

Novel by  
EMMANUEL



# Fifty Years Later

Francisco Candido Xavier  
By the Spirit Emmanuel





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Episodes in the history of second century Christianity

A novel dictated by the Spirit  
Emmanuel

Translated by  
Amy Duncan, Darrel W. Kimble and Ily Reis



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# Letter to the Reader

*My friend, may God grant you peace.*

*If you have read the unassuming pages of Two Thousand Years Ago<sup>1</sup>, it is possible that you will search herein for the continuation of the fierce struggles experienced by that book's real-life characters in the arena of earth's redemptive struggles. That is why I am compelled to explain something about the development of this new story.*

*Fifty years after the smoking ruins of Pompeii, where the impious senator Publius Lentulus once again departed the world to evaluate his pain-filled earthly experiences, we find him in these pages dressed in the humble garments of the slaves whom his prideful heart trampled on in the past. In his mercy, the Lord has permitted him to use the personality of Nestorius to rectify the abuses and arbitrary acts he committed in the past, when, as a public figure, he imagined himself as holding all powers in his vain hands by unjustifiable divine right. By observing a slave, you will recognize in every trace of his sufferings the blessed redemption of a past of clamorous wrongs.*

*However, I feel it my duty to satisfy your curiosity about his former close companions while he is on this new earthly pilgrimage, of which this book is a true account.*

*Even though the members of the Severus family, Flavia and Marcus Lentulus, Saul and Andre of Gioras, Aurelia, Sulpicius, Fulvia, and the rest of the actors in that drama are incarnate at this particular time, I must make it clear that they are all struggling in other sectors of blessed suffering. Consequently, they are not present in this story, where the former senator Publius Lentulus appears before your eyes in the garment of a middle-aged slave as an integral part of a new scenario.*

*However, of all the characters of Two Thousand Years Ago, one is to be found here among other figures of the time – including Polycarp – although he did not appear in the previous story. Through affective bonds, he was a*



*devoted and caring brother to Publius Lentulus during the political and social struggles of Nero's and Vespasian's Rome. I am referring to Pompilius Crassus, the brother who shared the same fate during the destruction of Jerusalem, and whose beating heart was torn from his chest by Nicandrus on the orders of a cruel and vengeful master.*

*Pompilius Crassus is Helvidius Lucius in these pages, resurfacing in the world for the work of renewal. And alluding to a dedicated and benevolent friend, I would like to inform you that I did not write this book for the purpose of describing my own transitory struggles in the world. Rather, it is a repository of the truth about the sublime heart of a woman, transformed into a saint, whose divine heroism was a shining light on the pathway of numerous embittered and suffering spirits.*

*In Two Thousand Years Ago we sought to examine an era of light and darkness, when Roman materiality and Christianity were fighting for the possession of souls in a scenario of miseries and splendors, amid the extreme aggrandizements of Caesar and the wonderful spiritual constructs of Jesus Christ. There, Publius Lentulus lived amid a heap of moral tatters and transitory fascinations; but here, as the slave Nestorius, he is observing a soul. I am referring to this story's central figure, Celia, whose loving and wise heart understands and applies all the lessons of the Divine Master during the pain-filled course of her life. In the sequence of events, you will follow her footsteps as a girl and young woman as if you were watching an angel hovering over all the contingencies of earth. Saintly because of her virtues and the actions of her edifying life, her soul is much like the lily sprouting from the mire of the world's passions to perfume the night of earthly life with the gentle aroma of the most divine hopes of heaven.*

*Thus, dear reader, we can affirm that this volume does not convey in full the continuation of the former Senator Lentulus's purifying experiences in the redemptive circles of earthly endeavors. Instead, it is the story of a sublime female heart that divinizes itself through sacrifice and selflessness, trusting in Jesus in the tears of her night of pain and effort, of reparation and hope. The Roman Church has kept her benevolent traditions in its aging archives, even though the dates, names, descriptions and annotations have been confused and obscured by the corrupt handling of human narrators.*

*Nevertheless, my brother or sister, open these pages and reflect on the eddy of tears that collect in the human heart, and think about the lot of bitter experiences that the transitory days of life have brought you. It is possible*

*that you, too, have loved and suffered much. At times, you have felt the cold winds of adversity chilling your heart. At other times, your well-intentioned and sensitive soul has been wounded by slander or deceit. In certain circumstances you, too, have looked up at the sky and silently asked where truth and justice might be found, invoking God's mercy in anguished prayer. Knowing, however, that all suffering has a glorious purpose for the redemption of your soul, read this true story and ponder it. The examples of a soul sanctified by suffering and humility will teach you to love the work and sorrows of each day; in observing its moral martyrdom and feeling closely its profound faith, you will experience a gentle comfort that will renew your hopes in Jesus Christ.*

*Try to grasp the essence of this compilation of comforting truths, and from the spirit plane the purified spirit of our heroine will pour the consoling balm of sublime hopes into your heart.*

*That you may profit as we have by the example of bygone times of struggles and experiences is the desire of this humble brother and servant.*

**EMMANUEL**

*Pedro Leopoldo, December 19, 1939.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Two Thousand Years Ago*, Brazilian Spiritist Federation, 2017. – Tr.

# PART ONE

# 1

## A Roman Family

Breaking through the crowd standing in the large public square of Smyrna on a clear morning in the year 131 of our era strode a group of fit young slaves carrying a litter richly adorned according to the tastes of the time.

Now and then one could hear the voices of the bearers shouting:

“Let the noble tribune Caius Fabricius pass! Make way for the noble representative of Augustus! Make way! Make way!”

The small groups of common folk that had recently formed around the fish and vegetable market in the square began making way, while the face of a Roman patrician peered out between the litter’s curtains with an air of boredom as he observed the noisy crowd.

Following the litter on foot was a man of around forty-five years of age. It was obvious from his typically characteristic facial features and his silent, rebellious pride, that he was an Israelite. His humble appearance however, revealed his lowly position, and while he did not take part in the litter bearers’ efforts, his doleful status as a slave could be seen in his constrained appearance.

On the banks of the splendid gulf blew the scented air that the winds of the Aegean Sea brought from the great Archipelago.

Activity in the city had grown a great deal in those unforgettable days following the last civil war that had devastated Judea forever. Thousands of pilgrims were pouring in from every direction, fleeing the terrifying circumstances of a Palestine ravaged by the calamities of the revolt that had devastated the last cohesive bonds among the industrious tribes of Israel, banishing them from their homeland.

Starving remnants of ancient authorities and numerous plutocrats from Jerusalem, Caesarea, Bethel and Tiberias crowded there, fleeing the torments of captivity following the victories of Julius Sextus Severus over the fanatical supporters of the famous Bar-Coziba.

Making its way through the instinctive movements of the crowd, the tribune's litter stopped in front of a magnificent building, in which the Greek and Roman styles melded harmoniously.

Upon arrival, he was immediately announced inside, where a relatively young patrician of around forty was waiting for him with obvious interest.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Fabricius, embracing his friend Helvidius Lucius. "I wasn't expecting to find you in such fullness of strength and elegance. It would make the gods themselves envious!"

"Oh, come now!" replied Helvidius, in whose smile one could see the happiness those affectionate and friendly words produced. "Just one of the miracles of our times. Besides, if anyone deserves such praise, it's you. Adonis has always paid you tribute." Meanwhile, a young slave brought a rose-adorned silver platter with small vials of perfume and garlands of the season.

Helvidius Lucius carefully helped himself to one of them, while the visitor thanked the offer with a slight nod.

"But listen!" continued his host without disguising the happiness he felt with the visit, "we've been waiting a long time for your arrival in order to leave for Rome as soon as possible. The galley has been ready for two days now, and its departure has depended only on your arrival!"

And patting Fabricius amiably on the shoulder, he continued:

"What took you so long?"

"I'm sure you're aware of the fact," explained Fabricius, "that tallying up the damage caused by the last revolt was a very difficult task to accomplish in just a few weeks. That's why, despite the delay to which you refer, I'm not taking a detailed and complete report to the Imperial Government, but only some general information.

"Speaking of the revolt in Judea, what is your personal impression of the event?"

Caius Fabricius smiled slightly, adding amicably:

“Before giving my own opinion, I know that yours comes from someone who faced the facts with the utmost optimism.”

“Well, my friend,” said Helvidius, as if to justify himself, “it’s true that the sale of all the horses I bred in Idumea for the operational forces solidified my finances, freeing me from concerns regarding my family’s future; but that hasn’t kept me from considering the plight of those thousands of people who were ruined forever. Moreover, if fate has smiled on me in terms of my material needs, I owe it mainly to my father-in-law’s intervention with the prefect Lollius Urbicus.

“Did Censor Fabius Cornelius really act so decisively on your behalf?” asked Fabricius, somewhat surprised.

“Yes, he did.”

“Good, then,” said Caius, his mind now at ease. “I’ve never understood the ins and outs of horse breeding in Idumea or Liguria. Besides, the success of your business doesn’t change our long and cordial friendship. By Pollux! ... There’s no need for such explanations.”

And after taking a sip of carefully served Falerno wine, he continued as if he were analyzing his own innermost reminiscences:

“The state of the Province is lamentable, and I don’t think the Jews will ever find the comforting benefit of a home and fatherland in Palestine again. Over the course of several encounters, more than a hundred and eighty thousand Israelites died, according to accurate knowledge of the situation. Almost all the towns were destroyed. In the area around Bethel, the misery has reached unprecedented proportions. Entire helpless and defenseless families have been wantonly murdered. While hunger and desolation have brought general ruin, the plague has also appeared from the fumes of unburied corpses. I never imagined I would see Judea in such a state.”

“But who’s to blame? Hasn’t Hadrian’s government been characterized by righteousness and justice?” asked Helvidius Lucius with great interest.

“I can’t say for sure,” replied Fabricius thoughtfully. “Personally, I believe that the main culprit was Tineius Rufus, the Province’s propraetor legate. His political incompetence was obvious throughout the development of events. The obedience to the Emperor’s whims to rebuild Jerusalem with the name Aelia Capitolina appalled the Israelites, desirous of preserving the traditions of the holy city. The times would require a man of exceptional

abilities to head affairs in Judea. However, Tineius Rufus has done nothing but exacerbate the minds of the people with religious impositions of all sorts, contrary to the classical tradition of the empire's tolerance in conquered."

Helvidius Lucius listened to his friend with particular interest, but as if desiring to rid himself of any bitter memory, he stated:

"Fabricius, my dear friend, your description of Judea terrifies my soul ... The years we spent in Asia Minor return me to Rome with an apprehensive heart. Superstitions totally contrary to our most respectable traditions have taken hold throughout Palestine, and these strange beliefs are invading even the family circle, making it difficult to establish domestic harmony."

"I know," his friend replied solicitously. "Of course you're referring to Christianity, with its innovations and followers."

"But," added Caius, showing familiarity with his host, "has Alba Lucinia stopped being the blameless guardian of your house? Could that be possible?"

"No, no," replied Helvidius, anxious to be understood, "it's not my wife, the sentinel of all my life's achievements all these many years, but one of our daughters. Contrary to all expectations, she has become imbued with such principles, causing us serious discontent."

"Ah! I remember Helvidia and Celia. As little girls, they were really two smiles of the gods in your home. But are they really inclined to philosophical leanings at such a young age?"

"Helvidia, the older, hasn't been struck by such sorcery, but our poor Celia seems quite harmed by these eastern superstitions, so much so that when I return to Rome I plan to leave her in the care of my father for a while. We think his lessons on domestic virtue will renew her heart."

"True," agreed Fabricius, "the venerable Cneius Lucius could remold the most barbaric sentiments of our Provinces to Roman sentiments."

There was a slight pause in the conversation as Caius drummed his fingers, showing his concern as if he were evoking some painful memory.

"Helvidius," said the tribune fraternally, "your return to Rome has worried your true friends. In remembering your father, I instinctively recall Silanus, the little foundling that he almost adopted officially as his own son in his eagerness to free you from the slander imputed to you in the early days of your youth."



“Yes,” said his host, as if he had suddenly awakened. “It’s a good thing that you know about the slanderous charge that was leveled against me. Moreover, my father is aware of it too.”

“In spite of it all, your venerable father didn’t hesitate to shower the utmost affection upon the child that was sent to him.”

After passing his hand nervously across his forehead, Helvidius Lucius asked:

“Do you know what has become of Silanus?”

“The last I heard, he had joined our legions in Gaul as a mere soldier in the army.”

“Sometimes,” added Helvidius, concerned, “I think about the fate of that young man, a ward of my father’s generosity ever since the days of my youth. But what can I do? Ever since I got married, I’ve done everything I could to get him to come and live with us. Under my watchful eye, my property in Idumea could provide him a simple existence free of any major concerns. Alba Lucinia, however, has been adamant against it, not only remembering the slanderous comments that targeted me in the past, but also claiming sole rights to my affection. So, I have been compelled to resign myself, keeping in mind the noble qualities of her benevolent soul.

“You know very well that my wife has a right to my utmost respectful attention. I have no choice but to willingly accept her loving demands.”

“Helvidius, my good friend,” said Fabricius prudently, “I mustn’t interfere with your married life. There are problems in life that only spouses can resolve between themselves in the sacred privacy of the home. But it isn’t just Silanus that has me worried in regards to your return.”

And looking his friend straight in the eye, he said: “Do you remember Claudia Sabina?”

“Yes ...” Helvidius answered vaguely.

“I don’t know if you have been duly informed about her. Claudia is now the wife of Lollius Urbicus, the prefect of the Praetorians. You must be aware that as the recipient of the Emperor’s utmost trust, he is the man of the hour.”

Helvidius Lucius passed his hand across his forehead again, as if to ward off a painful reminder of the past. Finally, he answered, seeking to bring himself peace-of-mind:

“I don’t want to dig up the past, since I am a different man today; but if there is a need to be recognized in the Imperial Capital, we must not forget that my father-in-law is also a man of trust not only to the prefect but to all the administrative authorities as well.”

“I’m well aware of that fact, but I also know that the human heart has mysterious hide-outs ... Claudia has been elevated to the highest spheres of aristocracy by the whims of fate and I don’t think she has forgotten the humiliation of her impetuous plebeian love that was trampled on in the past.”

“Yes,” confirmed Helvidius with his eyes staring into the abyss of his innermost memories, “I have often regretted having nourished such intense affection in her heart; but what can I do? Youth is subject to many whims, and most of the time there is no warning that can rend the veil of blindness.”

“And are you today less of a youth such that you feel completely free of the many caprices of our times?”

Helvidius understood the full significance of those wise and prudent remarks; however, since he was not inclined to examine the circumstances and facts whose painful remembrance would torment him, he replied without losing his apparent good humor, although his eyes displayed anguished concern:

“Caius, my good friend, by Jupiter’s beard! Don’t force me to go back to the dark abyss of the past. Ever since you arrived, you have spoken to me of nothing but painful, somber matters. First, it was Judea’s hair-raising misery with its pictures of desolation and ruin; then, you turn to the dreadful past, as if the present sorrows weren’t enough ... I’d rather you’d say something that strengthens my inner peace. Although I can’t explain why, my soul is uneasy about the future. The wheels of Rome’s social intrigues wear me out, but I have never gotten the chance to escape its detestable environment. My return to the city is tainted with sorrowing perspectives, although I’m afraid to admit it!”

Fabricius listened to him attentively and with compassion. His friend’s words revealed his profound fear of returning to a past so full of compromising behavior. That pleading attitude attested to the fact that the memory of bygone days was still beating in his chest, despite all his efforts to forget.

Suppressing his own fears, he said warmly:

“All right, we won’t talk about it anymore.”

And focusing on the joy of their meeting, he continued affectionately:

“So, did you think I forgot about something you asked me about?”

