of priests who carried the statues of gold and silver of their gods, the bust of the Emperor, and of the members of the imperial family, and sprinkled the immense edifice abundantly with a shower of lustral water.

“By Hercules,” muttered Sabinus impatiently into his neighbor’s ear. “Will the devotees never finish ? Can they not spare us these interminable delays ? If I were

the Emperor, I should immediately order a combat between a hundred gladiators. How much greater is the charm of the combatant's cries than this dull chanting ! I call the gods and the people to witness. Is it not true that they take more pleasure in seeing streams of blood flow than in this abundance of lustral water which is falling as copiously as the Deucalion deluge !”

The noisy clamour and the joyous exclamations with which the crowd hailed the Emperor's arrival had been for the future martyrs the signal that the hour of combat had struck. Resigned, what do I say ? joyfully, they looked into the face of approaching death. They once more gave each other the kiss of peace and encouraged each other to bravely confess CHRIST, their love and their hopes. Irene, standing in the midst of the prisoners, with a smile on her lips and a transfigured face, appeared like a mother surrounded by her children. She, whose sacrifice had at first been so poignant, now seemed to breathe forth superhuman joy and to be no longer of earth. It sufficed for any failing heart to look at the noble matron in order to regain courage ; but all the hearts there, beat in unison, and were filled with holy enthusiasm and sweet loving confidence.

The pagan rites and ceremonies being over, all eyes were directed towards the Emperor's box, awaiting the signal for the opening of the games ; the barriers had been removed, and the drivers of the chariots could no longer restrain their mettlesome steeds that were impatient to enter the arena, but the *Mappa*¹ did not fall, the imperial throne was empty.

1. The course was along an immense wall, the *spina*. He who after having gone around seven times, came in first, was the winner. In the centre of the wall were the *metæ*, four enormous pillars round

Maxentius had assisted at the lifting of the draperies, he had gazed on the statue of his son, then he was suddenly seen to disappear. Did the impatient sovereign wish to avoid the long religious ceremonies ? but now the *pompa* was over, the priests waited motionless, in doleful silence, and the expected signal did not appear.

The minutes succeeded and seemed like hours, yet the Emperor did not return ; the impatience of the spectators massed on the tiers was at its height, and burst forth in cries, vociferations and furious stamping of feet. In the circus, at the amphitheatre, the most despotic tyrants took the wishes of the people into consideration, and these latter then took the most incredible liberties that the most powerful sovereigns allowed, even as far as bowing before the disapprobation of the people with the same smile with which their praise had been received.

Amidst the surging sea of the populace, the general restlessness suddenly took a new form ; the news spread that Constantine had attacked Rufus, that the shock was a rude one, and then the agitation went beyond all bounds.

To allay the tumult, an officer of the court thought it was best to give the signal for the opening of the games, in the Emperor's stead, and the six four horses chariots dashed into the arena. With foaming nostrils, eyes on

which the chariots had to turn, and this occasioned serious accidents when the driver turned too short.

The *prodiu*m or the balcony surrounded by a balustrade, was reserved for the senators ; there was a seat of honour for the Emperor. When he presided at the games, his place was at the balcony over the large entrance gate in the centre. He gave the signal for the opening of the games, by throwing a piece of white linen called the *mappa* into the arena.

fire, excited by the too long waiting, the steeds seemed to devour space with terrific speed, when menacing hisses and frightful cries rose from every side ; each one looked at the imperial box still empty. The races, which ordinarily the Romans loved passionately and watched with breathless excitement, as the chariots flew along the *spida*, had this time lost their charm. In the midst of frightful confusion, the greater number of the spectators fled and rushed out towards the *vomitorias*.

The boldest remained in their places shouting :

“Have done with the races, away with the chariots and horses ! Where is the Emperor ? Where has he fled ? We want news !”

At last a herald advanced and commanded silence with his rod.

With strong hands the drivers of the chariots reined in their trembling horses, and silence suddenly fell on the immense circus, a whole people listened, spurred by intense curiosity.

“Our divine Emperor,” cried the herald in a loud voice and pronouncing each word distinctly, “our divine Emperor did not wish to leave his brave legions alone to fight against the infamous wretch who has dared to raise his sacrilegious hands against the capital of the empire and attack it on the very day of the fête of the Romans. The heroic Maxentius then has placed himself at the head of his troops and, surpassing the glory of Julius Cæsar, he has but to show himself in order to conquer.”

These words were received without any enthusiasm, some remarked in a low voice that the issue of the combat must be very doubtful for the Emperor to leave the games ; others listened to the herald's absurdly vain word, one with an ironical smile ; and soon all had but

one intention : get back as quickly as possible within the walls of the town.

In the twinkling of an eye, the tiers were empty, and the last of the spectators crowded impatiently before the *vomitorias* which had become too narrow. To see this crowd fleeing in disorder towards the walls one would have thought that instead of attacking Rome by the bridge Milvius, Constantine was pursuing the fugitives from the circus along the Appian way : men, women, children, patricians, plebians, slaves, ran along it breathlessly and in utter confusion.

In this frightful disorder, Sabina searched in vain for her son, her slaves, her bearers ; she was obliged to flee on foot, in her festive attire, mixed up with the common people, streaming with perspiration, covered with dust, under the clouds of sand raised by the people running in this sudden delirium of fear.

In truth, Maxentius, warned by Rufus that his troops were giving way had hurried to the place of combat ; he flattered himself with the hope that his presence alone would turn the fortunes of the day. However, on leaving, he sent to the centurion who had charge of the Christian prisoners, the order to massacre them that same evening, if he did not receive news of Maxentius's triumph.

"Those cursed dogs at least shall not rejoice, if misfortune should befall me," growled the barbarian.

As for Sabinus, he would have wished to leave all the laurels of victory to Cæsar, and cared little about sharing in his courage. As much as he had till then always hung about his sovereign's throne and sought to approach him to win one glance, so much did he now seek furtively to avoid him. But Maxentius made him an imperative sign

and he was forced to follow the Emperor to the field of battle.

The horsemen posted all along the way by Heraclius, to bring news rapidly from the camp to Rome, received orders on the contrary now to go at full speed to Rufus to tell him, at all costs to await the Emperor on the battlefield.

On the heights where the tomb of the Corneli stands, the deacon Severus and the *fossor* watched the horsemen and the crowd pass, and they guessed what was happening. With his eyes raised to heaven, the old man prayed to the God of armies ; then turning towards the deserted circus, he murmured : *Balthasar*.



CHAPTER XIII

THE BATTLE

HALF AN hour's distance from the Gate of the People, at that time called "Porto Flaminia", and quite close to the Mole (the bridge Milvius of the ancient Romans) two great roads joined each other : the Via Cassia and the Via Flaminia of that time ; the latter passed before the "Villa ad Gallinas" where the Cæsar of the Gauls had encamped. At this point, steep hills run along the Tiber, having narrow meadows between their base and the banks. Farther on, the river, making a wide sweep, forms, towards the mouth of the Anio, the large plain which in our day bears the name of *Prati de Tor di Quinto*, from the ruins of an old tomb that may still be seen there.

It was there that the famous battle of the 28th October, 312, was to be fought. Rufus, the chief of Masentius's army, had disposed his troops in the form of an immense triangle. The rear-guard and the right were protected by the Tiber and the Anio, the left wing occupied the slopes of the hills, while the heights were held by the archers and the *funditores* with powerful slings ; they thus had the Flaminian way in front of them, towards the north. Thus the old Roman general's position was as advantageous as that of Constantine's troops was unfavourable. Hemmed in, the banks of the Tiber on their left, and the hills on their right, the latter could not deploy freely, and their unprotected flanks exposed them to dangerous attacks.

Besides this, the Cæsar of the Gauls had to fight against old well-disciplined troops, four times as strong in numbers¹, who were not, as were his soldiers, fatigued by long marches. Humanly speaking, the enterprise was audacious, nay, even presumptuous ; to lose this battle at the moment when the object of his hope was within reach, would be to lose all.

However, a firm confidence in the mysterious sign which had miraculously led him on from triumph to triumph, up to the gates of Rome, urged Constantine to go forward ; he did not wish to lose a single day.

At the first dawn of day, he was seen to set his army in battle order ; he rode along the ranks of his warriors, mounted on a magnificent white charger, clad in brilliant armour, the gold of which shone in the rays of the rising sun.

Animated by his ardent words, all hearts beat high with noble enthusiasm and each one was eager to rush into the combat.

Under the shadow of the Labarum, of which they were so proud, the valour of the numerous Christian soldiers in the army had risen to heroism ; they fought like lions. Heaven rewarding the faith of these brave men, ceaselessly watched over them with striking proofs of protection, the arrows of the enemy could not touch them and fell harmless at their feet.

But while the confidence inspired by these prodigies,

1. Zosimus tells us, in speaking of Constantine's military forces, that they numbered 90,000 infantry and 8,000 cavalry, while he estimated Maxentius' troops at 170,000 infantry and 18,000 cavalry.

The German and Breton auxiliary troops formed a strong contingent of Constantine's army which had lost but few men in the preceding battles. Nazarius brings this forward in his panegyric of the Emperor : *Tuis integri... Sine tuorum vulneribus.*

conferred on the Gaulish army a Christian character which daily grew stronger and turned all hearts towards CHRIST, while the fame of the mysterious sign spread and its triumphs excited general attention, the soldiers and the chiefs who remained faithful to the gods became more gloomy, and the jealous uneasiness which filled their hearts increased with the increasing glory of the *Labarum*. This did not escape the discerning eye of the young Emperor ; and even he at that moment, allowed himself to be influenced by some indefinable feeling of hesitation. It was not that in his heart of hearts, he had ceased to believe in CHRIST, and to attribute his marvellous victories to Him ; but, arrived before that city, mistress of the world, the bulwark and citadel of all the false divinities of paganism, actuated perhaps by fear of displeasing the Romans and also by the desire of not wounding his pagan warriors, he wavered between his nascent faith and the sacrifices it imposed. Besides, he had not yet been able to sufficiently overcome his old prejudices and pray with an entire and lively conviction to the God of the Christians, to Whom however, he knew he owed his success.

Doubt gradually weakened his mind. Constantine yielded, he decided that the sixth legion, that is to say the legion which carried the *Labarum*, should not at first take part in the combat. He would leave it in its place in the centre, but kept it in the rear rank, allowing it to advance only if the danger became imminent. If the standard with the mysterious sign then saved them from defeat, the Christian religion would triumph both over his inmost doubts and his heart for ever.

These measures were no doubt the result of the priest Gordien's insinuations. After having offered numerous sacrifices to the god of the sun, this wily personage, with

feigned joy, had announced to the Emperor that he would be most surely successful.

All was now ready for the combat. Constantine gave the signal for the attack, the trumpets sounded in the camp, and the war-cry rose as terrible and powerful as the rolling of thunder, bursting from the clouds.

The young conqueror, at the head of the Gaulish cavalry, dashed forward the first, carried away by his daring, under a storm of shafts and arrows; the enemy's cavalry at first gave way before the fury of the onslaught; the Gauls advanced and soon found themselves before the infantry, the old legions, splendid and immovable as a wall of brass. Pressed in close ranks, these veterans seemed like a forest of lances against which the blows resounded without making them flinch in the least. In vain did Constantine put forward his columns of infantry, the old pretorian guard advanced in their turn and engaged in a desperate struggle; Gaulish courage gave way before the invincible resistance of the enemy, and in their turn, the Romans took the offensive.

Rufus commanded in person the old soldiers with whom he had won so many victories; on the left wing, the corps of Hercules, six thousand giants, clad in skins of beasts and armed with enormous steel clubs, advanced. Under the feet of these heavy columns, the ground trembled and seemed to give way, the encounter was terrible.

"By *Odin*," roared old king Froc who marched at the head of his Germans, "by *Odin*, have I led to Rome a lot of old women armed with spindles? Thor, hear my voice and may thy heavy hammer crush the first who draws back before these men with the skins of beasts! Forward! and let him who has blood in his veins follow me."

He rushed on the enemy with his wild Germans, but

like a block of granite the Hercules received the shock without yielding and their whirling clubs mowed down the best warriors.

All then, was to the advantage of Rufus ; the sun too, which his troops had behind them, blinded his adversaries, and at the same time, a strong wind blew thick clouds of dust into their eyes.

It was at this juncture that Rufus sent a messenger to Maxentius to announce the favourable progress of the combat. This news was given to the Emperor at the moment of the unveiling of the statue of Romulus ; everything seemed to succeed according to the desires of the Cæsar who was so confident in his good fortune. However, he wished to keep this good news to himself, so as to dazzle the people by suddenly announcing the complete overthrow of his enemy.

Success and defeat alternated at different points of the battlefield ; Constantine's soldiers, stimulated by the sight of Rome and the remembrance of their recent victories, fought like lions and performed prodigies of valour, notwithstanding their small numbers.

Constantine had sent to the tribune Artemius, who was at the head of several cohorts, the order to clear the hills, dislodging the archers and the *fronditores* by attacking them in the rear ; but that officer must have failed in the attempt, for the murderous shafts continued to pour down, sowing death in the ranks of the right wing of the Gaulish Cæsar.

Eroc the old German King, had again rallied his men, and once more attacked the left wing of the Romans. So as to further excite the courage of his warriors, he entrusted the standard to his only son, the idol of the soldiers. Like so many heroes, the brave troops threw

themselves into the conflict. Alas ! the first that fell, pierced to the heart, was the valiant Ulric. He fell with his standard, before the eyes of his father who suppressed his tears. At this sight, dis-couragement overcame these brave men, sorrow disheartened them ; they hesitated, and profiting by this check, the Hercules broke into their ranks with irresistible impetuosity.

Under the terrible clubs of these giants, the helmets and shields of the Germans flew into pieces, as if they had been of clay. Martial wielded his club with matchless dexterity and force, although he was bleeding himself from many gaping wounds, and the dead bodies were piled up around him. The Germans were about to give way, their ranks began to falter. Rufus, certain now of triumph, sent a second messenger to Maxentius with the best possible news. The moment was a terrible one for the assailants.

Constantine saw his bravest warriors fall like wheat beneath the scythe, he saw the cohorts that had never wavered, retire before a rejoicing enemy that was sure of triumph. Before him rose the city of Rome into which he had thought to enter, crowned with the laurels which now seemed to elude his grasp ; behind him, there was death, there was shame ; beside him his dearest companions in arms slept their last sleep, the earth steeped in their noble blood.

Then the warrior remembered the GOD of the Christians, he raised his tear-filled eyes to heaven.

“ O Lord JESUS ! O CHRIST ! ” he cried, “ keep Thy promise and give me the victory if it were indeed Thy name I saw shining above the sun. By this token, I shall believe in Thee and the whole empire will adore Thee with me as the one true GOD. ”

He then gave the command for the sixth legion to advance. It dashed forward, impatient at its long inaction, following the *Labarum* that Candidus bore, and rushed on the enemy while the air rang with the cry of *Christus Vincit*¹.