Without further delay he went to the atrium, where his trusted servants were waiting for their orders. He returned to the room with the stranger who had accompanied his litter with the humble demeanor of a slave.

Helvidius Lucius was surprised to see the interesting character who was introduced to him.

He immediately identified him as a slave, but was surprised by the deep sympathy the man inspired in him.

His Jewish features were unmistakable, but there was a trace of noble pride in his eyes, tempered with uncommon humility. A few premature gray hairs framed his broad forehead, although his physique betrayed the energy of a robust middle-aged man. His general appearance, however, was that of a man deeply disenchanted with life. On his face signs of weariness, indescribable suffering and painful impressions were readily apparent, albeit compensated by the energetic gleam of his serenity-filled gaze.

“This is the surprise,” said Caius Fabricius cheerfully. “I bought this gem at the fair in Terebinthus as a souvenir when some of our comrades settled the spoils of the vanquished.” Helvidius Lucius seemed not to hear, as if seeking to delve deeply into that curious figure before him, whose sympathy impressed the most sensitive and deepest fibers of his being.

“Surprised?” insisted Caius, eager to hear his direct and frank assessment. “Would you rather I’d brought you some formidable Hercules? Instead, I preferred to flatter you with a rare example of wisdom.”

Helvidius thanked him with an expressive gesture and approached the silent slave with a slight smile.

“What’s your name?” he asked solicitously.

“Nestorius.”

“Where were you born? In Greece?”

“Yes,” replied the slave with a sorrowful smile.

“How did you wind up in Terebinthus?”

“Sir, I am of Jewish origin, although born in Ephesus. My ancestors moved to Ionia a few decades ago on account of the civil wars in Palestine. I was brought up on the shores of the Aegean, where later I raised a family. Fate, however, was not kind to me. I lost my wife prematurely due to great difficulties and soon, under the iron glove of relentless persecutions, I was enslaved by illustrious Romans who took me back to the old country of my ancestors.”

“And that is where the revolt caught you?”

“Yes.”

“Where were you?”

“In the vicinity of Jerusalem.”

“You said you had a family. Just a wife?”

“No, sir. I also had a son.”

“Did he die as well?”

“I do not know. When he was just a child, my poor son fell like his father into the terrible darkness of captivity. Taken from me, I watched him leave with my heart torn with pain and longing as he was sold to powerful merchants from southern Palestine.” Helvidius Lucius looked at Fabricius to show his admiration for the stranger’s frank responses. He continued:

“Whom did you serve in Jerusalem?”

“Calius Flavius.”

“I know the name. What happened to him?”

“He was one of the first to die in the conflicts around the city, those between the legionaries of Tineius Rufus and the Jewish reinforcements from Bethel.”

“Did you fight as well?”

“Sir, I only fought to perform the obligations I owed to the one who kept me as a slave in the world’s eyes but had long ago restored my freedom with his magnanimous heart. My weapons had to be those of the necessary assistance to his loyal and just soul. Calius Flavius was not a tormentor, but a friend and protector at all times. For my inner consolation, I was able to prove my dedication to him when I closed his eyes at his last breath.”

“By Jupiter!” uttered Helvidius, addressing his friend in a loud voice. “This is the first time I’ve ever heard a slave bless his master!”

“Not only that,” responded Caius Fabricius with good humor as the standing and dignified slave watched them, “Nestorius is the personification of good sense. Despite his blood ties with Asia Minor, he has vast and remarkable knowledge about the Empire.”

“How so?” asked Helvidius, surprised.

“He knows Roman history as well as any of us.”

“But has he ever lived in the world’s capital?”

“No. From what he says, he knows it only by what he has heard.”

Invited by the two patricians, the slave sat down to demonstrate his knowledge.

With self-assurance, he spoke of the enchanting legends about the birth of the famous city between the valleys of Etruria and the lovely landscapes of Campania. Romulus and Remus, Acca Larentia and the kidnapping of the Sabine women were images that, in the language of a slave, took on new and interesting nuances. Then, he went on to explain the city’s extraordinary economic and political development. The history of Rome held no secrets to his intellect. Going back to the time of Tarquinius Priscus, he spoke of his wonderful, gigantic building projects, dwelling especially on the famous sewer network that made its way to the muddy waters of the Tiber. He recalled the figure of Servius Tullius, who divided the Roman population into classes and centuria. Numus Pompilius, Menenius Agrippa, the Gracchi, Sergius Catilina, Scipio Nasica and all the famous figures of the Republic were recalled in his exposition, where the chronological concepts were aligned with admirable accuracy. The city’s gods, its customs, its conquests, and its intrepid and brave generals were indelibly etched in detail in his memory. Continuing along the course of his knowledge, he recalled the Empire in its beginnings, highlighting its prodigious accomplishments from the time of the stately splendor of the Court of Augustus. The magnificence of the Caesars, described in his fluent language, revealed new historical hues in light of the psychological considerations surrounding every political and social situation.

Nestorius had been speaking at length about his knowledge of the past when the truly amazed Lucius Helvidius asked him:

“Where did you acquire this knowledge, rooted in our remotest traditions?”

“Sir, I have studied all the books of Roman education at my disposal ever since I was a young man. Moreover, although I cannot explain why, the Empire’s Capital has the most singular allure for me.”

“And,” added Caius Fabricius, pleased, “Nestorius is as familiar with a book by Sallust as he is with a page from Petronius. The Greek authors also hold no secrets for him. However, considering his predilection for Roman themes, I would like to believe he was born at the very foot of our gates.”

The slave smiled slightly while Helvidius Lucius remarked:

“Such knowledge reveals an inexplicable interest on the part of a slave.”

And after a pause, as if he were orchestrating a plan, he continued, addressing his friend:

“My dear friend, I thank you for your thoughtfulness. My great concern lately has been to obtain an educated servant to be in charge of enriching my daughters’ education while at the same time helping me with the processes of the State, to which I’m compelled now due to my position.”

The host had barely finished his thanks when his wife and daughters appeared in the room in a gracious family ensemble.

Alba Lucinia was not yet forty, yet she preserved in her face the most beautiful features of youth, which illumined her Madonna-like profile. Together with her daughters – two smiling primroses – her youthful aspect acquired an overall tone of noble expression, blending in with the two as if she were their older sister instead of their doting and affable mother.

Helvidia and Celia, however, despite the profound resemblance of their facial features, at once revealed different temperaments and spiritual inclinations. The former displayed in her eyes the usual unrest of her age, indicating the feverish dreams that filled her soul, whereas the latter had a look of serene and deep reflection in hers, as if the spirit of her youth had aged prematurely.

All three gracefully displayed the delicate ornaments of the domestic-style peplos, their hair held by precious nets of gold as they offered Caius Fabricius a smile of welcome. “Well, well,” hailed the guest with the enthusiasm of his good-natured personality as he walked towards the lady of

the house, “my magnanimous Helvidius has found the altar of the Three Graces and has enthroned them selfishly in his house. And what’s more, we are here on the shores of the Aegean, the cradle of all the gods!”

His greeting was received with general pleasure.

Not only Alba Lucinia but her daughters also delighted in the presence of the loving family friend of many years.

Soon, the entire group was involved in lively, wholesome conversation. The latest buzz of news from Rome was mixed with impressions of Idumea and other regions of Palestine, where Helvidius Lucius had stayed with his family, as well as the enchanting and intimate views about the little nothings of each day.

At one point, the owner of the house drew his wife’s attention to the figure of Nestorius, huddled in a corner of the room, adding enthusiastically:

“Lucinia, this is a royal gift that Caius brought us from Terebinthus.”

“A slave?!” asked the woman with a tone of pity.

“Yes, and an invaluable one. His mnemonic ability is one of the most interesting phenomena I have ever seen. He has the long history of Rome in his head, without omitting the slightest detail. He knows our family traditions and customs as if he had been born on Palatinus. I sincerely wish to take him into my private service and at the same time make use of him in the refinement of our daughters’ education.”

Alba Lucinia eyed the stranger, taken with surprise and sympathy. The two young girls also gazed at him in amazement.

Recovering from her astonishment, however, the noble matron pondered thoughtfully:

“Helvidius, I’ve always considered our domestic mission as the most sensitive one of our life together. If this man has shown evidence of his knowledge, has he also done so of his virtues so that we might entrust him with the education of our daughters?” Her husband felt embarrassed to reply to such a sensible and timely question, but the firm words of Caius came to his aid:

“I’ll say this, Madam: if Helvidius can vouch for his knowledge, I can testify to his upstanding moral qualities.”



Alba Lucinia seemed to ponder this for a moment, finally adding with a satisfied smile:

“All right then, we shall accept the assurance of your word.”

The gracious woman looked at Nestorius with charity and kindness, understanding that, although his dolorous outward appearance was undoubtedly that of a slave, his eyes revealed a superior serenity, imbued with extraordinary firmness.

After a minute of close and silent observation, she turned to her husband and said a few words in an almost inaudible voice, as if asking for his approval before giving voice to one of her desires. Helvidius, in turn, smiled slightly, giving a nod of acquiescence.

Then, turning to the others, the noble lady said movingly:

“Caius Fabricius, my husband and I have decided that our daughters will avail themselves of the intellectual assistance of a free man.”

And taking a tiny rod that rested inside an oriental vase in a corner of the room, she touched the slave lightly on the forehead, according to the familiar ceremonies with which masters freed their slaves in Imperial Rome, declaring:

“Nestorius, our house declares you free forever!”

“My daughters,” she continued to speak, addressing the two young women, “never humiliate this man’s freedom. He will have full independence to carry out his duties!”

Caius and Helvetius looked at each other happily. While Helvidia haughtily greeted the freed slave from a distance with a slight nod, Celia approached the freedman, whose eyes were moist with tears, and offered him her aristocratic and gentile hand in a sincere and warm greeting. Her eyes met the gaze of the former slave in a wave of indefinable kindness and affection. Visibly moved, the freedman bent down and reverently kissed the kind hand that the young patrician offered him.

The moving scene lasted for a few moments. Then, to the surprise of all, Nestorius rose from his corner, and walking to the center of the room, he knelt before his benefactors and humbly kissed Alba Lucinia’s feet.

## 2

# Angel and Philosopher

The residential palace of prefect Lollius Urbicus rested on one of the most beautiful elevations on Capitolinus.

Its owner's wealth was among the most opulent in the city; his political position, one of the most enviable due to its prestige and respective privileges.

Even though he was a descendant of old patrician families, he had not received a large inheritance from his illustrious forebears, and yet, early on, the Emperor had taken him under his wing.

First, he made him a military tribune full of hopes and promising prospects, and then promoted him to some of the most distinguished posts. After that, he made him a man of his full trust. He made invaluable donations to him consisting in properties and titles of nobility. The aristocracy of the city was astounded, however, when Hadrian recommended his marriage to Claudia Sabina, a plebeian of unusual talent and rare physical beauty, who, due to the Emperor's favoritism, had won the highest favors of the Court.

Lollius Urbicus did not hesitate to obey the will of his protector and best friend.

Thoughtlessly, he had gotten married, as if in marriage he would find a complete safeguard for all his private interests. Meanwhile, he continued his life of happy adventures in the various campaigns under his military authority, whether in the Imperial Capital or in the cities of its many Provinces.

On the other hand, his wife used the prestige of his name to enjoy one of the most prominent places among the Roman nobility. Little inclined to the life of a married woman, she could not stand the home environment and surrendered to the follies of worldly life, sometimes following plans devised

by her friends, sometimes organizing celebrated festivals renowned for their artistic vision and discrete licentiousness.

Roman society, on a direct march toward the decay of the old family values, loved Claudia Sabina's permissive ways. The Emperor's worldly spirit and the sensuality of the courtiers delighted in her undertakings in the whirlwind of exhilarating activities in the highest social milieus.

Claudia Sabina had earned one of the highest positions in elegant and frivolous circles. She knew how to turn her intelligence into a dangerous weapon and she used her position more and more to increase her prestige by elevating individuals of unprepared nobility to the heights of her environment to satisfy her whims. Thus, all attention and devotion fluttered around her appreciable endowments of physical beauty.

\* \* \*

Late afternoon.

A heavy atmosphere of solitude and quietness hangs over the elegant palace near the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.

Reclining on a divan out on the terrace, we find Claudia Sabina in an attitude of great intimacy in reserved conversation with a woman of the people.

"Hateria," she said interestedly and discreetly, "I had you called here to avail myself of your continued dedication. I need you to do something for me."

"Tell me what to do," replied the humble-looking woman, with the artificiality of her apparently unpretentious manners. "I am always ready to follow your orders, whatever they may be."

"Would you be willing to serve me without question somewhere else?"

"Certainly."

"Well, my sole purpose in life has been to avenge myself for terrible humiliations of the past."

"Ma'am, I remember your sorrows when you were living amongst the plebeians."

"I'm glad that you are aware of my sufferings. Listen," continued Claudia Sabina, intentionally lowering her voice, "do you know the Lucius

family here in Rome?”

“Who doesn’t know old Cneius, ma’am? Before you tell me of your anguish, I must tell you that I know of your grief caused by his son’s ingratitude.”

“So, I don’t have to tell you any more about it than what I have to say right now. Perhaps you didn’t know that Helvidius Lucius and his family will arrive in the city in just a few days on their return from the East. I intend to put you in his wife’s service so that you can help me carry out all my plans.”

“Tell me what to do and I will obey without question.”

“Do you know Tulia Cevina?”

“The wife of the tribune Maximus Cunctator?”

“That’s the one. From what I’ve been told, Tulia Cevina was asked by her old childhood friend to find two or three completely trustworthy female servants capable of meeting the demands of today’s Roman life. And so it is essential that you present yourself as soon as possible as a candidate.”

“How? Do you think it likely that the tribune’s wife will accept my simple offer with no reference to recommend me to her standards?”

“We shall have to think this over very carefully. Tulia must never know that you and I know each other. You could present special references from Chrysothemis or Musonia, my closest friends; but that might not work either. It might raise some suspicion when I have further need of your intervention or services.”

“What shall we do, then?”

“First of all, you need to be able to utilize your own resources for the benefit of our plans. Acquiring a humble servant is a valuable and rare thing. Introduce yourself to Tulia with the utmost simplicity. Tell her of your needs and explain your good qualities. I’m almost certain that that will be enough for our first steps. Then, I hope you will be admitted to the home circle of Alba Lucinia – that usurper of my happiness. You’ll serve her with humility, submission and devotion until you gain her full trust. You won’t have to report to me very often, so as not to arouse suspicion concerning our arrangements. You’ll come here one day each month in order to establish the next steps. First, study the environment and inform me of all the news and your discoveries about the couple’s intimate life. Later on, we’ll see the

nature of the work we'll have to do. Can I count on your dedication and silence?"

"I am entirely at your disposal and will fulfill your orders with absolute faithfulness."

"I trust in your efforts."

Having said that, Claudia Sabina gave her accomplice a few hundred sestericii as a pledge of their mutual commitment.

Hateria eagerly stashed the money for the first agreement, casting a greedy eye at Claudia's purse and saying politely:

"You can be sure that I will be watchful, humble and discreet."

Evening's shadows were falling over the Alban Hills, but Claudia's emissary sought out Tulia Cevina a few hours later for the described purposes.

The wife of Tribune Maximus Cunctator, a kind-hearted, affable patrician, welcomed the commoner with benevolence and warmth. Hateria's insistent pleas confused her. Tulia Cevina had mentioned her friend Alba Lucinia's request to a very small circle of her closest friends, but this unknown servant had not brought recommendations from any of them. She attributed the fact, however, to the gossip of some slave who must have found out about the matter indirectly through some casual conversation.