At the same instant, the aspect of the combat changed ; as the rising waves dash in vain against the rocks and fall back powerless, thus did the old legions, the pretorians and the Hercules give way and break up. One might have thought that the name of CHRIST, invoked by the Christian legions, shed a supernatural light and darted its rays like devouring flames upon the Romans. At the same time Artemius' soldiers appeared on the heights and the archers and *fronditores* were seen to fall headlong down the steep slopes. The hills were soon cleared, and by the wide valley which now bears the name of Poussin, the French painter, Artemius' cohorts broke the enemies' troops by attacking them in the flank. *Christus Vincit ! Christus Vincit !* repeated the conquerors, and the name of the triumphant CHRIST re-echoed, announcing the

1. The cry *Christus Vincit* was introduced later on into the liturgy. In the Middle Ages, two precentors sang alternately with the choir in the litanies : " Kings of kings ! — *Christe Vincis* ; — Thou our king ! — *Christe Vincis* ; — Thou our hope ! — *Christe Vincis* ; — Thou our help ! — *Christe Vincis* ; — etc. And then they added : *Christus Vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat*. — Christ has vanquished, He reigns, He commands.

As the greatest monument of the triumph of Christianity over paganism, Pope Sixtius the Fifth placed a cross on the obelisk which he had had conveyed from Nero's circus to Saint Peter's square. On the pedestal of the obelisk was engraven, by his orders, the cry of Victory : *Christus Vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat*, followed by the prayer : *Christus ab omni malo plebem tuam defende* : May Christ defend His people from all evil.

Victory. It resounded from all parts, from the centre to the wings ; the pagan soldiers as well as the Christians repeated the miraculous word which had saved them ; and over the immense plain, the conquering name of the CHRIST was heard : *Christus Vincit ! Christus Vincit !*

Rufus, wild with rage, ground his teeth on seeing the standard with the wondrous sign, which for the fourth time broke the palm of victory in his hands, and snatched from his brow the crown of glory with which it had been adorned. In vain did he place himself at the head of his terrified troops to lead them again to the combat ; arrested in their flight but finally repulsed, the Roman soldiers vainly threw themselves into the arms of death ; the pretorian guard, the Hercules, all gave way.

Maxentius had but just received the news of the second messenger, when a soldier arrived, riding at full speed. He ran towards the Emperor and handed him a paper with these words written by Rufus :

“ The accursed sign of the CHRIST bears down all before it ; where is thy promise ? Come, thy presence only can change the chances of the battle ! ”

Maxentius roared, uttered a frightful imprecation and left. The priest had not yet finished sprinkling the lustral water on the walls of the new circus.

Maxentius was going to conquer, that was certain, and if he regretted leaving the games, he rejoiced at the thought that his glory would be lastly increased, for the victory would be his own personal work.

“ Because Rufus is unable to break this famous standard, ” he soliloquized, “ I shall go myself and place it under his knees that he might crush it. And we shall then see, cursed Nazarene, ” he added contemptuously, “ which of us is the stronger. ”

The Emperor rode over the Via Flaminia at full speed.

At that moment, Rufus had succeeded in rallying his soldiers, and with the troops he had held in reserve, was fighting desperately to retrieve what was lost, and win the victory which appeared doubtful ; but above, Constantine's legions, restrained momentarily by Rufus' supreme resistance, the heavenly hosts themselves seemed to combat by the sign of the cross. One might have said that invisible hands arrested the Romans' darts and aimed them back at them.

When Maxentius arrived, the tumult and the *mêlée* were frightful all over the battle-field as far as the eye could see. Remembering their brilliant past, the pretorians, who had made and dethroned so many emperors, died like heroes for a sovereign who was unworthy of such devotion ! The legions from Sicily, as also those from Africa, vied with the old guard in bravery. All fought and defended themselves with the energy of despair ; driven back to the river, they felt that they were lost and had but to choose between a glorious death, arms in hand, or that which would be found in the waters by fleeing ignominiously. Maxentius' arrival was therefore hailed as that of a saviour ; his head encircled with the diadem with golden rays, his wide purple mantle falling from his shoulders, without arms or cuirass, trusting to his prestige, the Emperor put himself at the head of his Hercules.

"In the name of the god Mars, follow me!" he shouted to the imperial guard, and setting his spurs he dashed into the midst of the enemy's troops.

Rufus followed him, and the Hercules marched after them. But what could their clubs do ? Of what avail is the greatest human strength against the power of CHRIST ?

By the side of Maxentius, Rufus, the brave old warrior, fell, struck by countless blows, the Hercules recoiled before the irresistible power of the *Labarum*.

Soon the flight was general, the rout complete, disorder reigned everywhere ; pursued by the Gauslih cavalry, the soldiers threw down their arms and rushed towards the two bridges, the victory was won.

Under the weight of the fugitives, the bridge of boats gave way and all on it were engulfed in the waters ; at the same time this closed the door of safety to all those still crowded on the bank ; but very few of these unfortunates were able to reach the opposite side by clinging to the planks and boats that floated.

The mass of fugitives, under the enemy's fire, fled towards the bridge Milvius, but the disorder and the crush were such that the parapets were torn from the sides, and infantry and cavalry were precipitated into the tide. They were seen to struggle and fight with death and then to sink and disappear for ever under the waters ; others swam desperately towards the left bank, but those who were sinking, trying to rise to the surface, clutched hold of them and dragged them down to the bottom.

Sabinus, the grand Chancellor's son, still in holiday attire, fled wildly ; arrived on the banks of the Tiber, he slipped in the mud and was engulfed.

Maxentius, surrounded by his Hercules and the remainder of the pretorian guard, retired fighting ; but he was brought to bay by coming up against the crowd of fugitives and could not take one step further. At that moment, Constantine appeared near the river at the head of the tenth legion. To rapidly terminate the bloody combat, he ordered a final and general attack. He himself shouted the triumphant cry : *Christus Vincit* and all

the soldiers repeated it after him ; Constantine had the *Labarum* brought beside him, and dashed forward towards the trembling remnant of the Roman cohorts ; all gave way before his conquering advance.

The imperial guard alone, having at its back the river, which had already received so many dead, the murderous sword of the enemy before it, death in front, death behind, the old guard fought its last fight.

As for Maxentius, seeing that all was lost, he drove his spurs into his horse's flanks, and the spirited brute, terrified, reared and plunged into the waters. In vain did the tyrant placing his last hope in his charger, cling desperately to its neck, the swollen current carried away both horse and rider struggling together against death, and they disappeared under the waters before the eyes of the young Cæsar, covered with glory. The CHRIST had vanquished !

Constantine immediately gave the sign for the cessation of the combat ; then, dismounting, the conqueror knelt down ; with uncovered head he gave thanks to the CHRIST in a loud voice.

Candidus and hundreds of Christian soldiers prostrated themselves beside the Emperor ; numbers of their pagan companions, carried away by an irresistible impulse, bent the knee with them ; tears of emotion ran down the browned cheeks of all these warriors, and their heads were bowed before the All-powerful, Who had crushed the strength of the enemy and given the victory to Constantine's standard¹.

1. His contemporaries were all convinced that Constantine's victory was the work of heaven. The pagan orator, Nazarius, addressing the victor, thus expressed himself :

" It was the Divinity Who protected thy piety, it was the Divinity

The decisive battle had been won, and the sun had scarcely begun to descend from the zenith.

Then only was the old King Eroc seen to seek, not far from the river's bank, the inanimate body of his son, Ulric the Valiant. His cold hand still held the standard that had been entrusted to him and his head rested on his heavy sword. Eroc, allowing his tears to flow, carried in his arms, his brave son, the object of his pride. In vain did his faithful warriors, in tears, beg him to give them the honour of carrying their young chief, the old man shook his head and kept his precious burden.

"No, no," he murmured sobbing, "these arms which received him when he came into the world, must be the only ones to place him in the bosom of foreign earth, far from fatherland and the old oak which shades the tomb of his ancestors; but his soul has found the way to the Walhalla, where Ulric the brave has taken his place at the feasts of heroes; there he drinks the ambrosia of the gods in the skull of his enemy."

Who broke the pride of the tyrant, upheld thy army and gave it a power that God alone can give." Constantine himself declares: (*ad sanctum cœtum*, chap. xxii).

"I attribute my fortune and all my success, to help from on high, all the city of Rome knows it as I do, and praises the Eternal for it as I do."

Eusebius says of Constantine, that firmly convinced of having been helped by God, the Emperor immediately thanked the Lord in a fervent prayer; he adds that Constantine wished that his statue, raised in Rome, should hold the *Labarum* and that the following inscription should be engraven on the pedestal: "True dispenser of your strength, I have, by this sign, delivered your city from the yoke of tyranny, I have restored liberty to the people and the senate with the grandeur and magnificence of ancient days." (EUSEBIUS, *History of Constantine*, I, 33).

The grave of the young warrior was dug at the foot of a dark cypress, on a hill by the waters of the Tiber. The face turned towards the east, his cuirass for a pillow, he sleeps his last sleep, and on the bark of the tree, with the points of their swords, his companions in arms engraved his name : *Ulric the brave, son of the King Eroc.*

A canvas of the immortal Raphael, at the Vatican, has illustrated the great battle which decided the fate of Rome and of the Church. In the foreground, Maxentius is battling with death in the waters of the Tiber ; on a height, near the bank, stands Constantine with the *Labarum*, the cross of which overlooks the whole scene ; to the right the fugitives who had crowded the bridge Milvius, and the boats are struggling in the waters ; to the left, an old warrior, on bended knee, leans over the lifeless body of a handsome young man, still clad in his armour, and lifts him up tenderly.



CHAPTER XIV

THE SAVICUR

THE great battle was won ; but it was important not to give the remnant of Maxentius' army time to gather behind the walls of Rome ; it was necessary to prevent the city from trying to sustain a siege, or to organize any resistance in the streets.

Would not the vanquished troops seek to compensate themselves for their defeat by murder and the pillage of the defenceless city ?

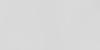
Convinced that he had no time to lose, Constantine commanded that the clarion should be sounded, and ordered the cavalry to advance by the road which passed by the Vatican, and immediately occupy the Capitol and the Forum. Some were to enter the city by the bridge Alius (bridge Saint-Ange), near the Mole of Adrian, and the others by that called the Janiculensis, below the Tiber. At the same time, the infantry were to close the approach to the bridge Milvius and the road to the Vatican, to the defeated and dispersed troops. The Senator Paulinus was charged to accompany the commander of the cavalry, so as to officially announce to the public authorities Constantine's victory, Maxentius' defeat, and the arrival of the conqueror. The august sovereign had not forgotten Paulinus' terrible anxiety with regard to his children, and in choosing him for this mission, he wished to give him the means of hastening to their assistance.

From the moment it was known in Rome that the battle



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had begun, and more especially from the time of Maxentius precipitate departure for the field of battle, the agitation continued to increase. It rose like the waves of the sea, and the spectators of the circus, wavering between fear and hope, also hastened to enter the town.

The most contrary news was carried to the city; terror was at its height, when it was heard that Maxentius' soldiers spoke of nothing less than setting fire to the four quarters of the city, to avenge their emperor, if he were really dead.

After the interruption of the games, the Senators had gradually assembled in the Temple of Concord, at the foot of the Capitol, where their ancestors had been accustomed to hold their councils in times of public danger. Messenger after messenger had been despatched toward the bridge Milvius to bring back authentic news. Suddenly they learned that Maxentius was dead, drowned in the Tiber, and that Constantine had won a brilliant victory. Immediately, the august assembly, whose decision had been made before hand, sent an official deputation under the leadership of the new Prefect Ancelinus to the battle field, carrying the golden statues of Rome and Victory; the deputation was to render solemn homage to Constantine and take the oath. At the same time, at the suggestion of some of its Christian members, the senate gave the order to set free all political prisoners accused of the crime of high treason.

In an instant, everything changed in the city, the air resounded with cries of joy and happiness, the people acclaimed and blessed the new Emperor, they hailed with transports of joy the victims of the tyrants whose dungeon doors had been thrown open, more emphatic still was the cavalry, which arriving at full gallop, took possession of

the Capitol and the Forum, thus assuring the safety of all.

Paulinus received by his friends with the most lively demonstrations of joy, could not take part in this happiness for his heart was a prey to anguish because of his children of whom, up to that moment, no one had been able to give any news. At last, a Christian Senator succeeded in reaching him and told him that his dear ones were safe from all peril, hidden in the Villa of the Quintilii,¹ at the fourth mile stone on the Appian way, with a Christian family. He might have added that, as happy catechumens, they had already, for more than a month past, the happiness, of being initiated in the doctrines of CHRIST.

The noble Senator, whose dearest wish was thus fulfilled, immediately despatched a messenger to the Villa of the Quintilii. If he had been informed at that moment that the condemned Christians, confined in the prisons of the circus, had not been set at liberty notwithstanding the general amnesty, he would have hastened to send a detachment of cavalry to their assistance; but, in the general confusion, no one thought of those unfortunates. But for an unexpected intervention, the infamous order of the dethroned tyrant would have been executed and from beyond the vale of death, his spirit would have feasted on infernal cruelty.

As soon as Miltiades heard of the battle, the Holy Pontiff, with several deacons and a good number of Christians; went to the catacombs of Saint Valentine² between the Flaminian gate and the bridge Milvius, of

1. The ruins of this immense Villa may be seen at the present day; the people call it *Roma Vecchia*.

2. The cemetery of Saint Valentine is celebrated for the magnificent representation of the crucifixion of Our Lord, due to Bosio's chisel.

which only the ruins now remain. Being near the place of combat, they could succour the wounded Christians immediately after the battle.

From a Villa situated on an eminence, quite at the entrance to the catacombs, they could see the theatre of the fight in the distance ; they saw the first fugitives fleeing wildly along the Flaminian way in the direction of the city, Maxentius arriving on the battle-field at a gallop, and soon after, the general rout of the vanquished army.

While Constantine and his soldiers fought with the sword, the Christians raised their hands to heaven in fervent prayer ; thus had Moses done when Israel fought against Amalec. At last the news of Constantine's decisive triumph reached them, and almost at the same moment, they heard that Maxentius had perished in the waters. Then the Holy Pontiff, falling on his knees with the deacons and the faithful, intoned the song of Moses, with which the shores of the Red Sea had re-echoed in times past when Pharaoh and his army were engulfed in the waters.

"The Lord *is* my strength and my praise, and He *is* become salvation to me. He *is* my God and I shall glorify Him : the God of my fathers and I shall exalt Him.

"The Lord *is* as a man of war, Almighty *is* His name.

"Pharaoh's chariots and his army He hath cast into the sea ; his chosen captains are drowned in the Red Sea.

"The depths have covered them, they are sunk to the bottom like a stone.

"Thy right hand, O Lord, *is* magnified in strength : Thy right hand, O Lord, ! . . . slain the enemy.

"And in the multitude of Thy glory, Thou hast put down Thy adversaries : Thou hast sent Thy wrath, which hath devoured them like stubble.

“ And with the blast of Thy anger the waters were gathered together : the flowing water stood, the depths were gathered together in the midst of the sea.

“ The enemy said : I will pursue and overtake, I will divide the spoils, my soul shall have its fill : I shall draw my sword, my hand shall slay them.

“ Thy wind blew and the sea covered them : they sunk as lead in the mighty waters.

“ Who is like to Thee, among the strong, O Lord ? Who is like to Thee, glorious in holiness, terrible and praiseworthy, doing wonders ?

“ Thou stretchedst forth Thy hand, and the earth swallowed them.

“ In Thy mercy Thou hast been a leader to the people which Thou hast redeemed : and in Thy strength Thou hast carried them to Thy holy habitation ”

The song being ended, the Bishop of bishops, with his clergy and the faithful, hastened towards the battle-field. He wished that the Church of Rome should bear to the conqueror the tribute of its gratitude, that it should consecrate that hour, the first after three centuries of struggle, which was to free it from its chains and give it liberty; to works of charity and mercy.

The Father of souls wished also to hasten to the dying and the wounded, so as to soothe their last sufferings on this earth and aid them on their way to the eternal father-land.

Miltiades' third object was to call the sovereign's attention to the Christians at the circus. Alas ! would it not be too late, may they not have already succumbed to the fury of the executioners ?

With the anxiety of a father who trembles for the safety of his children, the holy old man made haste to implore

the sovereign to send an imperial order in favour of the condemned.

When the Pope appeared at the camp, the young chief had just assembled his staff for a council of war, and they had decided that the Emperor was to make his triumphal entry into the city that same evening. He and all his warriors were still under the powerful influence of the events of that glorious day, and while their thoughts turned sadly to those brave companions in arms who had fallen beside them, their souls were lifted in gratitude towards the God who had promised and given them the victory. At that very hour, Constantine wished, with his own hands, to confer on Candidus, the gallant standard bearer, the insignia of military tribune, and to place the golden ring on his finger. Was not the whole honour of the victory due to the *Labarum*, and did not he who had borne it so faithfully, merit a share of the glory ?

That was a solemn hour in the history of the world, when the venerable Pontiff, who governed, not only the diocese of Rome but the universal Church, met the young Emperor crowned with the laurels of victory.

For more than three hundred years, Rome and the world had cursed the name of CHRIST, for more than three hundred years, the Emperors had not ceased to issue edicts for the most bloody persecutions of His disciples. And behold, now, Constantine miraculously won the victory and the empire through the God of the Christians ; and it was the Bishop of the Christians who brought him the first tributes of homage from the Capitol. From the obscurity of the catacombs, where the immaculate Spouse of CHRIST had lived during three centuries, she rose to offer her assistance to the new Emperor, and to found, on the ruins of the old world which was crumbling,

a new world, better and happier. After three long centuries, the priesthood and the empire were to meet for the first time in holy concord, messenger of peace and love.

The young conqueror and those around him were struck with admiration and deep respect on seeing the venerable old man appear, his bearing all of saintly modesty and majestic dignity. In spite of himself, Constantine compared the Pontiff of the Christians with Gordian and his priests ; he felt himself in the presence of the Pope, that is of a supernatural power, of one sole power, descended from the heavens on earth.

The supreme Pastor, constrained by the thought of the dying, hastened to express to the sovereign his joy, his gratitude, his wishes, and exposed to him the imminent danger in which the Christians at the circus were.

Through respect for the Sovereign Pontiff and the Emperor, Candidus had, up to that moment, remained at a little distance, and had not dared to question Miltiades as to his mother's fate ; but on hearing the holy old man speak of the Christians who were condemned to be exposed to the wild animals and of the imminent peril which menaced them, the young warrior's heart was seized with a terrible apprehension. Pale, and in a trembling voice, he cried, addressing the Pontiff :

“ Holy Father, what has happened to my mother ? ”

Miltiades hesitated ; he remained silent, and Candidus understanding all, threw himself at Constantine's feet and implored, as a favour, to be allowed to go to the circus himself.

The Sovereign, touched with pity, sent for his swiftest Andalusian coursers, and while one messenger carried orders to the commander of the cavalry to lead two squadrons to the theatre of the games, on the Appian way, he

entrusted Candidus with an imperial rescript, written with his own hand, which liberated the Christians.

"The news of our victory and Maxentius' fall are doubtless already known there," he said to Candidus, "the prisoners have certainly been set free; if it is otherwise, thou shalt thyself be the happy messenger who, breaking thy noble mother's chains, will lead her in triumph into Rome, with all the other Christian captives. It is to the imperial dwelling of the Lateran that thou shalt accompany Irene; the master of the palace shall receive orders to place an apartment at her disposal. Go, my brave friend," added the Emperor kindly; "hasten, the God Who has guided our conquering steps up to Rome, will lead thee, be sure of it, to the arms of thy mother."

In his heart of hearts, Constantine, who knew Maxentius' cruelty trembled, thinking that he might have ordered a massacre of the Christians, should he be defeated, and this same fear made Candidus' heart sink.

He set off in all haste, his horse's hoofs making the sparks fly as he rode along the road which runs by the right bank of the Tiber, and, crossing the Transtevere, passed before the circus of Maximus and the baths of Caracalla, on to the Appian way. His courser seemed to fly, yet he did not speed sufficiently for Candidus who would have wished to have wings; as the minutes passed, his anxiety became more poignant, and he prayed from the depths of his soul.

"Lord and My God, oh! I beseech Thee, grant that I may not arrive too late!" and his spurs tore the flanks of the noble beast, which with eyes aflame, devoured space.

At the dawn of day, Valeria had gone to the circus in company with a number of Christians, almost all parents, relations of the confessors of the faith. They wished to

have the sad consolation of embracing them once more, of gathering up their remains, or at least, of dipping linen and sponges in their blood. A moment later, the old deacon Severus was seen to arrive with Mincius and the other *fossores*; to them belonged, more especially, the honour of carrying away the remains of the martyrs.

A few words repeated by the slaves of the palace, had made known to the Christians that the combat had begun at the gates of Rome, and in their hearts arose the hope that the prisoners would escape death.

But soon the first messengers from Rufus passed, and the Christians learned sorrowfully of the first success of Maxentius' army.

"Lord, Lord," cried Valeria with passionate entreaty, "deign to hear the supplications of thy humble servant, at the prayer of thy martyrs, grant the triumph of the cross; may the *labarum* give Constantine the Victory!"

The young girl then felt a vehement desire to mingle her blood with that of the confessors of the faith, in order to turn the scales in favour of the Gaulish army. She wished to openly declare herself a Christian, for then they would lead her to join the condemned in the arena; however, the remembrance of her father, the thought that God chose His victims Himself, made her renounce this project, though not without regret, and she begged the Lord JESUS to at least, accept her impotent desires.

Just at that moment, Rufus' third and fourth panting messengers to Maxentius passed, the Emperor left the fête and hurried to the battlefield. Soon the general disorder, the crowd leaving the circus and fleeing wildly towards Rome, left the Christians no longer in doubt; the chances of war were evidently in favour of Constantine. Severus, beaming with joy, said to Mincius:

“ Dost thou remember Balthazar and the mysterious words traced on the wall by an invisible hand : *Mane, Thécel, Pharès ?* ”

Valeria had heard the conversation between the deacon and the *fossor*.

“ After Balthazar, ” she cried, “ came the king, under whose reign Daniel was saved from the lion’s den. Yes, my heart tells me the day has arrived in which the All-Powerful will renew a like marvel. ”

Hope is the mother of consolation ; she is full of charms for youth which loves to lean on her maternal bosom ; her sweet smile makes youth forget that one day the age of deception will come, an unkind step-mother, with harsh, sombre visage and heart of bronze.

The thoughts of the pious girl flew onwards to a joyous future ; she already saw Irene free, and trembled with happiness.

“ My God, ” she sighed, “ is it wrong to rejoice at the hope of snatching my adopted mother away from the heavenly throne which already awaits her ? Is the heart of a daughter selfish if it beats fast at the thought that her mother will be given back to her ? May I not rejoice when I believe I feel in my soul a divine promise, when I know not what sweet mysterious voice seems to tell me that the noble Irene, like the patriarch Jacob, will again find her son in the days of her old age ? ”

Valeria was most desirous of speaking to the prisoners, who the evening before, had been shut up in the subterranean vaults of the circus ; she tried to soften the stern centurion charged with watching them, begging him to allow her a few minutes conversation with them. But not content with repulsing her brutally the savage asked her with bitter sarcasm if the condemned

needed to hear from her lips that they were to die.

"If they do not know," he added, "thou canst soon be a witness of their agreeable surprise when they shall be dragged into the Arena, to there receive the caresses of the lions and the leopards."

The deacon Severus had despatched successive couriers to Rome to carry the news that arrived from the battlefield.

The first sent returned to announce that the imperial troops fleeing in confusion, poured into the city in ever increasing numbers, that Rufus had perished in the combat and they affirmed that Maxentius was a prisoner. The centurion himself questioned the bearers of the news; but, not allowing this to influence him, he declared that it would not change the fate of the prisoners in any way; he had received orders from the Emperor himself, and he would remain faithful to him.

"You Christians," he added with a glance of hatred, "you hope for the fall of Maxentius, and you are already preparing songs of joy for his death; but know this. if he falls, I, his centurion, will be careful to offer the blood of your brothers as a first libation in honour of the illustrious dead, my Master."

"Friend," gently replied Severus, "if Constantine is conqueror, thou art following a bad path in executing so barbarous a command, and thou mightest repent of it when too late."

But the centurion, whose rage but increased at the news of the reverses Maxentius sustained was completely remained inflexible in his resolution of massacre the condemned; the Christians then lost all hope of saving them.

Valeria alone preserved her firm confidence. How would

help come ? She did not know, but with ardent faith she awaited it from God's divine goodness, and took refuge in the tender mercies of the heavenly Father.

" No, " she said, " He has not let such sweet hope shine before us only to plunge us once more into a deception, the more cruel because we believed that we had obtained deliverance ; no, after having arrested Abraham's arm by his angel, He did not arm it anew with the sword of sacrifice. "

The sweetest hopes hovered around her soul like angels of peace and consolation, and it seemed to her that she already held Irene, her second mother, in her arms ; she seemed to see her surrounded, as with a crown, by all the confessors, joyous and free. She thought she already saw them entering Rome with joy, singing the triumph of the Church.

Severus had posted Mincius as a sentinel on the hill, near the tomb of the Cornelii, with the last hope that perhaps some absolutely certain news of the decisive victory of Constantine might arrive at the circus, and change the ill-will of the centurion. After long waiting, the faithful *fossor* at last sighted an approaching horseman.

The centurion immediately proceeded with some of his soldiers to the Appian way and was followed by many Christians. The horseman arrived ; he was the messenger sent by Paulinus to his children, who had taken refuge in the home of the Quintilii. The Christians gathered round him anxiously, even Mincius had left his post of observation to hear the messenger's news ; but, vainly did he give certain news of the issue of the battle, vainly did he affirm Maxentius' fall and death, the centurion, with rage in his heart, swore he would be revenged on the Christians for the death of his Master.

Suddenly he dashed forward into the circus like a very panther.

"Here," he said to his soldiers, "here, in the middle of the arena, at the foot of the statue of Romulus we shall offer a great sacrifice to the shade of the divine Maxentius."

In vain did all the faithful together implore him to renounce the execution of that inhuman order, in vain did Severus the old deacon, cast himself at the feet of the centurion; the touching supplications of the white haired old man left the centurion inflexible. He went himself into the dungeons to bring forth the Christians whom he surrounded with his soldiers to lead them to death.

Valeria perceived Irene, calm and serene; mute with sorrow, she stretched out her arms to her whom she called her mother and lifted up her tears of grief to the throne of infinite mercy; with the faithful, the weeping girl followed the confessors who went forward to martyrdom.

But divine power was already making itself felt: the news brought by Paulinus' messenger, had sped from mouth to mouth, and the soldiers of the cohort, hearing that Maxentius, vanquished, had perished in the Tiber, that Rome was in Constantine's power, asked themselves what would be for themselves, the consequences of a butchery commanded by a Cæsar who no longer lived. It was with repugnance and murmuring that they had led the prisoners to the circus; but when the centurion ordered them to draw the sword and strike the innocent disarmed group, the warriors revolted and refused to obey.

Valeria longed to throw herself into Irene's arms, but feelings of delicacy and modesty kept her away, she wished to leave the happy mother entirely to the son who had saved her life.

How touching were the circumstances of their reunion

after such a long absence ! And how much did those two hearts tell each other in that silence which alone can express great joy as it does sorrow.

When, after the tempest, the rose bends its head still heavy with the raindrops, the sun reflects itself in the drops, which are like so many diamonds, while he gives back to the flower its perfume and its charms ; even so was Irene, her face bathed in tears, a heavenly smile on her lips, she looked at her son while her soul sent up to heaven a supreme hymn of love and gratitude. Suddenly her eyes fell on Valeria and she opened her arms to her. The mother and daughter held each other in a tender embrace ; it seemed to them as if a divine hand had removed from their lips the cup of suffering from which they had so long drunk, and that that beneficent hand was distilling into their souls the delights of paradise.

“ My God, my God ! what will it be in heaven ! ” they cried as with one voice.

The matron then remembered that she ought to present the young patrician to her son.

“ God alone, ” said Valeria, “ can reward thee, noble Candidus, for the eminent happiness which you have just brought us all, for this hour of joy which reminds us of eternity. ”

“ It is, alas ! the fate of the soldier, ” replied the young warrior with emotion, “ to shed blood and to spread carnage ; but it belongs to him also, sometimes, to snatch victims from death and to defend the oppressed. How proud, then, is he to save those who suffer, even though it be at the cost of his life ; but who can tell the joy of a son to whom it is given to arrest the sword held over a beloved mother’s head, and with her, to save the glorious confessors of CHRIST ? He who has tasted this happiness once in

his life, counts as nothing ephemeral laurels which fade so quickly."

Valeria understood all.

"Oh! powerful and good God!" she exclaimed, "I give Thee thanks, oh! Thou who savest Moses from the hands of Pharaoh and Daniel in the lion's den, Thou who hast never confounded those who have trusted in Thee."

And, already certain of the deliverance of the confessors, she threw herself into Irene's arms; but the centurion repulsed her with savage violence.

"By Hercules!" he shouted "my Emperor shall be obeyed and revenged! If you, ungrateful soldiers, if you forget the divine Maxentius and his benefits, if you rebel against his orders, I alone shall know..."

While wrath choked his utterance, a clamour was heard among the dense crowd assembled around the circus.

"A horseman is advancing along the Appian way at full gallop," they cried from all parts.

With a sullen look the centurion lowered his sword and sent his soldiers to the entrance of the circus. Valeria and the Christians, in inexpressible anguish, followed them with their eyes.

An armed horseman was coming down the slope of the Appian way at full speed; his pace was vertiginous, and his horse's flanks seemed to graze the ground. It was thus that Candidus, for it was he, — arrived like the wind traversing space; while still at a distance, he waved a papyrus and shouted with a loud voice:

"Stop! in the name of the Emperor, stop!"

Descending from his foam-covered charger, he bounded into the arena, into the midst of the crowd that gave way to make room for him, and threw himself into Irene's

arms which were stretched out to him, crying : " Mother ! "

Speechless with joy, the Christian kissed her son's head, while he could only repeat : " Mother, my Mother ! " and hold her close to his heart.

The soldiers themselves were touched even to tears, the centurion did not conceal his great surprise at the appearance of the military tribune, still clad in armour, who miraculously snatched his victims from him.

He had already read the order from Constantine that Candidus had thrown towards him while dismounting, and his ear caught the sound of the gallop of the Gaulish horsemen in the distance.