Hateria's humility and simplicity seemed charming to her. Her manners displayed an extraordinary capacity for unveiled and loving submissiveness.

Tulia Cevina accepted her out of pity for her situation and took her in that very night, settling her in among her other attendants.

Some days later, there was unusual activity at the Port of Ostia. Luxurious ships were arriving in port, where our acquaintances' galley had already dropped anchor.

Among the constructions on the sunny beach, joyful and loving words were being exchanged. A crowd of friends and social and political representatives welcomed Helvidius and Caius in a deluge of affectionate embraces.

Lollius Urbicus and his wife had arrived too, along with Fabius Cornelius and his wife Julia Spinter, an elderly patrician known for her traditions of proud sincerity. Tulia Cevina and Maximus Cunctator were also

there, eager for the fraternal embrace of their friends, who had been away for so many years. Numerous relatives and fond friends vied for the moment when they would take their newly-arrived dear friends into their arms; but standing out from the crowd was the venerable figure of Cneius Lucius, with his halo of white hair that the painful experiences of life had sanctified. An atmosphere of love and veneration surrounded his vibrant cultured and benevolent personality, which seventy-five years of struggles had not tarnished. Roman society had followed the course of all his steps, knowing from a distance his traditions of nobility and loyalty, and respecting him as one of the most dedicated exponents of ancient education, full of the beauty of Rome in its most austere and simple principles.

Cneius Lucius had learned to despise all positions of dominance. He grasped the fact that the spirit of militarism was causing the decadence of the Empire. He avoided all situations of material evidence in order to preserve his spiritual ascendance. On his record of service to the community, there were measures developed by the Imperial Government for the slaves who taught the basics to their masters' children, as well as many other social charity projects on behalf of the poorest and humblest disfavored by fate. His name was respected not only in the aristocratic circles of Palatinus but also in Subura, where nameless and unfortunate families huddled together.

That morning the old patrician's face displayed the serene joy that pulsated in his soul.

He wept with joy as he held his children for a long time against his breast and he kissed his granddaughters with fatherly contentment. But while the most festive greetings were being exchanged in a whirlwind of expressive displays of love and affection, Cneius Lucius noticed that Lollius Urbicus kept looking furtively at his daughter-in-law, Claudia Sabina, while she herself, pretending to have completely forgotten the past, focused her attention on Helvidius. Lollius's glances said everything to Cneius's experienced heart, tired of beating amid the capricious deceptions of the world.

Having disembarked in Ostia, Nestorius, in turn, realizing an old dream of getting to know that celebrated and powerful city, felt strange inner disturbances, as if he were seeing fond and dear places again. He was convinced that the panorama now unfolding before his eager eyes was familiar to him from long ago. He could not pinpoint the chronology of his

memories, but was certain that, through some mysterious process, Rome filled the screen of his most entrenched reminiscences.

That same day, while Alba Lucinia and her daughters left for the city along with Fabius Cornelius and his wife, Helvidius Lucius took his place at his elderly father's side. They headed for the urban outskirts without noticing the time passing by or the pleasant sights along the way, fully immersed as they were in the most intimate confidences.

Helvidius confided to his father all the impressions he had brought from Asia Minor, recalling scenes or evoking fond memories. However, he stressed his deep moral concerns about his daughter, whose premature knowledge in matters of religion and philosophy had amazed him ever since he had accidentally indulged in hearing the household slaves talking about the dangerous superstitions of the new belief that had invaded sectors of the Empire in every direction. Thus, he explained his entire family situation to the gentle and kindly spiritual mentor of his life, giving him all the details and circumstances concerning the matter.

Cneius Lucius listened to him attentively and then promised him moral assistance regarding the issue, the solution to which his experienced educational training would provide the most useful help.

Within a few days, our friends had settled into the magnificent residence on Palatinus and had started a new cycle of city life.

Helvidius Lucius was pleased with his new position; as the immediate replacement for his father-in-law in his functions as Censor, an important role was reserved for him in the life of the city under the benevolent supervision of the Emperor. As for Alba Lucinia, thanks to her innate artistic leanings and Tulia's help, she transformed the appearance of the old property and gave it the flavor of the times, creating in every corner an element of the harmony of home, where her husband and daughters could rest from the many concerns of life.

Needless to say, after having been approved by Tulia, Hateria was accepted into the home. She impressed everyone with her clever humility and won her masters' full trust within a few days.

The following week, for the purpose of spending some time with her grandfather, who idolized her, Celia was taken by her parents to his home on the other side of the Tiber at the foot of Aventinus.



Cneius Lucius lived in a comfortable, elegant Roman-style mansion with his two elderly daughters who filled the starlit evening of his old age with their love.

He welcomed his granddaughter lovingly, with the most unmistakable display of pleasure.

The very next morning he ordered his private litter to be readied so that he could take her with him to offer a sacrifice in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.

Celia accompanied him calmly and joyfully, although she noticed the expressive manner in which the elderly man observed her, perhaps anxiously trying to discover her innermost sentiments.

Cneius Lucius stopped not only at the sanctuary of Jupiter. He went to the temple of Serapis also, where he sought to converse with his granddaughter about the most ancient traditions of the Roman family. The girl did not try to argue, nor did she interrupt his loving lesson. She submitted herself in perfect obedience to the temple's ritualism according to the regulations established in Rome by the Flaminian priests.

Evening was already falling when the kindly old man ended his pilgrimage to the city's religious buildings. The sun was setting in the west, but Cneius Lucius wanted to know the whole depth of his granddaughter's new thoughts, so he led her for that purpose to the home altar, where the magnificent ivory images of the family gods were lined up.

"Celia, my dear," he said finally, resting on a large couch in front of the idols, "today I took you to the temples of Jupiter and Serapis, where I offered sacrifices for our happiness; but more than for our own happiness, dear daughter, I wish for yours. I noticed that you were following my gestures and yet you did not show sincere and ardent devotion. Have you perhaps brought some new idea, contrary to our beliefs, from the Province?"

She listened to her venerable grandfather with her soul lost in deep conflict. She grasped the situation at a glance, and, accustomed to the strict traditions of her family, guessed that her father had suggested this tactic in order to reform her thoughts as well as her deepest convictions.

"Dear Grandfather," she said, her eyes moist and shining with pure innocence, "I have always loved you with my whole heart and you have taught me to tell the whole truth in every circumstance."

“Yes,” said the surprised Cneius Lucius, guessing the beloved child’s emotions, “you are in my heart every moment. Speak, my little child, with the utmost frankness! I have learned of no other way but that of the truth entailing our traditions and our gods.”

“First, I should tell you that I know it must have been my father who asked you to reform my religious sentiments.”

The venerable old man made a gesture of astonishment at that unexpected remark.

“Yes,” continued the young woman, “I think my father has been unable to understand me completely ... He never could listen to me satisfactorily without a vigorous protest in his soul. Nevertheless, I will continue to love him always, even if his heart does not understand me.”

“Then, dear child, why have you withheld your innermost confidences from him?”

“I tried to tell him one day when we were still in Judea, but I saw right away that he would judge my sincerest words wrongly. I then realized that, for the truth to be fully understood, it must be dealt with between hearts of the same spiritual age.”

“But, dear child, where do you now place the sacred ties of the family?”

“In the love and respect with which I have always cultivated them; however, grandpa, in the realm of ideas, the bonds of blood do not always mean harmony of opinion among those whom Heaven has brought together in the same family. Although I venerate and cherish my father in my filial love and in my respect for the traditions of his name, I have embraced ideas that his spirit cannot adhere to for now.”

“But what do you mean by spiritual age?”

“Youth and old age, as we see them in the world, are only expressions about a physical life that ends with death. There are neither youths nor old people, but rather souls that are young in their reasoning or deeply enriched in the field of human experiences.”

“What do you mean?” asked the old man, greatly astonished. “Have you read the Greek authors so widely?! This is surprising; after all, your father only recently obtained an educated slave especially meant to enrich your and your sister’s education.”

“Grandpa, you know very well that I have been eager to learn ever since I was a little girl. Even though I am young, I feel the weight of a millenary age in my spirit. In all those years away in the Province, I spent all my available time devouring the library that my father could not take with him to his activities in Idumea.”

“Child,” exclaimed the venerable elder, sincerely dismayed, “weren’t you acting like the sick, who, in seeking something effective in all the medications within their reach, wind up dreadfully poisoned?!”

“No, grandpa, I didn’t poison myself. And if such a thing had happened, for the past two years I’ve held in my heart the best antidote to the corrosive influence of all the poisons of this world.”

“What is it?” asked Cneius Lucius, extremely surprised.

“A fervent and sincere faith.”

“Have you placed your thoughts about this under the invocation of our gods?”

“No, dear Grandpa, it pains me to confess this to you, but in your heart I feel the same ability to understand that resonates within my own soul, and I must be sincere. The gods of our ancient traditions no longer satisfy me.”

“Why not, dear child? To which entity of the heavens do you now entrust your exalted and fervent faith?”

As if a strange light were shimmering in her big eyes, Celia responded calmly:

“I have put my faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

“Are you saying you are a Christian?” asked her old grandfather, turning pale.

“The only thing lacking is my baptism.”

“But child,” said Cneius Lucius with a sweet inflection of tenderness in his voice, “Christianity contradicts all our principles. It eliminates all religious and social notions, the building blocks of our concept of State and Family. Besides that, don’t you know that adopting this doctrine is the pathway to sacrifice and death?”

“Grandpa, in spite of your long and careful studies, I don’t think you have gotten to know the traditions of Jesus and the gentle clarity of his

teachings. If you had the full knowledge of his doctrine, if you had heard directly those who have immersed themselves in its faith, you would have enriched the treasure of your heart's kindness and understanding even more."

"But how is one to comprehend such a pure idea, which has sent its followers to condemnation and martyrdom for almost a century.

"Even so, Grandpa, perhaps you haven't yet considered the fact that this condemnation comes from the world, whereas Jesus promised the joys of his kingdom to all who suffer on earth for his name's sake."

"You're out of your mind, my dear; there can be no divinity greater than our Jupiter, nor can there be another kingdom that surpasses our Empire. Furthermore, from what I've been told, the prophet of Nazareth preached an impossible fraternity and a humility that we cannot comprehend."

He rested his placid eyes on his granddaughter, full of mysterious charity; but he was deeply troubled to find her eyes calm, compassionate and transparent with an indefinable purity.

"Grandpa," she went on to say, gazing into space as if her soul were fluttering among fond and far-off memories, "Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God, who came to take away the error and sin of the world. Why don't we understand his divine teachings if we are hungering for love in our soul? To the world I may seem like a young woman and you an old man; yet, I feel that our thoughts are twins in our thirst for spiritual knowledge ...

"The clamors of revolt and the cries of battle are coming to us from all over the world ... The bitterness of the oppressed and the tears of all who suffer in humiliation and bondage are blended together!

"You know all about these unfathomable torments, spread as they are over the entire world! Your books tell of the unspeakable anguish of your sensitive and caring soul. These cries of suffering reach your ears at all times!

"Where are our ivory gods, that they do not save us from decadence and ruin? Where is Jupiter, that he does not come to the world to restore the balance of the wonderful scales of divine justice?! Can we accept a cold, indifferent god who takes pleasure in endorsing all the infamies of the powerful against the poorest and most wretched? Is the Providence of heaven like that of Caesar, for whom the most favored is the one who brings the richest offerings? On the other hand, Jesus of Nazareth brought new hope to the world. He warned the proud that all the vanities of earth are left behind at

the dark entrance to the tomb. To the powerful he gave the lessons of renunciation of the transitory things of the world. He taught that the most beautiful acquisitions are those consisting of moral virtues, the imperishable values of heaven. In all his acts of light he exemplified what was indispensable for our spiritual growth in God Almighty, the Father of infinite mercy, in whose name he brought us his doctrine of love with the words of life and redemption.

“Above all, Jesus is the only hope for the helpless and forsaken on earth, because, according to his sweet promises, all the unfortunate in the world will receive the blessedness of heaven amid the blessings of simplicity and peace, piety and practice of the good.”

Cneius Lucius listened to his granddaughter in moving silence, touched by an uneasiness mixed with wonder, like what a philosopher of the world should feel hearing the most tender revelations of Truth from the lips of an angel.

The young woman, in turn, gave free reign to the holy inspirations that bathed her soul and continued to speak, opening up the treasures of the most gratifying memories of her heart:

“We spent a long time in Antipatris, in Samaria, next to Galilee ... There, the tradition of Jesus is still alive in every soul. I got to know up close the generation of those who had benefited from his merciful hands. I learned the story of the lepers, who were cleansed by the touch of his love; of the blind into whose dead eyes a vibration of new life flowed from his loving, supreme word; of the poor of all kinds, who were enriched by his faith and spiritual peace. On the banks of the lake of his unforgettable sermons, I seemed to still see the luminous trace of his steps, when, my soul in prayer, I beseeched the Master of Nazareth for his soothing blessings!”

“But wasn’t Jesus of Nazareth a dangerous visionary?” asked Cneius Lucius, deeply surprised. “Didn’t he promise another kingdom, belittling the traditions of our Empire?”

“Grandpa,” replied the girl, unperturbed, “the Son of God never meant to found a bellicose and perishable kingdom like the peoples of earth have. Nor did he ever tire of declaring that his kingdom is not of this world; instead, he taught that its founding is destined for souls who wish to live far from the turbulence of worldly passions.

“Is ‘revolutionary’ the word that blesses all the afflicted and destitute of good fortune? That commands us to forgive our enemy seventy times seven times? That teaches worshiping God with the heart, without the pomp of human vanity? That recommends humility as a pledge of all the accomplishments for Heaven?”

“I have had the chance to read the Gospel of Christ in fragments of parchment in the hands of our slaves. It is a song of exalted hope on the tear-filled path of the earth as it marches toward the sublime glories of the Infinite.”

The venerable old man smiled complacently, and said kindly:

“Child, for us, humility and selflessness are two unknown postulates. Our symbolic eagles could never come down from their poles of dominion, and our customs are unlikely to accommodate themselves to forgiveness as a rule of progress or conquest.

“Your ideas, however, interest me greatly. But tell me: where did you get such knowledge? How could you bathe your soul in this new faith to the point of arguing so fervently against our old traditions? ... Tell me everything with the same sincerity that I have always recognized in your character!” “Well, at first I got to know the teachings of the Gospel by listening with curiosity to the conversations of our household slaves.” After saying these reticent words, Celia seemed to reflect solemnly, as if experiencing an indefinable difficulty in satisfying her dear grandfather’s wishes under such circumstances.

Then, as if she were caught in a silent dialogue between reason and sentiment, she blushed, as though she were afraid to reveal the entire truth.

Cneius Lucius, however, immediately recognized her mental state and exclaimed:

“Speak, child! Your old grandfather will understand what is in your heart.”

“I will,” she said blushing, turning her pleading eyes to him in her girlish timidity. “Grandpa, is it a sin to love?!”

“Of course not,” replied the old man, divining a world of revelations in that unexpected question.

“What if you’re in love with a slave?”

The venerable patrician felt a tightening emotion on hearing this painful revelation from his beloved granddaughter; nevertheless he replied without hesitation:

“Child, we are very far from being a society where the daughter of a patrician can unite her destiny with one of her servants.

“But tell me,” he added after a slight pause, “have you fallen in love with such a man subject to such dolorous circumstances?”

Seeing the tears in the young woman’s eyes and guessing her painful and embarrassing emotions in those confidences, he held her to his heart and kissed her, whispering gently in her ear:

“Don’t be afraid of your grandpa’s opinions; he is entirely devoted to your well-being. Tell me everything and don’t leave out any detail of the truth, however painful it might be. I will understand your soul, above all. Even if your loving aspirations and girlish golden dreams were directed to the most abject and wretched being, I would not love you any less for it, and trusting you, I will know how to respect your pain and your dedication!”