" The gods are my witness, " said the centurion aloud, " that it was impossible for me to keep the oath I made to the divine Maxentius. Let the will of the conqueror then be accomplished ! Prisoners, you are free ! "

The Christians received these words with exclamations of joy ; the deacon Severus intoned a hymn of gratitude, and all thanked heaven. Here, a husband took his beloved wife into his arms ; there, a father, a mother, with faces bathed in tears, pressed their children to their hearts, brother embraced brother and sisters, and the sweetest tears fell from all eyes. When heaven pours the oil of consolation into the lamps that are about to be extinguished, the flame burns up immediately ; thus from the spot where the sacrifice of the martyrs was to have been accomplished now rose the incense of a fervent prayer of gratitude, and the most High in his paternal goodness, received it lovingly.

The Gaulish squadron had dismounted, and finding that the prisoners were already set at liberty, bethought themselves of recruiting their strength, exhausted by the fatiguing day, for, since morning, and during the hard

combat, they had not had time to think of their meal.

These brave men soon returned to announce to the tribune that they had found in the gallery, above the entrance gate, a table sumptuously served for Maxentius and his court ; they came to invite the young warrior and the confessors of the faith, who had been fasting since the *Cena libera*, to share in it.

At the end of the gallery, some cavaliers, proud Gauls still pagans, perceived the bust of Maxentius, and remembering the insults offered but a short time before to the statue of Constantine, they tore out its eyes, in their turn, promising themselves that they would carry it back to Rome as a trophy of their victory. During this time, the Christian warriors, before thinking of themselves, pressed around those who had suffered for the faith and lovingly served the confessors of CHRIST.

After this fraternal *agape*, having returned thanks to the GOD of armies and the conqueror CHRIST, the happy troop took their way towards the city.

Valeria was in haste to inform her father of Irene's deliverance and that of the other prisoners ; Candidus gave orders that a horseman should take Mincius up behind him, so that the *fossor* might the more quickly carry the joyful news to his humble home and to ride on ahead.

While on the way, Irene questioned her son about the events of the campaign, and particularly about the terrible battle of the bridge Milvius. The two women felt hearts beat with holy pride at the recital of the Divine intervention and the prodiges of the *labarum*. It seemed to them, after a dark and sombre night, that they were witnessing the rising of a radiant sun, the messenger of peace, happiness and love.

Irene, in her turn, told her son of her long trials, and in doing this, told also of those of Rufinus, of Valeria and of the other confessors. The young patrician, with maidenly modesty which but enhanced her beauty, tried to pass lightly over the praise and tender admiration which her adopted mother intermingled with her recital, in speaking of this daughter so dear to her heart. And the brave warrior, deeply touched, said with conviction that the exploits of Constantine's army, like the triumphs of the *labarum*, were, doubtless, the fruit of the sorrows of those who had suffered so heroically in Rome, while the soldiers fought under the protecting power of CHRIST.

The young tribune could not conceal his admiration on hearing Irene tell of the heroic devotedness of her dear Valeria, how she had shrunk from no sacrifice to snatch her father from the Mamertine prison ; how not being able to succeed, she had wished to share his frightful captivity ; how, finally, she had climbed the Calvary whose painful heights we have seen her ascend. Candidus asked himself if it were possible that the walls of Rome could contain a more noble character, a more admirable Christian. When the young girl, at the request of the matron, told of all that followed the latter's imprisonment, Valeria unconsciously betrayed her own nobleness of soul, and excited the admiration of her listeners ; and Candidus, in his heart of hearts, thought there was none to equal her except his beloved mother.

It was arranged that Irene and her son should accompany Valeria to the home of Mincius, where Rufus was ; the tribune informed the two noble women that one wing of the Lateran palace was placed at the disposition of Irene and her friends ; Rufinus and his daughter could therefore freely make use of it till an imperial edict should

render to the august condemned their confiscated property.

At that time, all the approaches to the Via Appia, from the gate to the boundary of Caracalla and still further, were inhabited and even thickly peopled. By the side of the old tomb of the Scipios and the "Colombarii," Augustus' freed men, rose houses, palaces and villas in great numbers.

The nearer therefore, the tribune and his noble suite approached to the city, the more full of life were the streets, and the signs of joy became more lively at the news of the almost miraculous deliverance of the condemned. Surprise and admiration filled all hearts, and all pressed around the confessors of the faith. At the entrance to the city, each took a different way ; arrived at the bridge that crossed the Liber, Candidus stopped a cart and made his mother and Valeria get in, for he saw they were tired, and he accompanied them himself on his beautiful Andalusian charger.

On that side of the Transtevere Irene and Valeria were not very well known ; it must be remembered too that at that time of persecution, the young patrician had disguised herself in the costume of the common women, Irene also, perhaps ; therefore the general curiosity was greatly excited at the sight of the humble vehicle escorted by the proud tribune of Constantine's army.

To this day, all the poor of the Transtevere live in the streets ; the artisans work at the threshold of their open doors, the old women place their stalls before their dwellings and try to gain a few *liards* by their small sales ; it was the same then. These people were put into commotion : children and grown people, men and women followed, full of curiosity, and were still more puzzled when they saw the strangers enter one of the poorest streets of

the quarter and stop before the humble lodging where Mincius the *fossor* lived. Vainly did they question the driver of the cart : many a time was he obliged to answer that he did not know who the tribune and his companions were. Finally, some of the neighbours, recognising their benefactresses, told the crowd that the matron and her adopted daughter often traversed the streets of their quarter and were the friends of all the unfortunate there ; though they themselves seemed to be suffering some great misfortune ; as for the military tribune, it was the first time they saw him.

From the moment that Rustica had heard that a battle was being fought at the bridge Milvius, and more especially since the agitation in the town had penetrated as far as the Transtevere, the poor woman's anxiety was unbounded and she reproached herself bitterly for allowing Valeria to go alone ; vainly did she tell herself that Mincius was watching over the young patrician, vainly did she seek to console herself by saying that she could not have left her little babe, nothing could tranquillize her. The news of the certitude of Constantine's victory, brought by a neighbour, could not make her rejoice, for Rustica also trembled believing that Maxentius would have given the Christians up to the executioner's sword before setting out for the field of battle.

The blind old woman was surprised to find that her daughter heeded not the cries of the tame crow which she generally attended to so carefully. It was useless for him to ask for his food and pull at her dress, hopping about and croaking, Rustica remained deaf to the importunities of the little beggar, and did not even hear when, with all his strength he cried : *Ave Rustica !*

" My daughter, " at last, said her mother, " hast thou

had bad news ? I don't understand thee to-day, thou seemest very anxious."

"Mother," she replied, "my thoughts are with the Christians at the circus. . . I know nothing new, Mincius has not yet returned ; but he often spends his nights out."

After trying to soothe her mother, Rustica went to Rufinus who had allowed Valeria to go to see the prisoners much against his will ; he was anxious at not seeing her return, and his anxiety would have been greater had he been informed of the events of the day. But Rustica had been careful not to tell him anything up till then, and it was only in order to divert his thoughts from the circus that she deemed it better after all to tell him how Constantine had routed Rufus' legions and how Maxentius, completely defeated, had perished in the Tiber.

Constantine's victory filled Rufinus with joy, but he was grieved that his daughter was not there to hear such consoling news. The sun was already setting behind the Latium mountains, and neither Valeria nor Mincius had returned ; poor Rustica whose heart was torn with anguish, knew not how to longer hide her sorrow ; if it had been possible to leave her noble guest and the poor, blind old woman, she would have flown to the circus carrying her son in her arms ; but she could not think of such a thing.

Many and many a time did she open the low door of her home and try to see if she could perceive the dear absent ones in the narrow street.

At last, the young woman saw Mincius coming, but he was alone ! What had become of Valeria ? More dead than alive, she rushed out to meet him ; while yet far off, his radiant face reassured her ; Mincius told her of Candidus' arrival, the deliverance of Irene and the other con-

fessors, at the moment they were about to be massacred, and how Valeria had wished that without further delay he should carry the news to her father.

"Dost thou not know," cried Rustica joyfully. "dost thou not know where the tribune Candidus will take the noble Irene? for no earthly power will keep me away. I wish to go and congratulate the mother and the son."

"I suppose," replied Mincius, "that he will first accompany her to the Aventines."

"Impossible, impossible," she cried, "that would not be convenient for them. But hasten to announce the glad news to our august patient, do not lose a moment."

Following her husband and quite beside herself, she cried on entering her poor home.

"Be blessed, my God, be blessed a thousand times!"

Valeria out of danger and full of joy, Irene saved with all the Christian prisoners, Rome preparing for the triumphal entry of Constantine, such was the news with which Mincius gladdened his guest; the latter rejoiced the more as he had suffered so much in the hour of trial.

A few minutes later, Irene and Valeria arrived; the girl threw herself into her father's arms.

"Father," she cried, "Irene is free! free, and all the other prisoners also! Candidus saved them! They are both there and desire to see and wish you..."

"Wish what?"

Rufinus rose, and leaning on his beloved daughter's shoulder, went forward to meet them. All hearts were overwhelmed with joy, and no palace on earth witnessed such happiness as that which the poor home of the *fessor* witnessed. The poor blind old woman wished to kiss the hand of the hero, the saviour of the Christians, and Rustica ran to fetch her son from his cradle, as if she feared

that he would miss his share of felicity if his eyes also did not look upon the face of the young warrior.

Irene pressed the humble Transteverian to her heart, and Candidus guessing the heroic courage of the young woman and her sweet charity thanked her for having saved the life of the Prefect of Rome. With one accord, Irene and the tribune, Rufinus, and Valeria, with humid eyes, thanked Mincius and Rustica and their mother most heartily for the immense charity with which these noble hearts had not ceased to surround them. Rustica always so lively and quick to reply, remained mute and abashed before so much praise ; but great tears filled her eyes as well as those of the *fossor*.

However quite a crowd had gathered in the narrow street, and Rustica undertook to satisfy the curiosity of her well meaning neighbours. When they learned who Mincius' illustrious guests were, the joy of these poor people was great. We have already seen that Rufinus was beloved by the people because of his kindness to the poor and the remembrance of Sophronia's charity ; each one therefore wished to see the Prefect and show him their respect.

When Mincius' noble guests left his humble dwelling wishing him every blessing, the crowd followed their carriage with cries of joy, young and old pressed around so closely that they barred the way of the horses. The whole Transteverian quarter thus formed a triumphal cortege for the just and upright Prefect Rufinus.

The *fossor* and his wife followed the carriage with their eyes to the end of the street, then they were obliged to tell with details, all the incidents of this touching story ; but Rustica was careful not to reveal the name of the compassionate carter who had snatched the Prefect from death,

and to hide her own courageous devotion. With humble modesty she thought that this was but a simple duty of charity and gratitude ; and besides, the success of her plan was due to GOD alone. She contented herself then by relating that on that night, Mincius, when receiving the Prefect, thought that he was opening his door to a mendicant, who was so ill that it was impossible to refuse him shelter.

Candidus had charged the *fossor* to go and announce to the Pope, who had remained on the field of battle, that the Christians were saved ; and it can be guessed with what charity the faithful Mincius acquitted himself of this glorious and joyous errand.

The steward of the palace received the new comers in the magnificent apartments of the Lateran. He understood that the more honorably he treated the Emperor's guests the more easily would he win the good graces of the new sovereign, and consequently he spared nothing to make the hospitality shown worthy of those whom Constantine wished to honour.

Twilight had already spread its wings over the great city, the tribune left the palace to return to the camp. While traversing the streets, he saw that the windows and the balconies were being covered with branches of laural, wreaths of flowers and hangings for the solemn entry of the conqueror. The statue of Maxentius had been overturned in the forum and children danced and sang among the *debris* scattered on the ground.

When Candidus passed, the people recognizing a tribune of the victorious army, saluted him joyfully. On the Camp of Mars, and along the road he was frequently stopped by deputations from the numerous associations who were on their way, with palms and laurels, to meet the victor.

All along the Flaminian way, the houses and villas were illuminated ; groups of country people, torch in hand, danced on the distant heights around gigantic bonfires which reddened the sky.

The horseman rode on, thinking over the events which had filled this ever memorable day ; before his eyes passed the sanguinary combat of the morning, he experienced again the glorious delight of triumph, and then his poignant anguish, his hopes, and his intense happiness when it was given him to save his mother and to press her to his heart, and lastly his joy in having snatched from death so many generous confessors of CHRIST. And it seemed to him that the sweet presence of Irene and Valeria hovering around him, accompanied him like visions of peace, like angels of consolation.



CHAPTER XV

THE CONQUEROR'S ENTRANCE

WE left Miltiades on the battle field where the supreme pastor of souls, assisted by many of the faithful, and absorbed in his divine mission, carried to the wounded and the dying the succour and the consolations that only the God of love can bestow at that hour. The number of Christian soldiers who had fallen in the battle was but small, and it was easy enough to recognize them. "*Pax tecum*" murmured the venerable Pontiff while bending over the unfortunates, who lay on the ground consumed with fever or parched by the loss of blood; the poor pagans understanding nothing of this salutation, replied:

"Ah! why do you speak to me of peace? it is water, water that I need. By Hercules! give me water to quench the thirst which devours me."

Then at a sign from the holy bishop, the faithful hastened and charitably surrounded the dying warriors with every care. Alas! they could do nothing for their souls. Sometimes however the contrary happened; the wounded rejoiced, their faces became transfigured and in a faltering voice, they murmured.

"Oh! be blessed, my Father, thou who bringest me the pledge of mercy."

And the Sovereign Pontiff quickly bestowed on their soul the supreme pardon.

Miltiades approached a depression in the ground where the dead bodies piled high showed that it had been the

scene of a bloody struggle ; suddenly, his eyes fell on a face that was familiar to him ; he recognize Martial, the valiant Hercules, who had erstwhile saved Severus who was dying. Covered with frightful wounds, the brave soldier opened his eyes and cried :

“ Father, wash me in the water which will make me a child of CHRIST, I wish to belong to Him, I wish to die a Christian. ”

There was not a moment to be lost ; Miltiades knelt besides the dying man and recited the Apostle’s creed and the act of contrition.

“ Martial, from the bottom of your heart, ask pardon for the sins of your whole life, ” he said ; and he then poured the regenerating waters on the brow of the barbarian. Peace, not of this earth spread itself over the already cold face of Martial, while the holy Pontiff anointed him with the oil of the dying, and as if death had been commanded to wait till then. The last unction was scarcely performed when the soul of the new Christian, all tranfigured, took its flight to its heavenly home.

Twilight had fallen on the vast plain strewn with the dead and the dying, and Miltiades, with the faithful, was still there attending them with indefatigable charity. From his tent, Constantine had seen and admired the heroic devotedness of the Pontiff and the faithful.

“ Why is it, ” said he to himself, “ that Gordianus and his priests do not attend thus to our warriors ? The Christians celebrate the joys of triumph by the care of the wounded, and not in libations and feastings. ”

The Emperor did not yet know the words of love which fell from the lips of the Divine Master :

“ All that you did to one of these my least brethren, you did it unto me. ”

In order to give his troops some repose and because of the preparations necessary for the *fête*, Constantine's triumphal entry was put off till nightfall. The parapets of the bridge Milvius were broken, the cortege could not follow the Flaminian way ; it was decided therefore, that it should follow the right bank of the Tiber, and from the Vatican reach the mole of Adrian by the bridge Ælius, and from there, enter the city¹.

The elite of each legion had been chosen to accompany the conqueror with standards flying ; by express order, the *labarum* preceded him immediately. He himself appeared in his chariot drawn by four white horses, the imperial purple on his shoulders, his brow encircled with the golden diadem, surrounded by his legates, the chiefs of the army and all his officers. The Senators, horsemen and all those whose rank gave them the right to take part in the cortege, preceded or followed the conqueror.

The triumphal cortege, lighted by thousand of torches and flambeaux, advanced amidst cries of joy, while bonfires illuminated the heights of Mount Mario and the Vatican. On the slope of the Vatican hill, the deserted circus of Nero could still be seen ; it was there for the first time that Christian blood had flowed in Rome ; around the obelisk which marks the centre, the faithful dipped in molten lead, had burned like living torches to illuminate the obscurity of the nights, when the imperial chariot passed. Before that obelisk now passed in triumph the name of CHRIST which was then so despised ; instead of the groans of the victims, the songs of joy of the children and grandchildren of the martyrs now resounded ; the

1. Baronius admits that Constantine made his triumphal entry from the Vatican side and not by the bridge Milvius.

air re-echoed with their cry of victory *Christus vincit!* The day was to come when the obelisk, extracted from the ruins of the circus, would stand near the tomb of the poor Galilean Fisherman and bear the cross triumphant with the inscription : *Christus vincit!* On the spot where the modest mortuary chapel, and where the whitened bones of Peter reposed, was to rise like a "heaven in the heavens," the immense basilica of the Prince of the Apostles.

Near the chapel, "the little flock of CHRIST" would gather in the year 312, to see their deliverer pass. One day, from the *loggia* of the great basilica, Peter's successor, wearing the ring of the Fisherman, would extend his hands to bless, that vast square, thousands of the faithful, and in the whole world itself, millions of Christians.

At the time when Constantine began his triumphal march, Adrian's mausoleum appeared in all its splendor, with its many columns, its statues of Olympus and the colossal figure of the Emperor which arose above it. Underneath in the sepulchral vaults in urns of porphyry, reposed the ashes of the Sovereign of the world ; yet a few years, and the hands of the barbarians were to disperse them to the four winds of heaven, a few generations later, and the statue of Adrian would be replaced by that of the Archangel St. Michael, the glorious heavenly protector of the Church, the statues of the false gods would be overturned, the mausoleum would lose its ancient name and white marble angels, bearing the emblems of the passion of CHRIST, would one day guard the bridge *Ælius*, then called the bridge Holy Angel.

Did Constantine have a presentiment of all these transformations ? Did he cherish the noble ambition of being the first to set his hands to the work ? One might almost

think so, on seeing how he hastened to raise, over the tomb of Peter, the most magnificent basilica of the West, making use of the circus of Nero for this purpose. On the front was engraven an inscription which centuries have not effaced :

“Constantine the conqueror, has erected this princely dwelling for Thee so that all many rise triumphant to heaven under Thy guidance.”

From the bridge *Ælius*, the cortege entered the streets of the city. The doors, the windows, the walls of the houses and of the temples were brilliant with innumerable lights ; the torches on the terraces, lighted up the whole town, while on thousands of brasiers, incense and myrrh were thrown in profusion. Loud cries of joy from the terraces responded to the glad clamour which rose from the streets. Every voice spoke in praise of the conqueror all proclaimed him *Liberator urbis, fundator pacis*, words which may be still be seen engraven on his arch of triumph : “Saviour of the town, founder of peace.”

If the joy of all the Roman people delivered from the bloody yoke of the cruel tyrant was universal and sincere, that of the Christians was still more deep. A great number of the condemned, who had been set free by the Senate, were their brothers, their relations, snatched from the hand of death itself. The hope that the Church had placed in Constantine had been confirmed by the welcome the Pope had received from him, and by the measures taken to save the victims of the circus. Consequently the Cross and the name of the Lord were seen illuminated on the houses of the Christians. It was not without astonishment that the Romans, still attached to the old worship of their ancestors, saw the number of the faithful whom the bloody

persecution had but miraculously increased. The cortege passed before Pompey's theatre, turned round by the Capitol and the Palestine, then, ascending the *Via Sacra*, passed under the arch of triumph of Titus, in the direction of the Forum. On the high platform which surrounded the square for the temple of Rome, as had been previously arranged with Candidus, Irene and Valeria, awaited the Emperor's passing. Rufinus had wished to accompany them, but it would have been imprudent to expose his health, still, so feeble, to the cold night air. By order of the master of the Lateran palace, slaves had brought the noble matron and Valeria in closed litters.

The bath, the rich robes in which they were clad, the refreshments they had just taken, and more especially the joy that filled their souls, had effaced all traces of past suffering, of which they only retained a holy and austere reflection. Both of them looked at the old Palatine hill, rising proudly with its crown of sumptuous edifices brilliantly illuminated; to their right, was the arch of triumph of Titus surmounted by the *quadriga*, to their left, at the bottom of the valley, the Coliseum, the ever glorious arena of Christianity.

"See," said Irene to the young girl, showing her the dark pile of Vespasian's colossal amphitheatre, "see how the people crowd under the galleries and the arches. Diverted from the bloody spectacles of the arena, where, so often, they were glutted with the blood of the Christian martyrs, they await, at this hour, the triumphal march of the *labarum*, on which the name of CHRIST will make its glorious entry into the capital of the world."

"Yes," replied Valeria, "before the arch of Titus which celebrates the victory of Rome over Jerusalem and Judaism,

the arch of triumph of Constantine will proclaim the triumph of the cross over Rome and paganism. Where could it better stand than before the Coliseum, where the martyrs fought so valiantly and fell so nobly ? ”

“ It would be, as it were, a replica of the arch of Titus, ” said Irene smiling ; “ and what then will be that of the Palatine ; the palace of the Cæsars ? ” answered Valeria, allowing herself to be carried away, at this hour of delightful hope, by the projects of a heart which opens anew to joy. “ The palace of the Cæsars, what can replace it, if not the temple of the King of Heaven, the altar of the only GOD, whence the Vicar of CHRIST will bless Rome and the whole world ? ”

The joyful cries of the people and the ringing sound of the trumpets suddenly announced the approach of the cortege. From the galleries of the Coliseum, from all the windows, from the tops of the colonnades and the entablatures of the temples, flowers and wreaths were showered upon the conqueror, his name was echoed from mouth to mouth. Young men even mounted up on the shoulders of the statues of the gods and made the air resound with the cries of triumph.

After the torch bearers, came the detachments of soldiers, their standards crowned with flowers ; the Christians could be recognized by the monogram of CHRIST, with which they had decorated their cuirasses.

In the magnificent cortege Irene's and Valeria's eyes only sought the *labarum*. The mother's heart beat with noble pride when she perceived Candidus advancing at the head of his troops, and proudly bearing the sacred standard before the triumphal car. The tribune raised his eyes to the two women, while they cast their wreaths on the cross. The young warrior turned towards them,

the name of the Lord all gleaming with gold and precious stones, and his mother's gentle look was sweeter to him than the enthusiastic acclamations of the immense crowd.

The Senate, gathered together at the temple of the *Concord*, awaited the new Emperor, to there sanction his dignity by the *Lex Regia*, according to ancient usage. This was an empty formula ; however, Constantine, through prudence, was careful not to slight these rites which were superannuated but very dear to the *Patres conscripti*. He listened, calm and dignified, to the long discourse with which the best orator of the Senate saluted the conqueror, and then immediately went up to the Palatine ; but, giving as a pretext, the lateness of the hour, he avoided going to thank Jupiter Capitolinus in his temple. Already, the Senators, the greater number of whom were much attached to the gods, had noticed, not without displeasure, that the conqueror had not burned incense before the altar of Victory.

While everybody hailed the Emperor, Symmachus stood afar in the temple, his heart filled with anger, and could not make up his mind to follow Constantine to the Palatine ; his eyes in which there burned a dark flame, wandered restlessly over the brilliantly lighted Forum and the crowd whose joy was almost a delirium.

From the midst of the crowd Lactantius had watched the entry of the conqueror ; when the latter turned to go towards the curia of the Senate, he remained behind to hold converse with his own thoughts in silence. He slowly approached the Temple of Concord where Diocletian had consecrated his imperial dignity ten years before. It was in that very place that the persecuting Emperor had announced to the Senate that he did not wish to die till he had exterminated Christianity ; he had shed rivers

of Christian blood. Five years later, in that same Temple of Concord was read publicly the decree in which he resigned the empire and laid down his crown. At that moment, broken in health and spirit, Diocletian lived in dark despair on the cold shores of Dalmatia. If, from his retreat, he could have seen the fêtes of that evening, he would have understood that he also had been vanquished by the Cross.

Lactantius was mounting the steps of the temple, when he perceived Symmachus, with his arms folded, leaning against a pillar and plunged in profound meditations.

"Perhaps," said he to himself, "the march of events modifying the ideas of my old pupil, might have shown him the vanity of the false gods," and he saluted him affectionately.

The dark brow of the Senator grew darker, he perceived Lactantius.

"Enemy of the Empire," he cried bitterly, looking at his old master whom he had once loved, "you rejoice now at this victory, the greatest misfortune perhaps, that has ever befallen Rome. Never, since she has existed, have the conquerors failed to go up to the capitol, to there thank the immortal gods. Constantine did not even deign to offer sacrifice to victory! O tutelary divinities of our ancient city, can such a crime remain unpunished!"

"Thou accusest us, O Symmachus, of being the enemies of the Empire because we are Christians,"¹ said Lac-

1. The reproach of being the enemies of the State was always the lying pretext for the persecutions against the Church. It was thus that Nero, unable to prove the calumny that he had himself spread against the Christians, accusing them of setting fire to Rome, tried to exterminate them, not only as enemies of the State but as enemies of humanity.

tantius calmly. Can you mention the day, the hour in which we revolted against our Emperors, even when they crushed and persecuted us ? Have we not, on the contrary prayed unceasingly for them, rendering good for evil, according to the law of CHRIST in Whom we place all our hope ? Thou cursest this day as a day of mourning, and I, I bless it, because to-day the prisons have been opened, giving liberty to numbers of innocent ones, because to-day the executioners have been obliged to lay aside their instruments of torture and extinguish their homicidal brasiers, finally, because to-day the victorious sword of the conqueror has put an end to the horrible tyranny of a usurper. If the gods of paganism have been powerless before the mysterious sign which has led the conqueror from triumph to triumph to Rome, be sure that the CHRIST will be able also to protect him against their vengeance. What can the demons do against the all-powerful GOD ? A day will come when thy son, if not thou, will see the Goddess Victory dethroned in the Senate, and the statues of thy Olympus relegated to the museums as . . . works of art. That would be even doing them a great honour !”

“ When the populace seizes the power, even though it be but for an hour, ” cried Symmachus angrily, affecting deep disdain, “ it sets no limit to its audacity, to its arrogance. ”

“ I attribute these unjust words to thy anger, and I pardon thee, ” replied the old man. “ Thou art mistaken, Symmachus ; the events of this day are the glorious triumph of truth after three centuries of oppression. This day proclaims to the whole world, with irresistible logic, the divinity of Christianity, and convinces of folly the worship it has, up till now rendered to the false gods.

For a long time past now, have not their statues been covered with cobwebs, in your deserted temples ? Does not the grass already grow thickly on the steps of your sanctuaries ? Why, O Symmachus, despairingly clasp a corpse in thy arms ? Why attach thyself obstinately to superstitious beliefs ? In a few years, they will find an echo only among the ignorant."

Symmachus, who was furious turned away from his master, and without answering a word, took a by-path to his palace, so as to avoid the crowd and the sight of its joy.

However, Lactantius' words were a prophesy. In vain was the son of Symmachus to one day display all the power of his eloquence to save the statue of Victory, the last vestige of expiring paganism ; she was to descend from her pedestal, once so venerated, and it was a Christian poet, Prudence, who was to ask that the vain images of the gods be preserved as works of art : *Artificium magnarum opera.*

That same evening, Lactantius conceived the plan of a work that became celebrated and which he entitled: *De mortibus persecutorum.* (The death of the persecutors.) Drawing from authentic historical documents, he depicts in lively colours, the ruin and sad death of all the persecutors of the Church.

Arrived at the temple of Rome, Symmachus, hidden by the shades of night, leaned against one of the beautiful porphyry pillars of the peristyle, his back turned to the rejoicing people. From these solitary heights, his eyes wandered over the Forum, over all the many temples and commemorative columns, monuments of the glorious history of a thousand years, they followed the outlines of the temple and the citadel which crowned the Capitol,

and stood out clear and majestic against the starlit sky. He loved Rome passionately, the Rome of his ancestors, with its ancient institutions, its temples, its gods. He had inherited from his forefathers all the pride of a true Roman, he had firmly counted on help from Olympus, and it now seemed to him as if the earth was slipping away from under his feet.

“Why, O ye gods! have you permitted such a calamity?” he muttered in a low voice. “What! Rome, the honor of the human race, the sovereign of nations, vanquished, crushed to-day by the standard of the crucified Jew, the throne of the Cæsars tarnished by an Emperor who is traitor to our gods! Oh! quit, quit your funeral couches, come forth from your tombs, Cato and Brutus, Scipio and thou, O powerful Augustus! come, come to sigh and weep with me over a too great misfortune.”

“Who speaks thus, if not the most noble of Romans, the Senator Symmachus?” softly murmured Gordianus, the priest of the Sun interrupting him.

He had just offered the *taurobolium* or the sacrifice of the bull to his divinity. The Senator and he had known each other in their youth, and each saw, without difficulty, that the other shared his regrets. Gordianus, accompanying Symmachus to his palace, made it his business to console his bitter sorrow.

“When the god Sun, at the closing of the day, retires behind the clouds to his couch of gold,” he said, “or when he hides himself in the bosom of the sea, the mists of night overspread the earth; then serpents and scorpions come out from their hiding-places, but the invincible god sleeps but for a moment. When I poured out the blood, still warm, of the bull on the altar, and with mysterious words implored in behalf of Rome, the power of the

god who enlightens us, then I read an infallible augury in the entrails of the victim : " A year of years for the magician of Nazareth. " " And how dost thou explain these dark words ? " asked Symmachus.

" Their meaning cannot be doubtful, " returned Gordianus. " The year counts three hundred and sixty-five days ; after this year of years, the superstitious Christians will disappear. "

" But the last ealer 's of this year should not now be far off, " replied Symmachus ; more than three hundred years have passed since the poison of this shameful sect was spread amongst us, and it is precisely to-day. . . "

" The scorpion that entered Rome to-day in triumph, " cried Gordianus interrupting Symmachus, whose thought he had guessed, " the scorpion and the Galilean Viper have formed an alliance, but they will not keep the power. No, no, noble Symmachus ; in the east, the god Sun rises triumphant and he hastens, dissipating the mist of night, and forcing the reptiles to retire into their dark holes. I swear to thee, this royal sunrise is nearer than thou dost suppose. "

" How can I give credence to what thou sayest ? " questioned Symmachus anxiously. " To-day, the name we curse, the abhorred name of the Nazarean has made its entry into Rome, into the Curia, into the Palatine ! "

" Remember Maximianus, " replied Gordianus with a satanic expression of face, in which there mingled both joy and ferocious hatred, " the Emperor of the east, the sworn enemy of the Christians ! Between him and Constantine, a duel unto death is about to begin ; and by all the gods ! it is Maximianus who will conquer. "

On concluding these words, Gordianus took leave of the Senator and directed his steps towards the Palatine,

there to offer his obsequious homage to the Sovereign, and to announce to him that he had offered the *taurobolium* to Mithra as a tribute of gratitude for his glorious victory of the morning.