Comforted by those words, which revealed his absolute kindness and sincerity, Celia continued:

“Two years ago, Dad took us on one of his delightful excursions around the big lake in the region where we had our home. Besides Mom, Helvidia and myself, there was also a young slave who had been bought the day before. Because of his expertise with the oars, he helped with the task of rowing across the water. “Cyrus is the name of this twenty-year-old slave, who by the will of heaven, came to our home.

“We were all happy as we watched the skyline and the outline of the clouds in the clear mirror of the lapping waters.

“From time to time, Cyrus would gaze at me serenely and lucidly, producing an increasingly intense and indescribable emotion in me.

“Who can explain that holy mystery of life? Within such a divine secret of the heart, sometimes a gesture, a word, a look is enough to bind your soul to another forever.”

She paused from describing her reminiscences. Noticing the emotion in her teary eyes, Cneius Lucius encouraged her:

“Go on, my child. I want to hear and feel your whole story.”



“Our outing,” she continued with the eyes of her soul immersed in the picture of her innermost memories, “was going along serenely and smoothly, when suddenly a high wave rose up, driven by the strong wind. A violent jolt right where I was standing, absorbed in thought, knocked me overboard into the turbid water ...

“I could hear the cries of my mother and sister, who thought I was lost forever. But as I was struggling unsuccessfully to overcome the enormous weight pushing against my chest under the mass of water, I felt two powerful arms plucking me from the muddy bottom of the lake, bringing me to the surface in a desperate and immense effort.

“It was Cyrus. He had saved me from death with his spirit of sacrifice and loyalty, winning with his spontaneous act the unbounded gratitude of my father, and from the rest of us, our loving and sincere acknowledgement.

“Deeply moved by what had happened, my father gave him his freedom the very next day.

“The minute he was emancipated, the young freedman kissed my hands with his eyes moist with deep and sincere gratitude. My father kept him in our house as an invaluable, free servant. He would have been almost a friend if the conditions of his birth had been different.

“However, Cyrus won not only my gratitude and utmost esteem, but also my soul’s spontaneous and deep affection.

“During peaceful, clear evenings under the trees in the orchard, he told me his unique history, full of interesting and poignant episodes.

“At an early age, he had been sold to a wealthy master who took him to the country of the Ganges – a land mysterious and incomprehensible to Romans – where he had the opportunity to learn the popular principles of consoling religious philosophies.

“In that region of the East, teeming with comforting secrets, he learned that the soul doesn’t have just a single existence but many, through which it acquires new faculties. At the same time, it purifies itself of past errors or redeems itself from afflictions in the painful redemption of its past crimes or aberrations.

“However, after acquiring this knowledge, he was taken to Palestine, where he immersed himself in the Christian teachings and became a fervent follower of the Messiah of Nazareth!

“You should have seen how his words were impregnated with divine and luminous inspiration! ... Passionate about the benevolent ideas he had brought from the religious environment of India concerning the beautiful principles of reincarnation, he knew how to use simplicity and clarity of thought to interpret many Gospel passages that were somewhat obscure to my understanding, such as the one in which Jesus states that ‘no one can reach the kingdom of heaven without being born again’!

“Whether in the languid twilight of Palestine or the caressing moonlight of its starry nights when he was resting from his daily work, he would speak to me of the sciences of life and death, of the things of earth and heaven. The divine gifts of his intelligence kept my spirit suspended between the emotions of physical life and the glorious hope of the spirit life.

“Enraptured by the sweet caress of his tender expressions and gestures, he seemed to be the twin soul of my destiny, reserved by God to appreciate and understand me since the remotest lifetimes.

“For a year, life was like a bed of roses for us because we loved each other immensely. In our calm and pure idylls, we spoke of Jesus and his divine glories, and when I raised the possibility of our union in this world, Cyrus taught me that we should wait for happiness in the Kingdom of the Lord, that on earth a happy marriage between a poor servant and a young patrician was not yet possible.

“Sometimes he saddened me with his words devoid of earthly hopes, but his inspirations were so lofty and pure that in an instant his heart knew how to lift mine to the journeys of faith that lead to hope for everything, not in the earth or people, but in heaven and the infinite love of God.”

The valorous old man listened to all this without reproach, but his mental state harbored the deepest consternation.

Noting that his granddaughter had paused in her captivating and sad story, Cneius Lucius asked her kindly:

“What was the young man’s attitude toward your father?”

“Cyrus admired his open and spontaneous benevolence and showed his deep and pure gratitude for the fraternal act of setting him free forever. He always taught me to respect my father more and more and he emphasized his loftier qualities. He spoke to me constantly and enthusiastically about his

benevolent attitude and he admired his dedication to work and his remarkable energy.”

“And Helvidius never knew about your love?” asked her intrigued grandfather.

“Yes, he found out,” Celia replied humbly. “I’ll tell you all about it without omitting a single detail.

“In our house there was a supervisor who directed the activities of all the family servants. Pausanias loved scandals and was not at all sincere. My father, because of his need for constant travel, kept him almost as an extension of his own will due to his numerous interests. Pausanias often abused that kindly trust to establish discord in our home.

“After having noticed my friendship with the young freedman, whose moral gifts had impressed my heart so strongly, he waited one day for my father’s return from a trip to Idumea, and then poisoned his mind with slanderous insinuations about my conduct.”

“And what did Helvidius do?” the old man asked suddenly, interrupting her words, as if guessing the unfolding of all the scenes that had happened at a distance.

“He reproached my mother bitterly and blamed her. He called me into his presence in order to admonish and advise me, without ever allowing me to explain anything with the sincerity and frankness I am doing now.”

“And what about the freedman?” asked Cneius Lucius, eager to know what finally happened.

“He had him put in irons and ordered Pausanias to inflict the punishment he thought necessary and appropriate.

Bound to the whipping post, Cyrus was flogged several times for the crime of having taught me to use my heart and soul and the utmost loving respect to love all the traditions of the world and family on the altar of silent devotion and spiritual sacrifice.

“On the second day of his unspeakable suffering, I managed to see him, despite the extreme vigilance that everyone had decided to exercise over my movements.

“Just as in the days of our happy peace, Cyrus greeted me with a blissful smile, adding that I should not nurture any sentiment of bitterness about my

father's orders, since he was a good and generous soul; and even though we could not break ancient prejudices on earth, we should not harbor thoughts of ingratitude.

"But his suffering," the young woman went on, wiping away the tears of her memories, "really tore my soul apart.

"Recognizing the plight of the one who held all my hopes, I came to honestly curse my privileged position. What was the use of all the family pampering and the prerogatives of the name I was blessed with, if the twin soul of my destiny was imprisoned in a dreadful night of suffering?

"So, I explained my inner torment and my bitter thoughts to him. Cyrus listened to me with resignation and gentleness, telling me afterwards that we both had a model, a teacher who was not of this world, and that this Savior would provide us with a nest of happiness in Heaven if we were able to suffer with resignation and simplicity, like the blessed ones of his wise and sweet words. He added that Christ also had loved much, yet he had traversed the paths of earthly incomprehension, alone and abandoned. If we were victims of prejudice or persecution, such suffering was certainly due to the errors of our past as spirits in ancient times. He added that Jesus had sacrificed himself for all humanity, although with a heart as immaculate as a lily and meek as a lamb.

"What were our sufferings compared to his up on the cross of human wickedness and blindness?' he bravely asked. 'Celia, my dearest, lift your eyes up to Jesus and carry on! ...Who better than you and I can understand the sweet mystery of love through sacrifice? We know that the happiest are not those who dominate and are joyous in this world, but those who understand the divine plans and practice them in life, even though they may seem the most despised and unfortunate creatures of all ... Moreover, dearest, for those who love each other through the sacrosanct bonds of the soul there are neither prejudices nor obstacles in space and time. Therefore, we will continue to love each other while we wait for the light of the Lord's Kingdom. The painful moment of our separation has arrived, but here or in the beyond, you will always be alive in my heart, because as the despised worm who received the gentle smile of a star, I will love you for the rest of my life ... Can those who walk with Jesus through the mists of material existence ever be separated? Didn't the Master promise his blessed kingdom to all those who suffered with their eyes turned toward his heart's infinite love? Let us be accepting and have courage! ... Beyond these thorny thickets,

flowered pathways are unfolding, where one day we will rest in the light of the Unlimited. If we are suffering now, it must be for a just cause originated in the dark past of our successive earthly existences. The real life is not this one, but the one that we will live tomorrow in the unlimited realm of the radiant spirit world!’

“While his comforting words strengthened my weakened courage, I saw his bruised face and hair matted with copious sweat, realizing his excruciating and infinite physical suffering.

“Despite his extreme pallor, Cyrus smiled and comforted me. His lesson of patience and faith soothed my soul, and that courageous serenity will be for me a precious incentive for moral fortitude in my trials.

“I consoled him as best I could, telling him of my deep and sincere understanding of the meaning of those words of goodness and instruction, an understanding that I would keep inside me forever.

“We promised each other the most absolute calm and trust in Jesus, as well as eternal faithfulness while in this world so that we would be united some day in heaven.

“Once the brief moments I was able to speak to the prisoner came to an end, I renewed the internal energies of my faith and bravely wiped away my tears.

“I looked for my mother and begged for her loving intercession to stop the cruel punishment that Pausanias had inflicted on my soul’s beloved, and told her of the grievous scene I had witnessed.

“She was deeply moved by my story and obtained an order from my father for Cyrus to be released under certain conditions, which, although painful, were a kind relief to me!”

“What conditions?” asked Cneius Lucius, marveling at the touching story of his granddaughter, whose eighteen years of age testified to the deepest intensity of suffering.

“My father agreed on the condition that I could not say goodbye. That same night he made arrangements for him to go to Caesarea, escorted by two trustworthy slaves. At the port he would be put on a Roman galley and would be exiled at the discretion of its commanders!”

“Did you nourish any rancor against Helvidius because of his attitude, dear child?”

“No,” she replied with spontaneous sincerity. “If I were to nurture any rancor, it would go against my own destiny.

“Besides, Cyrus always taught me that those who do not honor their father and mother according to the divine precepts cannot go to Jesus.”

Cneius Lucius was truly amazed. When Helvidius had asked him for moral intervention with his granddaughter, he was far from expecting such a grievous love story from the heart of an eighteen-year-old, full of youth and compassion. His own heart, which was familiar with the destructive virus that was bringing about the decay of a society immersed in an abyss of darkness, was entranced by that simple story of a sweet, Christian love that was waiting patiently for heaven and all its divine realities. No young person’s voice had ever spoken to him with such purity.

Amazed and deeply moved, he rested his wrinkled face on his trembling right hand, immersing himself in a long pause to gather his thoughts.

After a few minutes, noticing that his granddaughter was anxiously waiting for him to say something, he asked with the same kindness:

“Child, did this young slave ever abuse your trust or your innocence?”

She gazed at him with her serene eyes, in whose crystalline glow an unmistakable candor and sincerity could be seen, and declared without hesitation:

“Never! Cyrus never allowed my sentiments to be tainted by any unworthy inclination. To show you the nobility of his thoughts, I would like to tell you that one day when we were talking in the shade of an old olive tree, I noticed that his hand was resting lightly on my hair, but at the same instant, as if our hearts were being carried away by other impulses, he withdrew it, saying movingly: ‘Celia, my dear, forgive me. Let’s not give in to any emotion that might cause us to partake of the world’s impatience, because some day we will kiss in heaven, where the clamoring of human malice cannot reach us.’”

Cneius Lucius looked at his granddaughter’s face, her pure sincerity radiating from her candid and courageous eyes, and said:

“Yes, my child, the man to whom you have dedicated yourself has a benevolent heart, much different from what one would expect from a slave, inspiring a love in you that is so far removed from the notions of today’s youth.

And accentuating his words, as if he wished to impress them with new strength directed towards his own soul, he continued after a short pause:

“What is more, this new doctrine that you have accepted must have a profound essence, given the wonderful hope it instills in suffering souls. I now believe that Helvidius did not probe the matter sufficiently to understand its many facets.”

“That’s right, grandpa,” she replied, comforted, as if she had found a balm for her innermost wounds. “At first my father was not afraid for us to analyze the evangelical teachings, nor did he consider them dangerous. It was only after Pausanias’s schemes that he believed the doctrines of Christ had brought me some kind of mental imbalance due to my inclination toward the young freedman.”

“No, your father would not understand a sentiment of that kind in your heart as a privileged young woman.

“But listen: since you have spoken to me in a way that does not allow for reproofs or reprimands, what are your prospects for the future? As for your sister, your parents have told me that the plans have been settled. In a few months, after she completes her Roman education, Helvidia will marry Caius Fabricius, whose love will lead her to one of the most socially prominent positions, in keeping with our family’s merits. But what about you? Will you persevere with these sentiments?”

“Grandpa,” she replied humbly, “With his thirty-five years of maturity and his fullness of kindness and generosity, Caius Fabricius will make my sister very happy, and she well deserves it! In God’s eyes, Helvidia has merited the sacred joys of a home and family. Another heart will beat next to hers that will grace her life with kindness and tenderness ...

“As for me, I sense that I will not experience happiness as we dream of it in this life!

“Ever since childhood, I have been sad and inclined to deep thought, as if the mercy of Jesus were preparing me at every opportunity so that I would not neglect my spiritual duties at the right time.”

And looking at the old man with penetrating and serene eyes:

“I feel many centuries of anguish weighing on my heart ... I must be a very guilty spirit who has come into this world to redeem itself from its dark, dark past!

“Ever since Palestine, my nights have been inhabited by strange, poignant dreams, in which I hear loving voices calling me to submission and sacrifice.

“Accused of being a Christian amid my own family, I feel that my affections are not returned and all my loving words die without an echo! Yet, I count myself truly fortunate in believing that your heart resonates with mine and that you understand my intentions and thoughts.”

As if she were sadly glimpsing the path of sorrows in the future unfolding before her spiritual eyes, Celia continued to speak to the tender heart of her old grandfather, who idolized her:

“Yes! ... In my prophetic dreams, I have seen a cross, which I must embrace with resignation and humility! ... I feel an enormous weight on my heart, Grandpa! Often, I glimpse painful scenes before me that must have their roots in previous lifetimes. I sense that I was born into this world to amend and redeem myself. When I pray and meditate, the ponderings of my anxious soul appear in my thoughts! ... I must not wait for cheerful springtimes or the flowers of illusion that would make me forget the sorrowful path of the spirit, destined for redemption; instead, I must expect winters of pain and harsh trials amid days of severe struggles that will lead me back to Jesus with the divine light of experience!”

Cneius Lucius’s eyes were wet with tears at the touching words of his granddaughter, who had won his adoration since childhood.

“Child,” he said kindly, “I cannot understand such discouragement in the heart of someone your age. Our family’s name will not allow such self-abandonment ...”

“Even so, dear Grandpa, I will not disdain the painful reality of sacrifice, knowing in advance that its cup is reserved for me.”

“And you don’t expect anything on earth as far as potential happiness is concerned?!”



“Happiness cannot be where we place it with our earthly blindness, but in our understanding of the Divine Will, which will know where and how to place our bliss at the appropriate time. We don’t have just one life. We have many. The secret of happiness lies in our accomplishments for God, through the Infinite. From stage to stage, from experience to experience, our soul will progress toward the supreme glories of the spirit world as if we were laboriously ascending a long harsh ladder ... We will love each other always throughout those many lives, Grandpa. They will be like links in the chain of our blessed and indestructible union. Later on, you will see that your granddaughter, within her spiritual reality, will meet with you with the same understanding and the same everlasting love in the realm of real happiness that death will unveil to us with its tombs of dolorous ashes!

“In the meantime, in your eyes I will perhaps always be sad and unhappy, but deep down I am certain that my suffering is the price of my redemption for the light of Eternity.

“According to what the omens of my heart tell me in their silent and secret voices, I will not have a home of my own for my happiness in this life! ... I will live misunderstood, with my heart broken on the bitter path of redemptive tears! The sacrifice, however, will be easy because in its exaltation I feel that I will find the luminous pathway to the realm of truth and love that Jesus promised to all hearts that trust in his name and blessed mercy!”

Celia looked up at Heaven, as if her soul were waiting right there at her old grandfather’s side for the divine graces glimpsed by her light and hope-filled faith.

Cneius Lucius, though, drew her gently to his heart as he would a child, and said to her with great tenderness:

“My child, you’re tired! You don’t have to explain yourself any longer. I’ll talk to Helvidius regarding your innermost thoughts, and I’ll explain your situation to him.” And calling Marcia, his older daughter, who fulfilled the role of a loving guardian angel in his old age, the respected patrician said:

“Marcia, our little Celia needs serenity and physical repose. Take her to your room and have her lie down.”

His granddaughter tenderly kissed his forehead, and left with her kindly and benevolent aunt, who nearly carried her in her arms as she led her inside.

Night had fallen, filling the Roman sky with fanciful twinklings of light.

Cneius Lucius, absorbed in deep brooding, sank into a sea of conjectures.

His old heart was tired of beating in its incomprehension of the world's mysteries. He, too, had been young and had nurtured dreams. In his distant youth, many times he had destroyed his noblest aspirations and most benevolent purposes in the tumultuous clash of materialized and violent passions.

Only the caressing breezes of reflection in his old age had ripened his spiritual concepts as he moved toward an increasingly greater understanding of life and its profound laws.

Ever since he had grown accustomed to pondering matters deeply, the ghosts of pain and the astounding contrasts of human destinies had befuddled his spirit. Although rooted in the purest traditions of his ancestors, and despite having transmitted them with fidelity and love to his descendants, his heart could not believe that the whole of divine truth was embodied in Jupiter, the ancient symbol that unified all the old beliefs.

He had hoped to provide a lesson to that child in his eagerness to teach, but it was his own soul, instead, that had been shaken and moved by the new concepts that came to him from the pure lips of an angel. He, who had accustomed himself to investigating the profound causes of pain and to feel the sufferings of those who wept in captivity, had just received a wonderful key to solving the capricious enigmas of fate. The vision of successive lives, the law of compensation, the pathways of spiritual redemption through expiation and suffering, were now obvious to his reasoning as providential solutions.

His knowledge of the Greek authors made him feel that the matter was not completely unfamiliar to him, but the loving and convincing words of his granddaughter, testifying the truth to him with her own premature sufferings, had opened his mind to a new path for all his cogitations in this regard.

With his heart gripped with anxiety, he reclined on the couch of the family altar, contemplating the proud, ivory-carved image of Jupiter Stator at the center of the other gods of his family and home.

He arose and walked slowly around the niches adorned with lights and flowers.

The image of Jupiter no longer awakened in him the same sentiments of pious veneration as it had on previous nights.

In light of Celia's gentle and profound revelations, he felt a bitter suspicion that all the gods of his respectable ancestors were tumbling from their altars, mingling in the whirlwind of the illusions of the old beliefs. With a heavy soul, the venerable patrician saw that the new philosophical and religious concepts were quickly taking possession of his heart ... Then, afraid and bewildered, Cneius Lucius heard within himself the sweet sound of divine footsteps ... It seemed that the gentle, energetic figure of the prophet of Nazareth, whose philosophy of forgiveness and love he knew through the preaching of the times, had appeared in the world to shatter all stone idols, to take possession of the human heart forever!

If he was a friend of truth, the venerable old man was no less a sacred deposit of austere traditions.

In the room devoted to the home deities, he felt that the environment choked his heart and his reasoning. Instinctively, he opened one of the large nearby windows and the night air entered in gusts to refresh his troubled mind.

He leaned out to contemplate the almost sleeping city. His conversation with his granddaughter seemed to have lasted an indeterminate amount of time, so great was the effect of her profound and impressive assertions.

With moist eyes, he looked at the flowing of the Tiber on the landscape as far as his eyes could encompass it and rested his weary thought on the effects of light that the moon whimsically made on the water.

How many hours had he watched the glittering constellations as he probed the divine mysteries of the firmament?

Only much later, at the break of dawn, did the loving voice of Marcia come to wake him from his somber, intense thoughts, inviting him to go to bed.

Cneius Lucius went to his room with slow steps, his forehead creased with anguish, his eyes sunken and sad, like someone who had been bitterly weeping.

## 3

# Shadows in the Home

The lives of our characters in Rome resumed with no major events or surprises.

Helvidius Lucius, despite his love for the Province, experienced the pleasant feeling of having returned to his old environment to occupy a higher position, where he would greatly enrich the value of his political vocation in the service of the State.

After granting freedom to Nestorius, he made sure that the former slave worked for him on tasks related both to his work and the house, reflecting Nestorius's standing as a cultured and independent citizen.

Thus, the former slave, who had rented a room in a boarding house in the vicinity of Porta Salaria, became his daughters' teacher and a work assistant eight hours a day with regular pay.

Apart from that, the freedman was entirely at liberty to take care of his own private interests.

He knew how to take advantage of his free time and made the most of the opportunity to concentrate on improving his situation. Thus, in the evening he taught elementary reading and writing to humble students who hired his services. This provided him with a wide range of friendships and expanded his benevolent tendencies in congenial meetings that brought new energies to his heart.

One month was all it took for him to become familiar with the most important centers of the city, its illustrious men, monuments and social classes as he made solid friendships in the humble milieu in which he lived.

Passionate about Christianity –a fact that Helvidius Lucius was unaware of – he did not deny himself the pleasure of getting to know his companions

in faith, thus doing his part in the blessed task of edifying souls for Jesus in that dark period that Christianity was going through, amid extensive waves of misunderstanding and blood.

Nestorius's fluent speech, coupled with his personal relationship with Presbyter Johannes, a beloved disciple of John the Evangelist at the church in Ephesus, provided him with the broadest knowledge of Jesus' traditions. This immediately gave him a prominent position among his fellow believers, who met twice a week at night in the Via Nomentana catacombs to study passages from the Gospel and to beseech help from the Divine Master.

Hadrian's reign had been liberal and just at the beginning, but was characterized by persecution and cruelty after the terrible events of the Judean civil war.

After the year 131, all Christians were compelled once again to seek refuge in the catacombs for their prayers. Tenacious and ruthless persecution was sustained by the imperial authority against all Israelite people or centers of belief. The followers of Jesus acknowledged each other in the city only by a vague sign of the cross that identified them fraternally wherever they met.

Nestorius was mindful of this dangerous environment and tried to adapt to the situation as much as possible in a way that he could continue to serve Christ in his inner faith without neglecting his duties.

He had the utmost respect and sincere esteem for Helvidius Lucius and his family. He would never forget that he had received full freedom from Helvidius's benevolent hands. Thus, he discharged his responsibilities with joy and devotion.

He had soon come to the conclusion that both the young women were properly prepared for life, given their extensive knowledge through reading. Helvidius Lucius, however, acting on the sympathy he had felt towards Nestorius since the very beginning, kept him employed in his office, where the freedman experienced his recognition and admiration, increasingly strengthening the bonds of their mutual friendship.

It had been just one month since our friends had returned to Rome, when Censor Fabius Cornelius opened his palace to introduce his children to all the prominent patrician figures.

Hadrian himself, along with the prefect and Claudia Sabina, appeared at this socially prominent party, enhancing the splendor of the event.

On that memorable night for our characters' destinies, everything was a dazzling display of light and flowers in the sumptuous residence in the old Carinas neighborhood.

Artistically arranged torches blazed in the lush gardens, while on an improvised lake graceful boats were filled with musicians and singers. The melodies of harps mingled in with the sounds of flutes, lutes and cymbals, and handsome young slaves lifted their caressing, crystalline voices in harmony with them.

But that was not all.

Fabius Cornelius and Julia Spinter had used all their material resources to present a gala whose qualities would make an indelible impression on the memories of the Roman aristocracy.

A profusion of light, plentiful tables, expensive flowers, extravagant ornaments from the East, famous singers and dancers, and a presentation of giant antelope fighting with athletic slaves in an arena carefully prepared for that purpose. Gladiators and artists mingled with the legion of guests, a superb display of marvelous festivity.

After some effort, Claudia Sabina managed to catch the attention of Helvidius Lucius – who was trying to avoid her – by eliciting the Emperor's direct comments on him and his accomplishments. Now and then she would make an affectionate and vague remark, which the patrician received with alarm, fearful of returning to the restless times of his youth.

Meanwhile, Lollius Urbicus offered his arm to Alba Lucinia and gently led her to the long and flowery promenades around the artificial lake, which sparkled in the evening light.

Purposely retained by Claudia next to the Emperor, Helvidius listened to the benevolent words of Caesar, who showed an obvious interest in him:

“Helvidius Lucius,” said Hadrian with an affable and attentive smile, “I am very pleased to see you back in the city again.”

And referring to Claudia Sabina standing beside him, he added:

“Our friend here told me of your excellent capacity for working and I congratulate you. At the moment I have several important projects in Tibur and I need the assistance of a hardworking and intelligent man who would take pleasure in such activity. It is true that all the buildings are nearly

completed, but some of the installations require the supervision of someone with extensive knowledge of our practical realities. I have entrusted Claudia with the solution of various problems with the artwork, taking advantage of her feminine sensibility, but I need a dedicated and persevering collaborator like you for the administrative part. Mightn't you find it pleasing to work with our friend for a while in Tibur?"

Helvidius understood the difficult situation that had been prepared for him.

Consciously, he could not happily accept such a task, but Caesar did not have to give any orders beyond revealing his desires.

"Augustus," said Helvidius reverently, "your kindness honors my efforts. The deference for such responsibilities constitutes a grateful duty of the heart for me."

Claudia Sabina smiled somewhat joyfully and addressed the Emperor:

"Thank you, Caesar, for choosing such an invaluable worker. I think that the Tibur constructions will be the insurmountable wonder of the Empire."

Flattered, Hadrian smiled, and like someone granting a rare favor, he said kindheartedly:

"All right then! We'll take care of the matter in due course."

And directing his enigmatic gaze at the harmonious flowered avenues, on which several couples were walking in unfeigned happiness, he added:

"But what are you two doing here, so young, trapped by my words so full of routine and austerity? ... Enjoy yourselves! Roman life should be a beautiful garden of earthly delights!"

Helvidius Lucius felt compelled by the circumstances and offered his arm to the seductive favorite, withdrawing slowly in her company under the kindly and complacent gaze of Augustus.

Claudia Sabina could not conceal the irrepressible emotion that had overcome her in light of the circumstance that had led her to the arm of the man who polarized her womanly aspirations. After a few steps, she was the first to break the awkward silence:

"Helvidius," she said in an almost pleading voice, "I recognize the line of social responsibilities that separates us, but have you really forgotten me?"

“Madam,” said the patrician, moved and respectful, “within our heart of hearts, all the past should be dead. If I did offend you in the past, I would be grateful if you would forget it. Otherwise, any closeness between us would represent an odious and impossible situation.”

Hadrian’s favorite deeply felt the firmness of those words, which froze her restless and eager heart. However, she replied without hesitation:

“A conquered woman should never consider herself an offended woman. The hands we love never hurt us, and I have never ever been able to forget your love.”

Adding a touch of humility to her voice, she went on:

“Helvidius, I have suffered a great deal, but I have waited for you my whole life. Although defeated and humiliated in my youth, I did not succumb to despair as I waited trustingly for you to return my love. Would you really want to break my heart now that I have humbly come to offer you all the treasures of life that I have zealously gathered to offer you?”

Her last words were underlined with deep disenchantment. Helvidius Lucius understood her disappointment and continued without hesitation:

“You have to realize that I have sworn fidelity and devotion to a benevolent and loyal woman, while you yourself are committed to a noble and worthy man. Would you want to break a vow given before our gods?”

“Our gods?” she repeated with a hint of sarcasm. “Do they try to prevent the many divorces of all those people of our society? And do those examples not come from above, from high positions under the direct authority of the Emperor? I don’t think about situations so that, first of all, I can satisfy my feminine sensibility.”

“It’s clear,” replied Helvidius sarcastically, “that you are unfamiliar with the tradition connected with a family name. So that they can remain faithful to the heritage handed down by their ancestors, those who wish to perpetuate the values of the passing centuries cannot take risks with the novelties of the times.”

Sabina Claudia bit her lip nervously upon hearing that direct reference to her former status as a commoner, and said haughtily:

“I don’t agree with you on that point. Victors who receive a name made to shine in the world cannot be traditionalists; they are those who triumph



over their own condition and environment, and know how to rise to social heights, like eagles of intelligence and sentiment, forcing the world to honor their achievements and merits.”

The proud Roman felt the acrimony of her response and could not find an immediate way to retaliate with the same weapon. The former plebeian added with an enigmatic smile:

“Despite your indifference, I will continue to hold onto my hopes. I don’t think you will refuse to accept Augustus’s honorable task for the conclusion of the work in Tibur, which currently is his constant concern.”

“No,” the patrician stated somewhat sadly, “I shall have to fulfill Caesar’s orders.”

The Emperor’s favorite was about to reply, when Publicius Marcelus, Lollius Urbicus’s companion in his remarkable military feats, approached noisily, robbing them of the opportunity to continue their private conversation and offering them a friendly invitation:

“My friends,” he cried with ebullient joy, “Let’s go over to the lake! Virgilius Priscus is going to sing one of his most beautiful compositions in honor of Caesar!”

Caught in a wave of happy urgings, Helvidius and Claudia separated naturally to attend to the warm invitation. Indeed, the entire group of guests began to eagerly gather at the edge of the large pool surrounded by trees. In a few moments, Virgilius’s velvety voice filled the air with music, highlighted by the melodious tones of the zithers and lutes that accompanied him.

From the top of his makeshift throne, Hadrian listened raptly as he received the homage of his loyal subjects to his imperial vanities.

Backing up, however, let us accompany Alba Lucinia and Lollius Urbicus as they stroll along the lighted, flowered lanes.

The noble woman maintained the graceful austerity of her patrician character, whereas her companion appeared highly emotive.

In an apparently carefree conversation, the Prefect of the Praetorians seemed to intentionally break away from the numerous groups in his desire to express the secret thoughts that afflicted his disconsolate heart.

At one point, very pale, he said in an almost pleading tone:

“Madam, I saw you for the first time over twenty years ago ... at the celebration of your betrothal to a worthy man, and I sincerely regretted not having arrived sooner to compete for your affections! ... I believe that your heart will be alarmed by my inopportune revelations, but what is there to be done if a man in love is always the same child that weighs neither situations nor circumstances to be sincere? ... Forgive me if I am offending your lofty and benevolent sensibility, but I have an overpowering need to tell you openly of my love.”

Alba Lucinia listened to him, painfully impressed with those earnest and decisive declarations. She wanted to answer him with the austerity of her high principles as a wife and mother, but a bitter turmoil seemed to paralyze her vocal cords in those difficult circumstances.

And becoming more vehement, Lollius Urbicus continued:

“I wasted my youth with the most painful inner regrets ... My soul searched everywhere in vain for someone like you. Anxious to find the heart that beats in you, I threw myself into the difficult adventures of my dreary military undertakings! My existence may be prosperous but it is filled with infinite bitterness ... Couldn't you grant me the relief of a little hope? Will I have to die like this, distant and misunderstood? I carelessly gave my name and social position to a woman who cannot satisfy the highest expressions of my soul. We are two strangers in our home ... however, madam, I have never forgotten your patrician profile, this divine, serene look, in which I am now reading the light-filled pages of your supreme virtue!