While the chiefs of the army gave themselves up to rejoicings and took part in the feast that had been prepared in the magnificent triclinium of Augustus, Constantine, fatigued, had retired alone to the imperial apartments, those that Maxentius had occupied that very morning.

The glorious standards of his legions reposed, gathered in a sheaf, against the wall of the hall, and formed a trophy that was crowned by the *labarum*. The Emperor in thought, went over the events of the last weeks ; his departure from Gaul, his victorious march through Italy, the brilliant victory of the day ; and he became but the more convinced that he owed his success to divine intervention, to Him whose sacred sign had led him to Rome itself.

Above his trophy of flags, on the *labarum*, shone the name of CHRIST ; as it had carried ruin and death into the enemy's camp, it now brought graces and favours to the soul of the Emperor.

Constantine rose, fell on his knees before the cross and lifted his hands in gratitude towards the God of the Christians. After more than three hundred years of sanguinary and proud struggle by the sovereigns of the world against the name of *Jesus Saviour*, behold there was now an *Emperor prostrate at the feet of the Crucified*.

At that hour, the gods of paganism, overturned from their thrones, descended to the bottom of the abyss ; a new epoch began in the history of the world.

Constantine then felt an immense desire to give official

and solemn expression to his religious feelings on that very day.

Up to that moment, Christianity had lived in the catacombs, in the dungeons, in the poorest hovels ; to honour it in its chief, he wished that the Pope should receive the palace of the Cæsars as his residence.

On one of the most beautiful hills of the city, on the Mount Cælius, in the centre of the Rome of that period, opposite the Palatine and the Capitol, rose the palace of the Lateran which saw at its feet the Coliseum, steeped in the blood of the martyrs, who had died for the triumph of the cross. Nero had annihilated the family of the Laterans, and their confiscated palace had several times been the dwelling of the Emperors ; it was this sumptuous residence that Constantine wished to bestow on the Sovereign Pontiff.

His resolution taken, the Emperor wrote the act of donation with his own hand ; he had but just finished when Candidus was announced. He could not have arrived more opportunely, for to him, more than to any other, belonged the honour of bearing such a message.

Before disclosing his project to the hero of the *labarum*, Constantine made him tell how he had saved his mother and the other Christian prisoners. Candidus told him also of Rufinus' trials, he depicted in warm colours the horror of the persecution to which he had been subjected, Valeria's heroic devotion, the not less heroic courage of the father and the daughter in confessing their faith, and he asked the Emperor to revoke the sentence which had despoiled them of their wealth and their palace.

Constantine listened with a lively interest to the touching episode of Candidus' providential arrival, and his snatching his mother and the other Christians from

beneath the executioner's sword ; but at the recital of Rufinus' suffering, he could not restrain his indignation.

" My first care," he cried, " will be to repair the outrages and the horrible treatment inflicted on the first magistrate of Rome, on that man who is more upright and loyal than all. Oh ! how I long to see again this dear companion in arms of my youth ! Tell him, Candidus," added the Emperor, " that I shall expect him to-morrow with his daughter of whom I have heard so much. Tell him also, that from this moment all his wealth is restored to him. He will not refuse, I hope, to resume his duties as Prefect of Rome, and to occupy under my rule, a charge he so worthily filled during the reign of Maxentius. But of this, after considering, I shall tell him myself. Let him come then to-morrow, with his noble daughter.

I have, tribune, to entrust you with another business which I have very much at heart, it is sweet to me to make you the bearer of it. Go at once and find Miltiades ; give him this decree written with my own hand. It is an act by which I put him in possession, *ad æternum*, him and his successors, of the palace of the Lateran which shall henceforth be the residence of the chief of the Christians.

May the CHRIST, who led me to Rome, to this imperial palace, deign to do me the favour and honour of accepting this dwelling for His Vicar on earth, as a humble token of my eternal gratitude. Tell the Pope also, that, not later than to-morrow, I shall publish an edict, by which the churches and cemeteries confiscated under Diocletian, shall be given back to the Christians."

The young warrior's eyes shone with joy ; how often, during the campaign through Italy, strange expectation had cast rays of light over his soul ; he foresaw a great revolution in earthly things, a consequence of Constanine's

conversion to Christianity, and behold, his dreams were being realized even beyond his hope ! Intense joy filled his soul. He bent one knee to the ground and received the paper the Emperor held out to him.

"May the CHRIST Himself be thy recompense, Cæsar," he cried, "I thank thee for making me thy messenger on this occasion. Joy gives me wings, I shall be with Miltiades in a few minutes ; wilt thou permit me however to pass by the Lateran palace so as to announce to my mother, to Rufinus, to Valeria, such a glorious event ?

"Very well," replied Constantine smiling, "I hope the detour will not be too long."

"I think it prudent," replied the young warrior, "to ask my mother where Miltiades lives."

"Go then, my faithful friend," replied Constantine with great kindness, "and tell thy mother how much I desire to tell her myself all that I owe to her son's courage. I hope to go and see her, if she does not anticipate me by accompanying Rufinus and his daughter to-morrow."

"Noble Emperor," cried Candidus, "my mother desires nothing more than to come and lay at thy feet the homage of her gratitude, for your having willed to entrust the *labarum* to my unworthy hands. It shall then be with the greatest pleasure that she will receive the favour thou art pleased to bestow on her, by inviting her to accompany Rufinus and Valeria to the palace."

"To-morrow, from the earliest hours," replied the Emperor, "the Senators and the chiefs of the army are to come to present me their homage ; but I will give orders that you may be introduced immediately after them."

The Emperor then left the young tribune, who retired and hastened to deliver his precious message. His heart

overflowed with joy, he did not even perceive the wicked glance Gordianus cast at him as he passed through the antechamber ; and the jealous hatred of the priest of the idols but increased on learning that the imperial audience he solicited was postponed till the following day.

At the gate of the palace, the young tribune met the Senator Anicius Paulinus who threw himself into his arms :

“Candidus,” he exclaimed, “the great and good God of the Christians has granted my desire. I have found my children ; they already profess the faith of CHRIST. Henceforth I shall worship with them ; I also am a Christian.”

In his turn, Candidus quickly told the Senator of his own happiness and then hastened towards the Lateran palace.

It was with lively gratitude that Rufinus and Valeria heard of Constantine’s intention of reappointing the Ex-Prefect to his former duties ; but theirs and Irene’s happiness were greater still when they learned of Constantine’s decree concerning the Lateran palace. By this royal gift, Constantine solemnly recognized Christianity, so despised hitherto, and gave a signal proof of his pious dispositions towards the Church of CHRIST.

“Ah !” cried Valeria, with shining eyes and cheeks flushed with the fire of holy enthusiasm, “it is now that the blood of the martyrs begins to germinate, and we may already promise ourselves an abundant harvest. Already, into the darkness of our catacombs, the rising sun begins to penetrate, the sun of the great day that GOD has made, the day of the resurrection. Dry thy tears, O Magdalen ! and with the Church, sing the eternal *Alleluia*, CHRIST has risen from the dead, CHRIST has vanquished.”

O noble Candidus, hasten to go and announce to the

holy Pontiff and to the whole Church this glorious news. From what Mincius the *fossor* told me, I think thou wilt find the Holy Father on the Flaminian way, at the catacombs of Valentine."

Candidus informed Irene, Rufinus and Valeria of the Emperor's gracious invitation, told them the hour for the audience at the Palatine, and then set off, passing by the imperial stables which stand to the south of the Palatine. He did not need to show the Emperor's signature in order to obtain a fleet horse. It was with great difficulty however, that he succeeded in passing through the streets, still illuminated and filled with joyous crowds, and only after he had passed the Camp of Mars, in the streets leading to the Flaminian way, was he able to put his horse to a gallop.

While the night breezes caressed his cheek and he passed through the vast solitudes, the most fascinating dreams traversed his vivid young imagination. The campaign that had just ended was a glorious one, he had found his gentle mother, he had himself snatched her from death with a multitude of his brethren, Constantine had made him a Military tribune, his Christian soul had just experienced the purest joy, he saw the Church and the cross triumph, what more could he desire? Had he not tasted of every happiness? Had not all the flowers of life blossomed together for him? But close beside the flowers that blossom, new buds open; man is so constituted, that he is never satisfied, even in his most holy desires; insatiable, he ever tends towards the infinite. And the heart of the young soldier entrusted to the stillness of the night a scarcely formed dream of the future.

Suddenly however, Candidus' thoughts were attracted elsewhere; in the deep silence, a mysterious chant, a pure, sweet melody fell on his ear and gently touched his

soul. Was it not the hymns and psalms of the Church !

Soon, he no longer doubted ; on the slope where the entrance to the cemetery of Saint Valentine is situated, a long procession was descending : men, women and children, all carrying flambeaux. At the head of the cortege shone the monogram of CHRIST all brilliant with light.

Candidus dismounted while the tears fell down his cheeks. — *Led by Christ, his Lord, the Church and the Pope emerged from the obscurity of the catacombs, and taking their way amidst songs of holy joy entered the capital of the world.*

Candidus awaited the cortege on the side of the way, he already distinguished the words of the CXIII psalm *In exitu Israel de Egypto*, the psalm which celebrates the deliverance of Israel, their coming out of slavery and throwing off the yoke of Pharaoh. Ah ! how well suited to the Church were the words of the Psalmist on this day of graces !

“ Not to us, O Lord, not to us ; but to Thy name give glory.

For thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake : lest the Gentiles should say : Where is thy God ?

But our GOD is in heaven : He hath done all things whatsoever He would. ”

The warrior, deeply moved, mingled his voice with those of the faithful ; when the procession arrived near him, he made a sign for it to stop. Then, kneeling at the feet of Miltiades he presented the Emperor's despatch ; at the same time, he announced his message in a loud voice.

Who can describe the joy of the Christians ?

Their hands were raised to Heaven, their prayers thanked the goodness of the All-Powerful, they glorified the CHRIST, they broke out into cries of gratitude and with their songs

of gratitude to God, mingled a thousand blessings for the Emperor.

The Sovereign Pontiff expressed his desire of going in person, on the morrow to thank Constantine, and Candidus offered to introduce him. He took leave of the Venerable Father and mounting his horse, turned towards the city; but many a time he stopped and turned round to look lovingly after the procession which slowly followed the Flaminian way.

Arrived at the Camp of Mars, Candidus met a small group of persons carrying a corpse to be buried; two *fossores* with a litter on their shoulders, and two women slaves formed the procession. The tired *fossores* put the litter on the ground, and Candidus' astonished gaze fell on a magnificent drapery which covered the sad remains, thus poorly accompanied.

"Whom are you thus carrying to his last home?" asked the tribune.

The two slaves wept, the *fossores* lifting the cloth of silk and gold, exposed the beautiful face of a woman, already disfigured by the horrors of death.

"It is the Ex-Empress, Maxentius' wife," they replied coldly; "she poisoned herself and her slaves are going to bury her near her son's tomb."

The *fossores* took up their burden once more and started off so quickly that the two slaves followed with difficulty.

"Ah! the nothingness of paganism," murmured Candidus, moved by the sad sight, and he continued his way towards the Palatine, where the Emperor's staff was quartered.

Rome, worn out by the emotions and fêtes of the day, was now silent and plunged in profound sleep; in the Lateran palace only, two windows remained illuminated.

How could Irene sleep on the evening of such a day. Her life, strewn all along with trials, sufferings ; poignant sacrifices, passed before her like a dark cloud charged with lightning ; but at its setting, it was gilded with the most beautiful rays of the sun. Filled with holy joy, the noble woman thanked heaven for all her past sufferings, for all her present happiness, and her heart placed in God's bosom a desire, a wish that would crown all these joys.

Valeria was not asleep either ; she had opened the bulla that Irene had given her on the eve of martyrdom and charged her to give to Candidus ; in the succession of great events which had taken place, she had not thought of it. Should she give it to Candidus or return it to Irene ? Valeria thought of her dear mother's relics that had been taken from her and which she had no hope of seeing again.

“ If I could at least, ” she said, “ share with Candidus, this sponge, steeped in the blood of his martyred father. ”

And it seemed to her, that from heaven above, Candidus and Sophronia smiled on her, blessed her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RECOMPENSE

THE numerous dead bodies that had been ingulfed in the Tiber, were thrown up on the banks during the night. Among these sad remains, the German soldiers soon recognized the body of Maxentius by its rich dress ; covered with mud and debris, it was horrible to see. His hair and red beard were soiled with mud, his face still bore traces of rage, despair, and the terrible struggle that had raged within him during the barbarian's last moments, and his savage features retained the impress of indescribable fear.

The soldiers drew back in horror ; but the love of lucre prevailed, and they hastily despoiled the frightful corpse, sharing the gold and precious stones with which it was covered. Then, familiarizing themselves with the sight of the hideous head, they separated it from the body and carried it away on the point of a lance, which they planted in the ground on the summit of a hill, consoling themselves with this shameful trophy for not having been able to take the tyrant before his death.

The vagabonds and brigands who infested the outskirts of Rome at that time, disputed the rights of pillage with the army, and all the corpses were despoiled, with only one exception. It was that of a man still young : he lay, covered with mud, among the reeds of a swamp.

Beside him, a woman, somewhat advanced in age and who must have been beautiful, kept watch and rushed

at the plunderers with the rage of a fury each time they attempted to approach. Her rich dress in disorder, her grey hair hanging loose and blown about by the wind, her haggard eyes, the hoarse cries that escaped from her heaving breast, gave her the appearance of a vision of hell.

"Silence!... Silence!... the Emperor is sleeping over there," she said, with pompous majesty, pointing to the dead body. "Do you know that my son vanquished Constantine in a single combat? At mid-day, the Emperor Sabinus will make his triumphal entry into Rome."

It was Sabina, who had become mad beside the corpse of Sabinus.

While the unfortunate woman watched the dead body of her son and protected it so desperately, Heraclius awaited, in the antechamber of the palace, the moment to present himself before his new master.

From the eve, the Greek had passed hours of indescribable agitation; the swarm of spies whom he kept in his pay, had abandoned him the moment they heard of Maxentius' death. The bark of fortune was sinking, and he saw with bitterness that each one thought only of saving himself. On the eve, at nightfall, he had tried to flee secretly, when Sabina discovered his intentions and retained him by main force. The fear that she would make a noise obliged him to yield, and during the long hours of a night filled with frightful anguish, he had asked himself what had become of Sabinus and what he was to do with his wife. In the morning, a slave informed him that his son's body had been thrown up on the bank of the river, with thousands of others that had been drowned. Sabina immediately went mad with grief and escaped from the house; the Chancellor, too selfish to go in search of his wife, thought only of his own safety, but in the midst

of terrible incertitude and fear. There remained for him but to hang himself or win the good graces of the Emperor before he was unfavourably impressed against him, but how? The unfortunate did not want to die, he trembled at the thought of death and his faith reawoke in adversity.

Notwithstanding his immense repugnance and his fears, he went to the palace to see Constantine. It was necessary, at all costs, to gain the Emperor's favour. Heraclius, consequently, awaited, in the antechamber, the opening of the Emperor's apartments; he threw himself at Constantine's feet, and kissed his hands and feet, with servile respect.