“In my social environment I have everything that a man can desire: wealth, political privileges, fame and a name, steps I climbed easily among the noblest classes. My heart, however, lives in hopeless despair, longing for an unattainable happiness ... As long as you remained in the Province I could handle my sorrows, but when I saw you again, I felt an unleashed Vesuvius of flames in my soul! ... My nights are filled with unrest and anguish, like those of a castaway seeing from afar the distant and unattainable island of his fortune.

“Tell me that your heart will accept my pleas; that you will regard me with sympathy at your side! If you cannot return my passion, at least delude me with your honorable and ennobling friendship. Look upon me as one of your servants!”

The honorable woman had become pale, her heart throbbing alarmingly at a violent rate.

“Mr. Prefect,” she managed to stammer, almost fainting, “I am sorry to have inspired sentiments of this nature and I cannot honor your loving tribute, because your words show the violence of an unreasonable and disastrous passion. My sacred duties as a wife and mother prevent me from considering what you just said. I will maintain my sincere disposition of considering you an illustrious and dignified gentleman, the dedicated and honest friend of my father and my husband, to whose destiny I am forever bound through a natural love.”

Accustomed to the feminine indulgences of the court because of his position and attributes, Lollius Urbicus suddenly paled on hearing this honorable and dignified refusal. In a glance he assessed the spiritual caliber of the woman he had ardently coveted for so many years. In his heart, mixed with the humiliation to his self-esteem, there was also a trace of shame toward himself.

However, hiding his resentment, he spoke almost pleadingly:

“I do not want to seem coarse and uncomprehending! The truth, however, is that I shall continue to love you as I always have. Your formal and courteous refusal only increases my desire to have you. How long, O gods of Olympus, shall I go on, misunderstood and tormented like this?”

Looking up, he saw that Alba Lucinia was weeping in sorrow. That serene and justified pain pierced his heart like the edge of a sword.

Lollius Urbicus realized for the first time that the materiality of his passion provoked sentiments of anguish and pity.

“Madam,” he said, afflicted, “forgive me if I have made you weep with the misplaced expression of my unhappy suffering. I love you so very much ... You married an honest, decent man and I have just committed the madness of proposing his disgrace and misfortune ... Forgive me! I am the victim of a painful moment of criminal insanity ... Have mercy on me, who has been living discouraged and heartbroken until now.

“A beggar from Esquilinus is happier than I, even though he holds out his hands for charity! I’m a wretch ... have mercy on my grievous suffering. I have held these uncouth and distressing emotions inside for many years, and you know that the mind of a soldier has to be cruel and indifferent, repressing

any kind thoughts! ... I have never found a heart that understood my own, and that is why I did not hesitate to offend your faultless dignity!”

Alba Lucinia listened to his supplications without understanding the conflicts in that violent and sensitive soul. There was a painful silence between them when someone crossing the rows of trees exclaimed in a loud voice close to their ears:

“Come and listen to Virgilius Priscus! Let us join together to pay homage to Caesar!” Lollius Urbicus realized it would be impossible to continue their private conversation, and offering his arm to the honorable woman, who accompanied him with a sad smile, they headed for the lake, where moments earlier we saw Helvidius and Claudia Sabina arrive.

All the guests were gathered around the singer in a large and distinguished crowd, attentive to the tribute the Emperor was receiving with serenity and pride.

The song commissioned by the hosts was a long poem in the style of the times, with Hadrian’s glorified deeds exceeding all other previous achievements of the Empire. In the flattering expressions of the artist, no hero had surpassed his brilliant accomplishments in Rome. Famous generals and poets, consuls and senators – all fell short of the one who had the good fortune of being the adopted son of Trajan.

On top of the throne erected to his honor, the Emperor smiled openly as he gave free reign to his personal vanity.

All surrounded him. Numerous authorities were there, joining in the homage of Fabius Cornelius and his family.

Let us not forget that Helvidia and Gaius Fabricius were also there together, enraptured in the cheerful springtime of love. Cneius Lucius had been forced by circumstances to attend and was supported on Celia’s arm. Somewhat tremulous in his advanced age, he was eager to show his children that his heart was also joining in the general jubilation.

The lutes fell silent and a legion of adolescents tore the petals from hundreds of rose wreaths brought by slaves on large silver plates, enveloping the throne in a cloud of fragrance.

More songs filled the air, and the troupe of dancers showed off new dances, replete with interesting and strange movements.

The wine flowed freely, filling nearly every head with fantasies, and with the hunt for the fabulous antelope the party ended, recorded forever in the minds of all the patricians. Helvidius Lucius and Alba Lucinia returned to their home under the weight of an indefinable anguish.

Caught in the unexpected events and emotions that had struck them unwittingly, both showed the reciprocal effect of having been recipients of unpleasant and painful confidences.

Upon returning to the intimacy of their home, the honorable woman said to her husband in an anguished tone:

“Helvidius, there were many times when I ardently desired to return to Rome because I missed our friendships and the incomparable urban environment; but today I understand better the calm of the countryside, where we lived without distressing concerns. During our years in the Province, I grew unaccustomed to the intrigues of the court and these festivities deeply tire my heart.”

Helvidius listened to her, feeling that the state of his soul was exactly the same, so great was the tedium that seized him after the spectacles he had observed, coupled with the painful emotions he had experienced that night.

“Yes, dear,” he replied, somewhat comforted, “your words do my heart much good. Back in Rome, I too realize that I am weary of its conventions and hypocrisy. I fear the city with its many dangers to our happiness, which we want to be imperishable!”

And recalling more specifically the painful upheavals experienced just hours before with Sabina’s confessions, he drew his wife to his heart, adding with a look illumined by a sudden clarity:

“Lucinia, I have an idea! What would you say to our returning to the cozy and quiet countryside? Let’s remember, dear, that the revolt is over and it wouldn’t be hard to get back to our old properties in Palestine.

“That way we could renew our peaceful existence in the Province without the exhausting and painful worries that assail us here. You could take care of your flowers and I could continue to watch over the interests of our house. I promise I’ll do everything to make your life less sad away from your parents! We would keep only your favorite slaves and I would constantly seek your advice in the unfolding of all our endeavors!

“I would take you with me on all my trips ... I would never again leave you alone at home, worried and longing.”

Helvidius Lucius had lent a singular and deeply expressive tone to his voice, as if it were revealing the endearing prospects of a springtime scene.

“Who knows,” he continued, his eyes shining, “We could return to Judea to be even more joyful and happy! Our Helvidia’s future is assured with her upcoming marriage, and Celia would stay with us to enrich our domestic bliss! ...On our way back, we could travel all over Greece to visit the oldest garden of the gods, and in Samaria and Idumea you would see the miracles my heart would produce in my desire to make you smile and be happy! We’ll take walks together like before, along moonlit roads in the silence of the still nights to feel even more the extent of our blissful love.

“Here, I feel our domestic peace threatened at every step ... The intrigues of the court torment my heart! ... However, we are still young and have a promising future ahead of us.

“Believe me, dearest, I nourish the greatest desire to return to our peaceful haven amid calm and bountiful nature!”

Alba Lucinia listened to him relieved of her own troubles. A tear glimmered in her eyes, her heart beating fast with the cheerful expectation of returning to the tranquility of provincial life.

However, despite the joy of these hopes, her mental state revealed a deeper consideration.

“Helvidius,” she said, comforted, “the prospect of returning to the rural environment with our happiness and love comforts my broken spirit. But listen: what about our duties? What will my father say about such a plan after he fought so hard to readjust your situation to the administrative politics of the Empire? In short, I would like to know whether you have accepted any other serious commitment.”

In listening to her calm reflections, the patrician suddenly remembered his commitment to the emperor concerning the building project in Tibur and felt disheartened after the outburst of his enthusiastic hopes.

He then told his wife about Caesar’s request, and she responded with a sigh of regret.

“In that case,” said Alba Lucinia with an unfamiliar hint of annoyance in her voice, “it’s too late to consider our immediate return to the Province.”

Her husband was forlorn as he realized the validity of her thought, but added:

“As a last resort, I will speak with Fabius Cornelius tomorrow and explain my apprehensions. Even if he does not approve of our return, let’s keep our hopes, because the gods will surely allow our return later on!”

Despite the deep intimacy of their conversation, neither had the courage to reveal the painful emotions of that night.

The next day, both were still feeling the initial impact of the emotional struggles that awaited them in the environment of the great metropolis.

Lucius Helvidius sought a meeting with his father-in-law and explained to him without reservation his plans and desires. In addition to telling him about his plan to return to Palestine, he also spoke of the imperial intention to use his personal services in the Tibur construction work.

Fabius Cornelius was surprised by his remarks and reproved his son-in-law’s plans, suggesting that it showed much childishness on his part under such circumstances. Did he not have a solid financial position? Did his living in Rome close to his entire family not represent an element of peace? Had he not won the graces of Hadrian to the point of joining the political-administrative system with all the honors of a military tribune?

In light of his stubborn refusal, Helvidius discreetly told his father-in-law about his adventures during his youth. He told him about Claudia Sabina’s new intentions and his difficult domestic situation in the sacred protection of his family.

The old censor listened to this confidential information somewhat surprised, but replied:

“My son, I understand your scruples; however, I must speak to you with the same frankness of your confession and explain that, in my current situation, I depend entirely on the support of Lollius Urbicus and his wife in the world of politics and business. Unfortunately, my financial situation is now quite precarious, given the numerous expenses imposed by the circumstances. If possible, help me out in these contingencies. Don’t turn down the opportunity Hadrian is offering you in Tibur, and do everything you

can to put up with Claudia's vengeful heart, especially in the current circumstances of our lives."

Helvidius understood the impossibility of abandoning his elderly father-in-law and sincere friend, and sought the support of his inner energies so as not to show any embarrassment under the circumstances.

"And besides," said the censor, trying to use humor to dispel the shadows of the emotional mood that had arisen between the two, "I hope you won't get lost in puerile fears in the most difficult situations ... Don't be afraid of this or that circumstance, my son!"

And with a kindly smile, he added:

"Do you know what Lucretius said more than a hundred years ago? He said, 'Woman is the holy little animal of the gods!'"

The two of them exchanged a frank and optimistic smile, although Helvidius Lucius continued to harbor his apprehensions.

That same day, Alba Lucinia sought advice from her mother about her anguished thoughts. Julia Spinter listened to her account of the previous day's events, her heart touched with forebodings about her daughter's situation. But keeping her moral strength, she replied with moist eyes:

"Dear daughter," she said, kissing her, "we are going through a period of bitter struggles where we are obliged to demonstrate the full capacity of our endurance. I can empathize with your inner anguish, because in my youth I too experienced these painful emotions in the whirlwind of social activities. If I could, I would break with the situation and with everyone for the sake of your peace of mind, but ..."

Signifying deep dismay, that reticence moved Alba Lucinia to the point of asking her mother:

"What do you mean, Mom? That 'but' has so much bitterness it surprises me. It makes me think there might be concerns perhaps even greater than my own in your soul."

"Well, my child, as a mother, I feel I have to be as interested in your happiness as I am in my own ... However, knowing your father's business and the ties that bind him to the praetorian prefect's politics, I gather that Fabius could not leave Lollius Urbicus for now without serious financial harm. Both are deeply bound to the current situation, so much so that in spite of the



candor that has always accompanied my words and acts, I must advise you to be extremely cautious regarding your father's peace of mind, which deserves our sacrifices."

The noble matron's words were spoken in a tone of bitter sadness.

Alba Lucinia was very pale after receiving this painful news and asked her mother:

"But is Dad's financial situation that precarious? Last night's festivities led me to believe quite the opposite."

"Yes, it is," replied Julia Spinter, resigned. "Unfortunately, the facts justify my inner sorrows. You know your father's temperament and how it is necessary that I support his whims. In my mind, however, a party like yesterday was not needed to show that I love you. I believe that such celebrations should be held in the privacy of the heart and the family; but your father thinks otherwise and I must go along with it. The expenses alone for last night came to several thousand sestericii. And that's not all. Your brothers have squandered most of the family assets and have acquired all sorts of debts that your father has to pay off, causing the most serious losses to our home. As you already know, the scandals of Lucilia Veintus have forced Asinius to leave for Africa, where, as far as we know, he still pursues the same path of easy pleasures. As for Rubrius, your father had to get him a commission in Campania to try to restore our financial stability. However, Lucilia, you know how society demands from us the mask of happiness ... In principle, I do not approve of Fabius throwing parties like yesterday's, but at the same time I must bear with him because a censor has to keep up with social conventions."

Listening to these private matters and filled with compassion for her mother, Alba Lucinia consoled her:

"Enough, Mom! I understand your plight. Let's keep this between the two of us. I'll get through all these difficulties somehow. Just yesterday, Helvidius and I were thinking about returning to the Province, but I can see that Dad needs our help. I can also see that you need my support to face these life situations!"

Julia Spinter was very touched as she embraced her daughter, noticing her intense look, as if she were foreseeing something dangerous to her happiness.

“May the gods bless you, my child!” she thanked her, almost radiant. “You will stay with me, yes, because I have been very misunderstood and very lonely! ... Only our dear Tulia has maintained our old friendship. She regards me as an adoptive mother given to her by Providence! ... My sons left home early in life to follow wrong pathways, and your father is always busy with meetings and affairs of the State.”

Mother and daughter continued their confidential, loving conversation for some time.

Thus, the overall situation remained unchanged. Alba Lucinia and her husband abandoned their plans to return to the provincial environment. They did everything they could to meet their domestic needs and remained in the imperial capital.

Sometime later Helvidius Lucius left Nestorius as an assistant to his father-in-law and left for Tibur in order to comply with the imperial orders. There, he found Claudia Sabina installed in a prominent position. Whether it was her desire to stand out in the eyes of the patrician and garner his respect, or whether she was expanding her innate talents, the fact is that the prefect’s wife was performing remarkably well in the administration of the artistic works entrusted to her feminine sensibility.

Compelled by the circumstances to work closely with her, Helvidius Lucius acknowledged her surprising abilities and came to truly admire her accomplishments, although he kept his heart alert against any attempt to return to the past. Claudia Sabina, however, despite a tactical change in her behavior, harbored the same desires as ever in her soul.

Meanwhile, Alba Lucinia had begun to endure a long series of moral sufferings in Rome. Lollius Urbicus had not given up on his intentions. Conscious of her lofty conjugal virtues, however, he had moderated his impulses. Roman society at the time loved sports and insisted on preserving the traditions of freedom in the mechanisms of family relationships, a situation that made it possible for him to visit the home of the absent patrician under the benevolent eyes of Fabius Cornelius, who saw in his loving concern a motive of honorable distinction for the family. The noble woman, however, knowing her father’s predicaments, did not feel the necessary courage to confide her justified fears to the old censor. Thus, she subjected herself to tolerating the friendship the prefect offered her, accepting it with the intangibility of her character.

Helvidius Lucius came home every two weeks. However, these brief trips to Rome were too short for him and his wife to find the solution to all the issues that concerned them.

Time flew by with its precious reserves of opportunities.

There was someone else who was deeply interested in the prefect's situation, and who deftly spied on his smallest movements. That someone was Hateria. As a servant in Alba Lucinia's home, she could observe his interests up close, hear his impressions and conversations, and keep an eye on his sentimental conduct.

Two long months had passed under these circumstances, when one day we find Lucinia and Tulia in a pleasant and comforting private conversation.

After some small talk, Helvidius's wife spoke confidentially of her bitter innermost feelings, telling her childhood friend her fears about the prolonged separation from her husband. Following the capricious decisions of fate, he seemed to be stuck indefinitely in the city of imperial predilection.

Tulia Cevina looked at her intently and said in a discreet tone:

"I sympathize with your apprehensions, especially because Helvidius continues to be close to Claudia!"

"Why do you think that's so important?" asked Alba Lucinia, surprised. "You mean you never knew?" "Knew what?" asked the other, twice as curious.

Tulia realized that because her friend had been away from the court for so many years, she had never really come to know the details of the past.

"A long time ago I heard that Claudia Sabina and Helvidius Lucius had a love affair in their youth. I think you are aware of the fact that she was strikingly beautiful back then, long before fate rescued her from the poverty of her social condition."

"I never knew that," exclaimed Alba Lucinia, visibly distressed, "but tell me everything you know."

"So you never heard the story about Silanus either?" asked Tulia Cevina, increasing the interest her words had aroused.

"Well, I know that Silanus is a young man that my father-in-law adopted as his own son, and I also know that when he was born a lot of people thought he was Helvidius's son by a commoner in the adventures of his youth."

“But do you know the whole story in its smallest details?”

“I only know that the little boy was left at Cneius Lucius’s door, and that he took him in with his usual benevolence.”

“That’s right, my friend, but there were those who saw the still-young plebeian Claudia Sabina abandon the child late at night at the place you mentioned, leaving a meaningful note for Cneius Lucius.”

“In any case,” Alba Lucinia replied, although impressed with this revelation, “I believe Helvidius was the victim of disgraceful slander.”

“I’m not saying he wasn’t,” said her friend, “because from what I’ve heard, Sabina was one of those women who live beset by many troubles.”

Helvidius’s wife felt a sharp inner pain. She wanted to weep to release the grief lashing her heart, but her moral strength overcame all other sentiments in her soul. It was not possible, however, for her to disguise her suffering in the presence of her loving spiritual sister from her early years, and bitterness and fear showed in her eyes.

Tulia Cevina held her at length and said softly:

“Dear Lucinia, I too have suffered these troubles that you have been going through, and I found an effective remedy. Would you like to try it?”

“Yes, I would. Where can I find it?”

“Listen to me,” said her friend with trustful and almost childlike goodness, “surely you’ve heard about Lucilia Veintus and her scandals at court. At one time, Maximus showed his inclination toward her, to the point of deeply undermining our domestic happiness. But Salvia Subria took me to a Christian meeting, where I asked for the prayers of a venerable old man who acts as a priest there. After I took advantage of that recourse, my husband returned to the haven of our home and our share of marital bliss has increased.”

“But did you have to make any kind of commitment?” asked Alba Lucinia, extremely interested.

“None.”

“Did the Christians perform some sort of sorcery to help you?”

“No. They told me that the virtue of prayer lies in its being addressed to a new god, whom the believers call Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Alba Lucinia, remembering Judea and her daughter’s beliefs. “I’ve heard about the Christian doctrine. My husband does not tolerate its concepts because they are contrary to our gods. So, I think that before making a decision of that nature I should hear what advice my mother might have.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“Because when I heard Salvia’s advice, I too went to your mother to speak with her about it; but with her formal ways and uncompromising candor, she was hostile to my wishes and said that a Roman woman must dispense with new gods to be an incorruptible matron to society and her family. Nevertheless, I decided to try this recourse and I got excellent results.”

“My mother must be right,” said Alba Lucinia with conviction. “Besides, I cannot accept mingling in with those plebeian gatherings.”

Tulia listened to her comments, and sincerely wishing to pool resources in rebuilding Alba Lucinia’s domestic happiness, she carefully objected:

“Listen Lucinia: I know your temperament is not compatible with this kind of meeting, but if you would like, I’ll go for you, just as I went for myself ... A holy man named Polycarp presides over the meetings. His word tells us of the new god with a faith so pure and a sincerity so great that there is no heart that doesn’t yield to the spiritual beauty of his affirmations ... His expressions sweep our souls away to a realm of eternal happiness, where Jesus of Nazareth must be ahead of all our gods, waiting for us beyond this life with the blessings of eternal bliss ...

“I’m not a Christian, as you know, but I have benefited from their prayers, and contrary to what others say, I can testify that the followers of Jesus are peaceful and good!”

Helvidius’s wife welcomed her loving suggestions with her heart deeply touched.

“And would you go alone without the protection of a guard?” she asked in amazement.

“Why do you ask? Christians are the victims of shameful measures on the part of the government authorities; however, I will meet with them

confidently, since this is about your personal happiness.”

“Is your faith in this providence that great?” Lucinia asked with interest and gratitude.

“I have complete faith in it.”

And making an expressive gesture, as if she had remembered another option, she added:

“Listen, dear: since you have already told me about Celia’s predilection for this doctrine in spite of our family secret about it, why don’t you allow me the pleasure of her company? These meetings are held in the old catacombs on Via Nomentana and the place is quite far from here. I have complete trust in the success of these prayers and one time will be enough for peace to return to your home and your heart.”

Alba Lucinia felt comforted by her friend’s promises, considering her deep and contagious faith in the happy prospect of her domestic bliss, and added:

“I’ll think about it and we’ll talk about the details later. But if you need company, I should be the one.”

They separated with an affectionate kiss while the slender figure of Hateria quickly withdrew from behind a large Oriental curtain after hearing this unusual conversation.

Due to the Etruscan influence, ever since their origins, all classes in a society such as this one had turned to the invisible and the supernatural in the most diverse life situations. Thus, Alba Lucinia began to ponder the precious opportunity suggested by her childhood friend. Although she found comfort in the plan’s prospects, she spent the rest of the day between indecision and moral suffering.

She felt an impulse to go to Tibur to tear her husband away from all the dangers he was exposed to, but reason prevailed over all her anguished worries.

At night, she went to the home sanctuary while everyone was asleep, and kneeling at the altar of Juno, she tearfully implored the goddess to support her heart on the rugged paths of duty and virtue.

## 4

# On Nomentana Way

A week after the facts just described, we find Claudia Sabina at night on the terrace of her house in Rome speaking with Hateria in the closest intimacy.

“So, Hateria,” she said in a low voice after her accomplice’s long account, “it looks like my husband wants to make the accomplishment of my plans even easier. I never imagined that he could fall in love with someone outside his power circle.”

“Nevertheless, ma’am, one could deduce the sentiments in his soul in his every gesture, his every word.”

“No matter,” said the former plebeian, as if the matter bored her, “my husband isn’t the man I’m interested in. Your news means that luck is on my side.”

“Also,” Hateria reminded her, emphasizing the secrecy of those revelations, “Lucinia and Tulia have agreed to ask for a blessing at a Christian meeting so that Helvidius Lucius will return immediately from Tibur to become part of their domestic harmony again.”

Claudia let out a nervous laugh, and asked eagerly:

“Really? How did you find that out?”

“A week ago they exchanged confidences and yesterday evening they decided on a plan, although Lucinia is really discouraged. I think they’ll carry out their plan within four days.”

“Keep spying on them in order to find out what they’re going to do next.”

And making a malicious gesture, she said:

“Is it possible that those two don’t know about the imperial edicts meant to eliminate Christianity? What disregard for the laws! ... In any case, by doing this we will also contribute in some way for the authorities to deal with this new center of Christian activity. After your account, I’ll talk to Quintus Bibulus about it.”

Hateria and Claudia talked a while longer, going over the details of their criminal intentions and settling on the heinous plans proper to the case.

The next morning, a modest litter left the prefect’s palace carrying someone who was leaving the house in utmost secrecy.

It was Claudia Sabina who, dressed in very plain clothing, gave orders to be taken to Subura.

After an exhausting trip, she ordered her trusty slaves to wait in an agreed-upon place and entered the deserted, rundown alleys alone.

She came to a block of humble, tiny houses and stopped suddenly as if to make sure the location was correct. She saw a greenish house at a short distance, with a distinctive feature that set it apart from the others.

Lollius Urbicus’s wife smiled in satisfaction, and quickening her step, she knocked on the door with visible eagerness.

In a few minutes a very old woman with an evil demeanor, matted hair and heavy creases wrinkling her face answered with an expression of curiosity in her puffy little eyes. Assessing her visitor, who wore a plain but expensive toga along with a gold net holding her graceful, abundant hair, the old woman smiled happily, smelling the good financial situation of the customer seeking her services.

“Is this where Plotina, the old oracle of Cumae lives,” asked Claudia with thinly veiled modesty?

“Yes, ma’am, that would be me, at your service. Do come in! My humble home is honored by your visit.”

The prefect’s wife liked the flattering, feigned reception.

“I need your help,” said the visitor, slipping inside. “I’m here on the recommendation of one of my friends in Tibur.”

“I’m very grateful, ma’am. I hope I can live up to your expectations.”



“They told me I don’t need to reveal the purpose of my consultation. Is that right?”

“Absolutely.” said Plotina in her enigmatic voice. “My occult powers dispense with any explanation on your part.”

Sitting on an old divan, Sabina watched as the sorcerer fetched a tripod and placed a number of amulets next to it, lit by the dim light of a small torch to meet the needs of the moment. Next, after assuming a contemplative and restful pose, Plotina let her head drop between her hands. She displayed a ghostly pallor, as if her mysterious clairvoyance was about to grasp the most sinister mirages of the invisible planes.

Claudia Sabina followed her slightest movements with a singular curiosity between fear and surprise of the unknown; but before long, the face of the intermediary between this world and the forces of the invisible realm returned to normal. The nervous contractions in her face lessened and the expressions of profound fatigue that had escaped from her swollen lips ended.

With a serene and curious look, as if her soul had returned from mysterious places with the deepest revelations, she took Claudia’s aristocratic hands in hers and said in a discreet tone:

“The voices told me that you love a man who is bound to another woman through the most sacred ties of life. Why not avoid a tempest of bitterness now that will fall on your own destiny later? You have come here in search of advice that would guide your desires, but it would be better to abandon all the plans you have in mind!”

Claudia Sabina was frightened upon hearing this but objected vehemently:

“Plotina, I’ve heard about the vastness of your knowledge and I’ve come here to avail myself of it with absolute trust! If your vision can penetrate the past, try to focus on the only concern of my life in the present ... Help me! I shall reward your services royally!”

Claudia opened a moneybag and let several coins fall onto the tripod as if she were pouring out a cascade of sestercii while the old sorceress stared wide-eyed in the greed and ambition of her lower sentiments.

“Madam,” she said, eager to tap into the proceeds of such wide financial resources, “I have given you my initial advice, which is that from the wisdom that assists me; but I’m also human and I want to deserve your generosity. I

know the plans that are motivating you and I will try to help you so that you may bring them to fruition! ... However, I must inform you that your rival is assisted by an angelic figure, although I cannot say if this creature lives on the earth or in heaven. With my occult power, I saw the woman you hate haloed by the intense aura of an angel next to her.”

And as if she were fighting a duel with her conscience due to her consultant’s enviable financial situation, she added:

“We need to be very careful, ma’am. This celestial creature can defend your rival from any suffering that is outside her fate.”

“But how can that be?” asked Claudia Sabina, deeply impressed.

“Does your rival have any children? And among them, mightn’t there be one with a pure and pious heart?”

“Yes,” said Claudia, somewhat annoyed, “but I don’t know if one of her daughters meets that description. I haven’t come here for that, but for my own passionate interest. So why are you telling me about this angelic defense that I can’t comprehend?”

“Ma’am, I will help you with all my powers because I need money to meet a lot of pressing needs. But I must warn you that we risk wasting our efforts. An angel of God can fend off evil’s blows because suffering as we understand it doesn’t exist for their purified hearts. While worry and pain can drag ordinary souls into the whirlwind of the world’s passions and sufferings, the redeemed spirit has achieved the edification of faith that connects it to God Almighty. Earth cannot engender torment or despair for such blameless hearts, ma’am!”

Claudia listened to her remarks highly impressed, but remarked with her quick mind:

“Plotina, I choose not to believe in this defense. Instead, I shall accept the help of your occult powers, completely trusting in the success of my plans. Don’t make me wander with you in your philosophical digressions because I want to live my own reality. Tell me! What do you suggest for my happiness?”

“If that’s your decision, we’ll have to focus on the most concrete facts.”

“Do you think I should consider eliminating the woman I hate?”

“In your situation, and in your case, you must not think about killing her body, but about wounding her soul, since the only death that should be applied to an enemy is the one imposed outside the tomb while fully alive.”

“You’re right,” said Sabina, interested. “Your arguments are intelligent and practical. What do you suggest?”

Plotina paused at length, as if formulating another consultation before the tiny, flickering flame, and then added:

“Ma’am, you have already had the power to move the man you love to Tibur temporarily ... I must inform you that, before he retires to his palaces under construction in that city where he will spend the rest of his days, Emperor Aelius Hadrianus will make one last trip through the provinces following his known vocation ... You will be compelled to accompany his entourage, and that will be your chance to include the man of your affections.”

“Really?” asked Claudia visibly happy. “And what do you advise me to do?”

Plotina leaned forward, placed her lips close to Claudia’s ear and suggested a terrible criminal plan. The latter accepted it with a meaningful smile.

They continued talking for a long time, as if their minds were joined by the same principles, with the same intentions and purposes. As she said goodbye, Claudia assessed her new accomplice’s needs and promised her comfortable solutions after giving her all the money she had with her.

A few hours later, the same modest litter returned to Lollius Urbicus’s palace through the back gate.

Two days later, at Helvidius Lucius’s house, we find Alba Lucinia and her faithful friend discreetly conversing in the most secluded room in the house.

Tulia Cevina was in great spirits, in spite of the concern wandering in her eyes. Such was not the case of Helvidius’s wife, who was lying on a bed showing signs of deep weariness.

“Lucinia, my dear,” said Tulia affectionately, “I have been notified that the meeting will take place tonight. I am at your disposal for us to go without fear. We can leave early this evening.”

“Impossible,” replied the poor woman, visibly ill and emphasizing her words with pain-filled melancholy. “I feel deeply tired and drained! ... However, I have resolved in my heart that I will resort to those prayers! ... I need something supernatural to give me back my peace of mind. I can’t go on with this moral anguish that robs me of all my strength.” Bitter tears cut her saddened words.

“I’ll go anyway,” Tulia said embracing her. “I have faith that the new god will assist us in your situation of painful uncertainty!”

Noticing her gentle, constant dedication, Alba Lucinia warned:

“Dearest, I wouldn’t have any peace-of-mind knowing that you went alone. I’ll ask Celia to go with you.”

Tulia smiled happily while her friend told a young slave girl to call her daughter.

A moment later the girl, with her graceful profile, appeared.

“Celia,” said her mother emotionally and sadly, “could you go with Tulia this evening to a Christian meeting to say a prayer for your mother’s peace?”

The girl made a gesture of surprise, but a broad smile of happiness appeared on her lips.

“What wouldn’t I do for you, Mom?” And she kissed her.

Alba Lucinia felt the immense comfort of such tenderness, and added:

“Dearest, I feel tired and ill, and have decided to turn to Jesus Nazareth with your prayers. But it is really important that you do not speak about this to anyone, do you understand?” As if she were remembering her own sorrow, the young woman made an expressive gesture and said:

“Yes, Mom, I understand. Don’t worry. I’ll go with Tulia, wherever it is, to say the prayers you need! I’ll pray for Jesus to make you happy, and I hope that his infinite goodness will pour the soothing balm of his love, which fills us with life and joy, into your heart. Then you will see how new energies will bring you inner happiness.”

Tulia Cevina listened highly interested to such ideas, admiring the young woman’s knowledge, which Lucinia then explained as she embraced her daughter tenderly: “In Judea, Celia got to know firsthand the matters pertinent to Christianity. Although very young, she has already suffered a great deal.”