"The post I occupied under the usurper," stammered the poor Chancellor, "might well do me harm in the eyes of thy divinity, if I did not possess papers that will speak for me. They will help me to prove to thee that when, against my wish, I served the tyrant, I was entirely devoted in heart to thy majesty. I hope then to obtain grace and pardon for the occasions on which I was forced to accomplish orders that my conscience held in horror. Thou shalt see by these papers, O Prince, that while feigning faithful devotion to Maxentius, I knew how to thwart treason and calumny, that I rendered conspirators powerless by intercepting the letters addressed to Maxentius."

While speaking the Greek handed to Constantine the letters that Gordianus had written to Rufus.

The Emperor's brow darkened and he frowned sternly on reading the documents whose authenticity could not be questioned. This priest of the sun who, in the name of his false gods, had promised him victory, had at the same time plotted to ruin him and assisted the enemy to snatch

the victory from him ; this dark conspiracy merited for Gordianus the infamous death of the traitor.

Constantine asked himself, however, what impression such an arrest, issued during the first days of his arrival in Rome, would produce on the worshippers of the pagan divinities, so numerous in the city and in the army. The accusation was a sufficiently disagreeable one, therefore for the Emperor to make, and the wily Greek, doubtless noticing this, hastened to add :

“ That is one of the smallest services which the most devoted of thy servants proposes to render thee. No one is better able than I to know the feelings of thy subjects, and I will make it an imperative duty to disclose to thy divinity the enemies thou mayest count in the senate among the officers, in fine, among the whole nobility. ”

Constantine understood all the courtier's villiany, but he restrained his just anger. Heraclius therefore continued :

“ The government of a city, such as Rome, cannot dispense with a complete secret service of spies, the centre of which cannot be better placed than at the Chancellor's office, spreading out from there like an immense spider's web. Thus, without any difficulty, all that passes in the town can be brought to the ears of thy divinity, even the smallest remarks passed in the most private family circles. ”

The thought alone of renewing the shameful system of espionage that had dishonoured the reign of Maxentius and led to exile, to ruin and to death so many illustrious Romans and noble women, was revolting to the high spirited, generous Caesar.

He recalled the infamous acts of which Rufinus and his dear ones had been the victims, but mastering his emotion, and looking sternly at Heraclius he said :

“ Since thou holdest all the strings of this powerful

administration, acquaint me with what has been happening to the unfortunate Rufinus, the friend of my childhood, so unjustly removed from his office by Maxentius."

Heraclius grew pale, but recovering himself immediately said, with a hypocritical sigh :

"Alas ! he was one of the noblest victims on whom Maxentius glutted his cruelty, he died of misery, hunger and bad treatment, in the works of the basilica. His unhappy daughter had him buried on the Appian way ; rarely has a more upright magistrate been broken down and crushed by such infamous proceedings."

"But," replied Constantine who with difficulty restrained his indignation, "Maxentius might have thought that he was acting justly in taking such iniquitous measures for falsified letters, written it was said by my own hand, to Rufinus, were presented to him, I know it ; an article even appeared in the *Acta diurna* on this subject. Thou who knewest the under-side of the cards, canst thou tell me the name of him who wrote those messages, trying to imitate my writing ? Say, canst thou name him to me ?" continued Constantine, his eyes flashing fire as if he would annihilate the courtier. "Canst thou name me the infamous Greek who threw the Prefect of Rome into the Mamertine prison ? what price was asked his daughter for his deliverance ? Who condemned him to work in the basilica ? Who, in fine, cast his daughter on the streets like a common mendicant ? And thou darest, vile serpent, appear before me to offer me thy base services ! No, no, Rufinus is not dead ; the CHRIST, the all-powerful God whom thou hast denied, persecuted with thy hatred, CHRIST the conqueror has protected him and drawn him out of thy snares."

Heraclius, pale and trembling, threw himself at the

Emperor's feet ; he implored mercy, protesting that he had acted only in obedience and on the order of Maxentius ; but, at a sign from Constantine, the centurion on guard had already come forward.

" Take this wretch to the Mamertine prison," commanded the Emperor, " let him be cast into the deepest of the dungeons ; I hope, that the walls of Rome do not enclose another creature as worthy of death as this monster ! "

The Emperor had scarcely ceased speaking when the guards dragged Heraclius out of the palace. The highest personages in Rome were crowded in the antechamber, each awaiting the honour of presenting his homage to the Emperor. All recognized the Grand Chancellor and understood what was his fate, but no one was at all moved ; had not his lists of proscription carried mourning among all the nobility, in all the Roman families ?

While a squad of soldiers leading the prisoner, descended the staircase which led to the imperial apartments, Candidus mounted the steps in company with the Pope Miltiades, Irene and Valeria. Rufinus followed them in a covered litter. The tribune only saw Heraclius, but he did not know him. The eyes of the Greek fell on Valeria, and his face already so pale, became ghastly. Terrified, he looked at the young girl, his knees knocked against each other, and he would have sunk down on the steps, if one of the guards had not pitilessly pushed him forward.

Until then Heraclius had never seen the young girl except in her long mourning garments and plunged in profound sorrow. She had thus presented herself before him, when falling on her knees at his feet, she had implored the life of Rufinus ; accepting to become the wife of Sabinus, to save her father, she had kissed his hands ;

thus also had she appeared in the Forum, conjuring him to lighten the fate of the Ex-Prefect of the city, when he had repulsed her with such bitter words.

To-day, on account of the ceremonial of the court, Valeria was obliged to wear festive robes ; she wore the dalmatic and ample garment of pale yellow silk ornamented with two broad bands of purple embroidered in gold (the distinctive mark of noble women) which fell from the shoulders down to the feet. Her fine silky hair gracefully framed her pure forehead, and waved under her long white veil, bordered with purple and a gold fringe, leaving bare her neck ornamented with a necklace of fine pearls. On her shoulders and the edge of her dress were fastened rosettes called *calliculæ*, all embroidered with gold and pearls.

A soft pink replaced, on her cheeks, the pallor they had worn, and divine love that had increased in suffering, gave to the girl's beauty an indescribably sweet heavenly charm that attracted all eyes.

The crowd massed at the entrance to the palace, watching the visitors who presented themselves at the imperial audience, asked themselves who this young patrician was, beautiful as a vision, and the Christians seeing her enter between Miltiades and the young military tribune, saluted in her the image of the Church, coming gloriously out of persecution.

To the culpable Heraclius, maddened by Constantine's sentence, she seemed like a supernatural apparition, like the triumph of innocence over vice, a gaze of divine justice.

Irene looked at Valeria lovingly and proudly, and rejoiced, like a true mother, at the transformation that had taken place in the beloved child ; in her mind she compared her to a precious stone to which the jeweller gives a

new lustre by a brilliant mounting ; to a rose, which when night passes, opens to the first rays of morning. Then the noble matron lifted her eyes, with indescribable joy to the face of her son Candidus, the handsome warrior, the brilliant tribune, dressed to-day in full uniform, and who also seemed to revive again, for his mother had only seen him covered with dust, broken with fatigue and emotion.

Irene herself was enveloped from head to foot in the long *Stola Matronalis*, the privilege of noble elderly ladies, and the rich *palla* which veiled her head, fell in large folds on the *Stola*.

The ceremonial observed that day at the Palatine was that of the first ages of the Empire, perfected by Diocletian. The men clad in white togas, the official dress, awaited in the *Vestibulum* of the palace, the time of the audience, and liveried men in waiting introduced each one, according to his rank or office.

Not only did Constantine not wish the visitors to kiss his hand, according to the custom introduced by Diocletian, but he remained standing instead of sitting on his throne to receive them. This was taking the proud Roman nobles on their weak side ; all were charmed by the exquisite politeness of the conqueror which contrasted so strongly with Maxentius' insulting coarseness and Diocletian's haughtiness.

Rufinus scarcely had time to respond to the earnest cordiality with which the members of the Senate greeted him in the antechamber. As soon as he was announced, the doors opened before him. On perceiving Irene beside Candidus, Constantine went forward to meet her, congratulated her on giving to the world such a brave warrior in whose heart, he said, nobleness, courage, and generosity contended for the first place.

“The clanking of arms almost always stifles the divine voice in us,” added the Emperor, “and too often the brass of the cuirass hardens the heart of the warrior. When Mars slackens his rein, his sons grow indolent and more than one hero has slipped on that fatal incline. It was not so with thy son, noble matron, war gives him back to thee to-day, rich in honour, victorious not only in the combat of arms, but also in all other contests; no cloud can therefore overshadow his mother’s joy.”

The Emperor then seeing Miltiades, interrupted himself to salute the Sovereign Pontiff who thanked him, in the name of Holy Church, and promised the Emperor his fervent prayers for the happiness and prosperity of his reign.

“Thou repayest an earthly gift with heavenly money,” replied the Emperor respectfully; “it is the dearer to me, as I expect from GOD alone the stability and happiness of my reign.”

Then Constantine saluted Rufinus with affectionate cordiality, reminding him of the days when they were companions in arms; then making an allusion, slight but full of heart-felt sympathy to his sufferings, he asked him to again accept the office of *Præfectus urbi*.

Valeria did not escape Constantine’s notice and he understood that the outward charms with which heaven had gifted her were but a slight reflection of those which adorned her soul. Then pointing to the *labarum* which crowned the trophy of standards, he said to Candidus:

“Thou didst bear this flag so gloriously, that it is my heart’s desire to entrust to thee another treasure which is also very precious. Thou wilt guard it with all the more jealous care as it does not belong to me and I have not yet asked of him alone who can give it to me, the permission to dispose of it.”

Then turning to Rufinus he said :

“ I ask the hand of thy daughter for the bravest of tribunes and the most faithful of hearts, and I know beforehand that thou will not refuse me. ”

On hearing these words, Candidus threw himself at the Emperor's feet, while Valeria, as was her habit in solemn moments, lifted her eyes to heaven and there sought, with unfaltering trust, the expected help, calm and smiling in her virginal beauty ; she more than ever, at that hour, appeared like a vision from on high.

“ Noble Emperor, ” cried Rufinus, “ thou crownest thy favors by thus realizing my dearest wishes. To what nobler soul can I entrust my only earthly treasure ? ”

Irene folded in her arms the girl for whom she had long felt the love of a mother, and could only say :

“ May JESUS and the Virgin MARY be blessed a thousand times ! ”

Constantine raised Candidus and led him towards Valeria ; Rufinus, taking his daughter's hand, placed it in the warrior's, and Miltiades, pointing to the *labarum* on which shone the victorious sign, blessed in the sacred name of CHRIST and placed under His protecting care, the espousals of the two young people.

“ May your alliance, ” he said, “ symbolize the union of the Church and the state in these happy days, when our glorious Emperor opens a new era to the world, seeking under the protection of the Immaculate Spouse of CHRIST, the Salvation which his predecessors thought to find in persecuting her. Be blessed then, my children, and may the CHRIST shower on you this day His choicest gifts. ”

And the holy old man's prayer went up to the throne

of God like the clouds of incense which rise from golden censers.

All joyfully responded : *Amen.*

That same day, the Pope took possession of the Lateran Palace, and set apart the most beautiful of its halls as the Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome.

Until then, the Church of Saint Pudentienne, daughter of the Senator Pudens, the same in which Saint Peter gathered the people together, had been the Cathedral of the Popes, but henceforth the basilica of the Lateran would be the mother of the churches of the whole city and of the world.

The Christians received with great joy the edict which restored to them their holy places, and the titular priests hastened to take possession of their respective churches.

The ancient and venerable church of Saint Clement had been converted into a temple of the god Mithra, that of Saint Lucine into a menagerie, some others into shops, and all the interior decorations had been completely destroyed ; everywhere there were only sad ruins, but the generosity and enthusiasm of the Christians were not to be discouraged, they spared no sacrifice to restore the temples of the Lord.

Each time a church was restored to public worship after being repaired, it was a festive day for all. The joy of the Christians was still further increased by the great number of conversions consequent on the prodigies obtained through the *labarum* and Constantine's victory. The pagans, in a body, convinced of the vanity of the worship of idols, came to Miltiades to solicit baptism ; amongst them, in the first rank, were to be seen the Tribune Artemius, also the Senator Anicius Paulinus with his children.

On the day following the espousals, Candidus and Valeria might have been seen in a carriage on the Appian way, accompanied by Rufinus and Irene. They were going towards the Cemetery of Saint Calixtus, to pray and to lay their flowers and wreaths on the loved tombs of Sophronia and Candidus' sisters. From early dawn, the Appian way was traversed by numerous groups of Christians, for it was the feast of Pontianus, Pope and Martyr, of glorious memory, and every year on the 30th of October, even at the height of the persecutions, the faithful crowded to his tomb.

The *fossore*s had joyfully opened the great entrance closed for such a long while, and cleared the strairway leading to the vast necropolis. All the way from the Appian way to the opening was strewn with flowers and leaves, the gate was decorated with drapery and branches, while garlands in festoons ran all around the walls of the chapel in which burned hundreds of little lamps.¹

During the morning, a storm of rain had laid the dust on the way and freshened all nature ; through the clouds, of most fantastic forms, the sun's rays pierced here and there, fringing them with gold and throwing them out with marvellous effect against the beautiful azure of the Italian sky.

How many times, but a short while before, Valeria had passed over the Appian way utterly sick at heart. It was there that she had gone to bury her mother, to prepare

1. Then pope Pontianus succumbed to his sufferings on the 30th October, 236, in the mines of Sardinia to which he had been condemned like a vile slave. His second successor, Fabianus, had his remains carried to Rome and placed them in the temple of the popes, in the catacombs of Saint Calixtus, the 13th of August, 237. The anniversary of his death was gradually forgotten through the celebration of the anniversary of this translation.

the tomb for her father ; she had traversed it again only two days previously to say a last adieu to Irene.

Rufinus now returned to Sophronia's tomb a Christian ; doubtless it was the prayer of that beloved wife united with that of his daughter, which had led him to the truth by the rough path of trial.

Over the same Appian Way, the executioners had dragged Irene to the circus, that she might die there without seeing her beloved son, at the moment he was returning to Rome, after a long and cruel separation. In the midst of what poignant anguish, had not Candidus himself but lately urged forward his neighing charger over that road which had seemed to him interminable, when he thought he would arrive too late.

Such were the thoughts that crowded through the minds of the Prefect, of Irene, and of their children.

The father and the daughter felt the need of pouring out their hearts at the tomb where the remains of a beloved wife and mother reposed ! It seemed to them that there they would be nearer her glorified soul. Irene and Candidus also felt the desire to go and pray at the tomb of the two young virgins, to whom martyrdom had given such a certain and glorious victory.

Tears filled the eyes of the two women at these sad thoughts of the past ; but heavenly smiles soon succeeded them, even as the sun's rays shine brightly after a storm. Nature had never appeared more sweet to them, the leaves so green, the flowers so beautiful. The villas on the slopes of the Latium hills appeared like gems in their setting ; the pure balmy air of a warm autumn day brought to them a hundred sylvan perfumes, the bees hummed in concert with the beetles and flies, while a glorious rainbow formed in the vault of heaven, and framed the City of Rome in the

beautiful glow of its brilliant colors, seeming to envelop it in peace and love.

After half an hour's drive, the carriage arrived at the Catacombs of Saint Calixtus, and led by Valeria, the group descended to the under ground necropolis, carrying tapers, wreaths, and flowers.

When they entered the *cubiculum* containing Sophronia's tomb, near which, it will be remembered, Valeria had prepared one for her father with the inscription she had intended to place on it, the father and daughter could not restrain their emotion and wept. How much did they long to hear Sophronia's voice once more, to see her loved face ! However, an indescribable sweetness mingled with their regrets, and it seemed to them that from her home of glory, she whom they wept for was present with their souls.

At that moment, Rufinus fully understood the meaning of the inscription he had engraven on his wife's tomb, when he was not yet a Christian :

" *Sophronia dulcis, semper vivet in Deo.* Sweet Sophronia, thou wilt live in God. "

Then, he silently engraved a third inscription on the marble :

" *Sophronia, vives felix cum tuis.* Sophronia, mayest thou live happy with thine own. "

Rufinus knew now the Christian truths, he knew that death does not create an abyss between us and those it takes away from us, though in reality a thin veil separates us.

Plunged in the fire of divine love, encompassed in its flames, was not Sophronia truly living nearer to her own, did she not love them with a more ardent love ?

Even at the present day, the three inscriptions just

spoken of may be seen in the catacombs of Calixtus. They reveal the aspirations of a believing heart, an ardent loving soul, towards her who had preceded him in the heavenly home.

When Irene and Valeria had finished decorating Sophronia's tomb, the pious group directed their steps towards that of the two young martyrs. They slept side by side, under the same stone, which did not even bear an inscription : Irene had had painted on it only the three children of Babylon in the furnace.

While still a youth, Candidus had left the paternal roof to follow the calling of arms. He now found himself with his mother beside the tomb of his sisters. Catulus' remains were still in the sand quarry, on the Latin way, awaiting the moment when his son should build a chapel into the centre of a catacomb that was to be known by his name to future generations : the Catacomb of Saint Catulus.

Irene and Candidus laid their crowns and flowers on the stone beneath which reposed the gentle doves adorned with the lily of virginity and the purple of martyrdom. Candidus engraved on the marble the name of Christ, their spouse, and covered it with his kisses.

Valeria then led the others to the tombs of those who had suffered most gloriously for CHRIST, then to the chapel where the popes had been buried from about a century before. They also visited the tomb of Saint Cecilia, the Church of the Catacombs of Saint Soteris, in the most ancient part of the cemetery where Saint Lucine, the disciple of the apostles, reposed. It is there, that after fifteen hundred years, pilgrims still resort, although the bones of the martyrs were transferred long years ago to the churches in the city, and time as also the vandalism of men, have there committed ravages.

The sarcophagus of stone, the lamps which had burned before the bodies of the martyrs, the paintings that ornamented either the walls or the ceilings, were all intact. During their pilgrimage through the Catacombs, the guests of the Lateran palace met numerous groups of the faithful, who taper in hands, visited the holy places and sang hymns whose melody charmed the ear. The tombs, almost all of which were decorated with wreaths and fresh flowers, revealed the piety of the pilgrims who took pleasure in lighting lamps on the side of the sepulchral stones that were hollowed out to receive them.

Valeria proved an admirable cicerone, commenting on the smallest particularities concerning the blessed underground cemeteries and their precious relics.

As a gardener, walking complacently in his garden, gathers here a rare flower, there a half opened bud, and soon forms, with the best his garden contains, a charming bouquet of varied colors, so Valeria explained here an inscription, there a symbol, further on a painting.

She led the visitors to richly ornamented chapels, then stopped before a *polyandrium* enclosing the bodies of several martyrs who had died torn by wild beasts or burned on red hot gridirons. Thus, from floor to floor, she led them all over the vast and sacred necropolis where the glorious remains of so many awaited the resurrection.

Rufinus listened with delight to the words that fell from his beloved daughter's lips; of the Catacombs, Candidus had retained but the souvenirs of his childhood and he admired, in turn, the richness of the mysterious jewels that Holy Church hides in her treasures, and the profound piety, the sacred knowledge and the quick intelligence of his *fiancée*.

"Look," said Valeria, "at this chapel supported by

columns, whose apsis is decorated with a rich painting, finished only during these last months. It is one of the most symbolical productions in our cemeteries. The Good Shepherd carrying his sheep, a figure of Our Lord JESUS bringing back on His shoulders, into the fold of the Church, lost humanity. The whole dear flock, with their heads turned towards Him, crowd around their Shepherd. The Apostles, meanwhile, traverse the deserts of the world, to offer to all people the waters of salvation which flow abundantly out of the living Rock, which is the CHRIST. Some listen to the glorious news eagerly and are filled with compunction, others, on the contrary, turn away in proud disdain from the Shepherd and His messengers."

"I am still but in the Vestibule of the Church," said Rufinus joyfully, his eyes fixed on the picture, "and how beautiful is everything I see already! What will it be then, when I shall be allowed to penetrate into the Sanctuary!"

He addressed question after question to his daughter and the light grew stronger in his soul.

"Tell me," he said again to Valeria, "what signifies the fish so often represented in the frescoes?"

They had stopped before a painting representing a fish swimming in water, and close by, a small basket containing bread and wine.

When she prepared her father for Baptism in the Marmertine prison, Valeria did not tell him anything of the Mystery of the Eucharist, taught to the catechumens only at the last moment, in those times of persecution. The young girl cast an anxious questioning look at Irene who smilingly encouraged her with a sign. Then she continued to satisfy her father's holy and eager curiosity.

"On the tombstones," she said, "we often see engraved a fish or the word *Ichthus* (fish) in which our ancestors in faith saw the initials of these words: JESUS-CHRIST Son of God, Saviour. It is thus that the fish became a mysterious emblem of the Lord, and that is why the name *fish* or its image is so often seen on the tombs to signify that he who rests there died in the faith of JESUS-CHRIST, the Son of God, and in the hope of being saved by His redeeming power. It is thus," she added pointing to the picture "that this fish which seems to rise living out of the water, represents to us the Son of God rising from the bitter waters of suffering up to eternal life, into the Splendors of the Father. However, before going up to Heaven, He unites Himself to us, in a marvellous food which offers to our senses only the appearance of bread and wine, while through the all powerful words of JESUS-CHRIST, it is changed into a supernatural food, heavenly and altogether divine."

Valeria stopped, not daring to lift the veil of the august Mystery; but Rufinus had fallen into deep meditation.

"This other picture," he soon continued, "represents baskets of bread offered as viands to the guests with the fish. Here the wine and the bread with the fish are, so to say, one and the same; but if I well understood thee, the fish is a figure of the CHRIST. This supernatural food, this heavenly and divine nourishment with which you nourish yourselves, and which only to the senses has the appearance of bread and wine..."

The words died on Rufinus' lips; the thought seemed too high, too august for him, he dared not to put it into words. Valeria's shining eyes, the heavenly smile on her half open lips, told him already of this excess of the love of a God.

" Ah, my child ! "cried Rufinus, beside himself, " Ah, my child ! can the Eternal lower Himself thus to the level of His poor creature ? Can a worm of the earth receive his GOD without being annihilated by the weight of His Majesty, without being consumed by the flames of His splendor and of His glory ? "

Valeria replied :

" Divine love which saved us on the cross, placed itself in the person of JESUS, with His arms extended between God and man ; it lowered the Infinite down to the dust of humanity, and lifted the Son of earth up to the throne of God, up to His paternal heart. "

" And may I,"questioned Rufinus, " may I, after having so long served false gods and resisting grace, may I hope to be one day admitted to this heavenly banquet ? Oh, my child ! May I stretch out my hands to the Son of GOD, may my lips open to receive this Bread of Heaven ? May my heart countain Him ? I am not worthy ! But I may at least adore Him under the form of bread. I shall be able to see how you, pure souls, you become absorbed in Him and He in you. Now I understand," continued the prefect, " that the power of the emperors struck in vain against Christianity, I understand why the martyrs went joyfully to meet death and how it is that they could gaze without growing pale on the instruments of torture, of which the sight alone made me shudder. "

Irene and Candidus had followed this conversation with ever increasing emotion ; initiated since long years into the astonishing mysteries which throw even the angels themselves into a state of stupor, they trembled with admiration and love in presence of Rufinus' rapturous transport, fathoming for the first time the marvels of divine tenderness.

"But tell me," continued Rufinus, who could not take his eyes off the fresco, "how do the bread and the wine change into this heavenly food, into JESUS-CHRIST, Son of GOD, our Saviour, the divine Ichthus? Thou dost hesitate, my daughter, ah! I conjure thee, help me to penetrate still deeper into this most august of mysteries."

"Father," replied the girl trembling with emotion, "pardon me if my weakness makes me stop to recollect myself to speak of so great a mystery, the most divine of all. One word, pronounced over the bread and the wine, by mortal lips which have become all-powerful under the breath of GOD, does violence to the Eternal, and changes death into life, the terrestrial into the celestial, the fruit of our earth into divine food, and under the veil of the bread and of the wine, Our Lord JESUS is found on the Altar. The Church stands before the Son of GOD, before the Saviour, but with uplifted hands, trusting and animated with a lively faith in His words: "*Take and eat, this is my body.*"

Rufinus, overpowered by the greatness of the mystery, strove in silence to support the weight.

At last he cried:

"How pure and holy must your priests be, since from their lips, so to say; the Son of GOD is born, how immaculate must be the hands to which He entrusts Himself. How great is the love of the Eternal to give to the son of the lowest dust, to the weakness of man, such a power in himself that one single word from his lips suffices to change the nature of the bread, not only into a man, into an angel, but into the divine nature! No no, human intelligence can neither understand nor embrace so profound, a marvel. My daughter," he continued, after a

pause, "what a sweet and heavenly recompense! Can the sufferings I endured and which have led me to the knowledge of the most ineffable prodigy of the divine goodness, have any proportion to the happiness which fills my soul at this hour?"

"The veil must be lifted still further," said Valeria, looking lovingly at her father. "Faith teaches us the not less august sequel of this ineffable mystery: The priest who stands at the divine table, at the altar, offers on that same altar an unbloody sacrifice, the august Victim being CHRIST Himself. But to penetrate so many secret mysteries, it is necessary that you should first be instructed in other truths and I fear thou art already very tired to-day."

"Can the body feel its weakness," replied Rufinus, "when the soul rises above the earth? Do the chains of the condemned weigh heavy when all heaven brightens his prison? But thy father will obey thee as the lamb does its gentle shepherdess, even if she makes it leave the sweet pastures of celestial transports for the deserts of this world."

Followed by Irene and Candidus, Valeria led her father back to the entrance of the Catacombs; the open passage allowed the light of day to penetrate and invited the pilgrims to return to the garden.

Leaning on Valeria, Rufinus painfully mounted the steep steps; he looked at his daughter with a smile in which tenderness and gratitude were mingled with the sweetest joy.

"When on the steep path which leads from error to truth, charity offers her arm to the traveller," he said, "by the grace of GOD he will arrive at the goal."

At that time, as it often happens even in these days, a

country lad offered to the tired passersby, in exchange for a small sum of money, the sweetest gifts of autumn, and placed before them, in dainty rush baskets artistically decorated with green leaves, apples, pears, peaches and magnificent bunches of red grapes. The seller choosing the finest, eagerly offered them to Valeria.

"Oh!" cried Valeria who immediately remembered seeing Sophronia press out the juice of a grape with a strange presentiment, the very day of her death, "give me those beautiful red grapes, it is my sweet mother who sends them to me. Dost thou remember," she said to her father, "how she pressed them between her fingers?"

"The pulp is red," replied Rufinus, deeply moved, repeating Sophronia's words, "but the interior is white and transparent, and the sweet juice surrounds the hard rough seeds. It is a true image of suffering."

While our four pilgrims were on their way back to Rome, on the Appian way, they met a squad of soldiers accompanying a prisoner in chains. What was not Candidus' surprise when he recognized Gordianus, the priest of the Sun. At that same moment, the latter raised his head and his look was one of Satanic hatred when his eyes met those of the tribune.

"Cursed standard bearer," he muttered grinding his teeth, "cursed worshipper of the CHRIST crowned with honor and the gifts of fortune."

For him, condemned to death, Constantine had commuted his sentence into exile for life and he was about to embark for a distant island.

The interview between Constantine and Heraclius, mentioned above, had passed from mouth to mouth, the public conscience sanctioned the punishment of the ren-

egade, the traitor, the extortioner, the slanderer, and the homicide who had sent so many innocent ones to death; but on hearing the news, Rufinus was affected, and taking advantage of the liberty his office gave him, he hastened without delay to the palace, to ask Constantine to pardon the unfortunate, to spare him the horrors of the Mamertine prison and to commute his sentence to exile, as he had done for Gordianus.

"I admire the magnanimity of thy soul," the Emperor replied, "but I admire still more the Christian religion which knows how to make men great so quickly and attain the sublime heights of heroism. I can refuse thee nothing, noble friend, but I fear much that this serpent, still nourished in the bosom of the empire, might find a means of poisoning it with his venom."

"Sire," replied Rufinus, "put it out of his power to do any harm, transport him to some solitary island, where he shall not be able to harm any one, but where he can end his days without suffering too much."

"I promise," replied Constantine, "for once again I tell thee, I can refuse thee nothing."

And with humid eyes, he led the prefect to the door.

The Emperor kept his word; but when the messengers descended into the dungeon where Heraclius was imprisoned, they knocked up against a corpse that was suspended in the darkness. Carried away by despair, he had found a means of hanging himself with his garments, and also perhaps with the complicity of a guard, favored but lately by his sinful benefits. The traitor had completed his resemblance to Judas.

But let us turn away our eyes from the frightful Mamertine prison, from the sad sight it has just presented to

us, and let us hasten to regain the fresh air and the light of the sun.

The news of Valeria's betrothal to Candidus was received with great joy by the friends of Rufinus and Irene. And numerous were the visitors who crowded on the 21st. of November, into the Lateran basilica which had been decorated as for a feast. The highest personages of the Roman aristocracy met there. The Supreme Pontiff had just celebrated the Holy Mysteries, he approached the betrothed who were kneeling before the altar, and before God and the noble assembly, he solemnly blessed their union.

Constantine had promised to give a dowry to the daughter of his friend, the fiancée of his dear tribune : he did so with royal magnificence. Beautiful wedding gifts poured in from every side, but, although she was very grateful to the Emperor and all those who took so large a share in her happiness, Valeria's heart was lifted above the riches of this earth. In her eyes, the most precious jewel, the richest treasure, was the golden *bullæ* enclosing the blood of the brave Catulus, of him whom she could henceforth call her father.

With most delicate attention, Irene had hung the relic around her beloved daughter's neck on the morning of the marriage.

Rufinus and Valeria had certainly not forgotten Rustica and Mincius. He had but just entered his palace, when the prefect sent for his dear benefactors of the Trans-tevere, on whom he wished to shower benefits. But the *fossore* and the young woman refused every recompense with as much energy as charming grace ; however they also wished to offer their humble present to the young couple, a poor present in truth, but one much appreciated,

for of all the gifts received, it was the most symbolical. It consisted of a crystal cup¹, on which was roughly engraven the picture of the two young married people before the altar ; above their heads was placed the crown of victory with the inscription :

"Vivatis in Deo. Live in God."

(The end)

1. The Christians were accustomed to offer to the newly married crystal cups with golden stands, and the monogram of CHRIST placed above the heads of the couple.

On the nuptial ring were engraven two fishes beside an anchor surmounted by a cross. This was the symbol of the marriage contracted in CHRIST.



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