Perceiving that her mother's words were about to enter into the details of her grievous love affair, Celia said tenderly:

"Now Mom, how could I ever suffer if I always have your love with me?"

And changing the subject from her personal situation, she asked:

"What time should we leave?"

"Early this evening," said Tulia, "because the journey is rather long; the meeting is beyond Porta Nomentana."

"I'll be ready."

The three then made all the preparations they thought indispensable. At dusk, wearing plain togas, Tulia and Celia took a litter, which spared them the weariness of much of the trip through the most frequented points of the city.

They stopped at Porta Viminalis, and after dismissing the bearers, they began walking courageously.

The night unfolded its fan of darkness over the plains. It was cold, but the two friends wrapped their woolen capes around them, hiding their heads in the heavy, dark garment.

It was nighttime when they reached the ruins of the ancient wall that had fortified the region in times past, but they pressed on over the long roads without weariness.

After clearing Porta Nomentana, they found themselves facing some nearby hills lined with rows of deserted, gloomy cemeteries bathed in pale moonlight.

As they approached the spot where the preaching would take place, they noticed an increasing number of travelers who ventured along the same trails with identical purposes. Lines of figures covered in long dark tunics walked beside them quickly or slowly, some silent, others in almost imperceptible conversations. Many held small lanterns to show the way to their companions when the feeble light of the moon could not cut through the heavy darkness.

The social status of the two patricians in their very simple garments and heavy capes could not be identified by the others who were heading toward the same destination. They considered them to be Christians like themselves, united in the faith and in the same idealism.

Facing the earthen walls that surrounded large gravestones in ruins, Tulia made sure they were in the right place by making the characteristic sign of the cross to two Christians who stood at the entryway. These two individuals received the password from all the converts, a password that consisted of that sign traced with an open hand in a way that was special but very easy to imitate. Then they both entered the cemetery without further ado.

Inside, a crowd was settling down on makeshift benches; nearly all of them covered their faces, some fearing the night's intense cold, others the traitorous wolves who might turn up there wearing the masks of sheep.

The moonlight that bathed the enclosure was aided by the light of torches and lanterns, especially around a mound of burial ruins from where the apostle of that group of Christ's followers would speak.

Here and there, someone mumbled a quiet prayer as if talking to the Lamb of Heaven on the altar of the heart; but hymns full of sublime religious exaltation rose from the center of the crowd. They were songs of hope, touched with the singular despondency of the world, portraying the Christian dream of a wonderful kingdom beyond the clouds. In each verse and each tonality of the voices singing together, notes of painful sorrow predominated from those who had abandoned all earthly illusions and fantasies and had surrendered to the renunciation of all pleasures, of all life's assets, to await the luminous rewards of Jesus in the heavenly beatitudes ...

On the makeshift benches of rough wood or discarded stones sat hundreds of people concentrated in deep reflection.

A profound silence had fallen over everyone when a rotting platform was carried to the place where most of the lights were centered.

Celia and Tulia took the seats that seemed most appropriate, and in a few minutes another song rose to the Infinite in vibrations of unspeakable beauty ... It was the hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord for his inexhaustible mercy, each verse describing Jesus' examples and martyrdom with a sentiment imbued with the highest inspiration.

Tulia Cevina was overcome with wonder when she suddenly heard her companion lift up her clear voice to join in the Christians' song as if she knew it by heart. Maximus Cunctator's wife could not hide her emotions as Celia sang, as if she were a bird exiled from Paradise! ... Her serene eyes were fixed on the firmament, where she seemed to envision the land of her blessings among the stars that twinkled in the sky like loving smiles in the

night. Those verses, inspired by the music particular to them, left her lips with such melodic richness that her friend was moved to tears and felt transported to a divine realm.

Yes, Celia knew that song that filled her heart with tender memories. Cyrus had taught it to her under the shady trees of Palestine so that her soul would know how to interpret the recognition of God in her hours of happiness. At that moment, in communion with all those souls who echoed her faith, she felt distant from the earth, as if her own soul had been touched by divine joy.

When silence fell again, a man of the people named Sergius Hostilius approached the make-shift podium. After opening a roll of parchment, he said movingly:

“My brethren, tonight we are going to study the Master’s teachings from Matthew on the topic: ‘Those who are the true brothers of the Messiah!’”

And unrolling a sheet faded with time, Sergius Hostilius read slowly:

*While Jesus was still preaching to the crowd, his mother and brothers in the faith were outside, wishing to speak with him. Then someone said to him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” Answering those who had alerted him, the Master said: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And extending his hand to all his disciples and followers, he said, “These are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother, my sister and mother.”*

After the Gospel reading, the same companion in faith at the podium said, deeply moved:

“My friends, I lack the gift of eloquence to deliver the teaching; therefore, I would invite one of our bothers here to offer tonight’s invaluable commentary.”

All eyes, including Tulia Cevina’s, looked around anxiously, seeking the venerable figure of Polycarp, the selfless apostle of all these meetings. Tulia Cevina noted his absence with great disappointment because of the faith of his prayers and his wise and benevolent words. But Sergius Hostilius explained in a voice touched with sorrow: “My brethren, your eyes are anxiously looking for Polycarp, but before I give you news of him, let us lift our hearts up to the One who did not despise scorn and sacrifice ...

“The apostle of our faith, despite his sanctified age, was taken yesterday morning by order of Subprefect Quintus Bibulus to the Esquiline prison!

“Let us implore the mercy of Jesus so that we may accept the cup of our sorrows with resignation and humility.”

Several women began to weep over the absence of that great man, whom they loved as a father. After a few minutes, in which no one ventured to replace his wise and loving teaching, a plebeian walked to the podium, uncovered his head and made the sign of the cross, filled with religious fervor.

The light from the torches lit his facial features and Celia and her companion immediately recognized the humble and determined face.

The man was Nestorius, Helvidius’s freedman, who, while helping the censor Fabius Cornelius in the very office of the prefecture of the Praetorians, was not ashamed to give public testimony of his faith.



# 5

## Preaching the Gospel

Greeted by everyone's eager and trusting looks, Nestorius began to speak with moving sincerity:

“Brethren, I know that, in my spiritual poverty, I could never replace Polycarp's heart on this platform, but the sacred fire of faith must be kept in our souls!

“In assuming responsibility for speaking here tonight, I recall my childhood to tell you that I saw John, the Lord's apostle, who illuminated the church at Ephesus for so many years!

“In raptures of faith, the great evangelist spoke to us of heaven and of his comforting visions ... His soul was in constant contact with the Master, from whom he received divine inspiration as his last disciple on earth, sanctifying himself with his lessons and his words with the sublime breath of heavenly truths!

“I evoke such distant memories to bring to mind that the Lord is infinite mercy. In my material and moral poverty, I have lived only because of his inexhaustible goodness and I wish to call on his charitable aid for my heart at this moment.

“Ever since I was a child, my eyes have been focused on the sublime teachings of his love, and it also seems to me that I have seen him in his apostolate of light for our redemption on the dark face of the earth. Sometimes, as if driven by a mechanism of wonderful emotions, I have the sweet impression of still seeing him<sup>2</sup> by Lake Tiberius, teaching truth and love, humility and salvation! ... I often imagine that those clear and sacred waters are singing a hymn of eternal hope in my heart, and despite the thick veils of my blindness, I feel that I can see him in Nazareth or Capernaum, in Caesarea or Bethsaida, gathering the straying sheep into his fold.

“Yes, my brethren, the Master has never abandoned us in his divine ministry. His piercing gaze will search out sinners in the most obscure hideaway of iniquity, and it is through his infinite tenderness that we can walk unharmed on the paths of crime and adversity!”

Nestorius spoke at length about his most cherished memories: his childhood in Greece; John the Evangelist’s sweet descriptions to his dear disciples; the Lord’s preaching and examples; his own visions in the heavenly realms; his memories of Johannes the Presbyter, to whom the unforgettable apostle had entrusted the manuscripts of his gospel – all of this was explained to the gathering in the most vivid and impressive colors.

The congregation listened to him, deeply moved, as if their spirits, transported to the past on the wings of imagination, were contemplating all the events related to the narrative. Even Tulia Cevina, who knew Christianity only superficially, was deeply touched. As for Celia, she welcomed him happily, admiring his courage and faith in light of his substantial and promising position with her father. At the same time, she thought about the fact that he had never revealed his beliefs, even in the classes that he taught her, evidencing the respect he felt for others’ beliefs.

After relating his reminiscences of Ephesus with its most eminent figures, Nestorius made his commentary on that night’s reading:

“Referring to tonight’s gospel topic, let us remember that Jesus could not condemn the human and sacrosanct bonds of family; but his words, uttered for eternity, cover and will cover all situations and all future centuries to show that fraternity is his aim, and that all of us, men, women and groups, collectivities and peoples, are members of one universal community, a fraternity that will join us all together as beloved brothers and sisters forever.

“His teachings referred to those who, in fulfilling the sovereign and just will of the Father in heaven, march in the forefront along human pathways toward his kingdom of love, full of imperishable beauty!

“Those who can heed the will of God in this world with humility and tolerance, with resignation and love, will arrive more quickly to the One who was revealed to us a hundred years ago as *the Way, the Truth and the Life!* Those loving and righteous spirits, who have been illuminated within by the understanding and application of the teachings throughout their lives, will be closer to his merciful heart, whose sacred beating impacts our own being through the infinite benevolence we feel surrounding our souls in all the

footsteps of this life! ... These individuals are his closest brothers and sisters since this very moment, through the Gospel illumination in the fulfillment of the laws of love and forgiveness.

“Therefore, from these prodigious lights of the Truth, we feel compelled to extend the concept of family in the universal realm, ridding ourselves of the criminal selfishness that sometimes takes our hearts by surprise, creating the seeds of discord and suffering in our own homes.

“If the individual is a divine particle of the collectivity, then the home is the sacred cell of the entire structure of civilization. A person divorced from the good, and a home poisoned by deviations of sentiments, cause the particular imbalances that torment the nations!

“Jesus knew all our needs and evaluated our situation, not only concerning the era that is now passing, but all ages to come.

“I do not believe that the Gospel can be fully understood in our bitter times of decadence and debauchery; however, while the most powerful forces in the world are concentrated in this empire filled with pride and impiety, other profound energies are working in its tormented organism in preparation for the advent of future civilizations.

“At present, Roman eagles dominate every region and sea; but the day will come when those symbols of ambition and tyranny will fall from their pedestals in a tempest of ashes and darkness! ... Other peoples will be called to direct the movements of the world. But while the aggressive spirit of war remains among humankind like a monster of ruin and blood, it is a sign that human beings have not changed inwardly to become pure and peaceful brothers and sisters of the Master.

“The earth will go through its evolutionary phases of pain and sorrowful experiences until the perfect understanding of the Messiah blossoms throughout the world for every soul.

“Until now, Christianity has flourished with the tears and blood of its martyrs; but the spirits of the Lord, whose voices I heard in my youth during the sacred meetings at the church of Ephesus, assured John’s disciples that it would not take long for Christ’s proselytism to be called on to collaborate in the political spheres of the world to dispel the darkness and confusion of its web of deceit ...

“At that time, brothers and sisters, perhaps the doctrine of the Master might experience the insults of those who navigate the vast ocean of earthly powers, full of vanity and despotism. It is possible that turbulent and hardened spirits might try to subvert the values of our faith, distorting it with the externalities of polytheism; but woe to those who attempt this, in light of the truths that guide and comfort us!

“In the efforts of our faith, let us never forget the Lord’s exhortation to the women of Jerusalem who wept at seeing him bent under the infamous cross: ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me! Weep for yourselves and for your children, because the days will come when they will say: Blessed are the barren; blessed are the wombs that have never borne and the breasts that have never nursed! All men will say to the mountains: Fall on us! And to the hills: Cover us! Because if this is what they do with the green wood, what will they then do with the dry?’

“Woe to those who have committed abuses in the name of the One who watches us from heaven and knows our innermost thoughts, because later, as he promised, the light from on High will be poured out on all flesh and the voice from heaven will be heard on the earth through the sweetest teachings and the loftiest prophecies! If human beings fail, hosts of his angels will come to us, attesting to his mercy ...

“Brothers and sisters, the kingdom of Jesus must be founded on hearts, on souls, and can never be reconciled in this world with any political expression of the human selfishness and doctrines of violence that structure the nations of the world!

“The Lord’s kingdom will suffer ‘the abomination in the holy place’ for a long time due to people’s erroneous interpretation, but the time will come when humanity, today decadent and corrupt, will feel its march towards a glorious and free Jerusalem! ...

“Let us keep the conviction that Jesus’ kingdom is not to be found in the temples or material manuscripts that time will destroy in its relentless passage, but that the divine foundations must be built within each individual so that each soul can build it by itself at the expense of effort and tears on the pathway to glorious dwellings in the Infinite, where, after the journey, we will await the blessings of the Lamb of God, who sacrificed himself on the cross to redeem us from misery and sin!”

After a prayer, Nestorius finished under the loving, deeply touched looks of those who had followed his flowing words through his evangelical considerations.

Some of the listeners wept with emotion, joining the speaker's sentiments with their own.

In these early assemblies, when the messianic doctrine was permeated with pure and simple teachings, the presenter of the Good Tidings was required to elucidate evangelical points in relation to the practical life of anyone who was in doubt.

Thus, after the sermon, several believers approached the speaker and asked for his fraternal and simple opinion.

"My friend," asked one of the students of the Gospel, "how do we explain the considerable differences between the Gospels of Matthew and John, or between Luke's narratives and Paul's epistles? Weren't they all apostles of the Christian teaching and inspired by the Holy Spirit?"

"Yes," explained Nestorius, "but we must realize that Jesus gave each worker a task. Luke and Matthew show us the shepherd of Israel leading the lost sheep into the fold of truth and life, whereas Paul and John show us the divine Christ, the Son of the Living God in his sublime universalist mission to redeem the world."

"Nestorius," interjected another, less focused on inner peace through meditation and study, "what will become of me, victimized as I am by the gossip and slander of my neighbors? ... I want to learn and grow in faith, but this increasing calumny doesn't let me." "Do you think you can get to Jesus by allowing yourself to be imprisoned by the opinions of the world?!" Helvidius's freedman explained solicitously. "The science of living rightly resides not only in our not being bothered by the thoughts and acts of others, but also in allowing others to be constantly interested in our lives."

"Master," cried out an elderly and sad looking woman, addressing the former slave, "my sufferings are overflowing the cup! ... Pray for me so that Jesus will answer my pleas!"

"Sister," Nestorius replied somewhat vehemently, "have you forgotten that Jesus counseled us never to call each other 'master'? I am nothing but a humble servant of his servants, unworthy to wipe the dust off the sandals of the one and only Divine Master. Don't give in to sorrows and lamentations,

because in matters of faith, you alone can give Jesus testimony of your love and trust. Besides, we have to remember that earth is not Paradise, and we have to be attentive to the Messiah's counsel that to achieve heavenly happiness we must humbly take up our cross and follow him."

Just then, Nestorius recognized Celia and Tulia breaking through the crowd of believers to approach him respectfully. Taken by surprise, the freedman greeted them as the young woman spoke to him with joyful, friendly words.

"Nestorius," asked Celia, beaming, "why didn't you ever tell me of your convictions, of your faith?"

"Child, in spite of my Christian fervor, I couldn't disdain the principles of the family that gave me my freedom."

Both were cheerful and happy, enjoying the contentment of mutual fellowship in the faith, when an even greater surprise jolted their souls. While most of their companions had started down the road back to the city because dawn was approaching, a strong, kindly young man stood out from all the groups. He approached the podium with eyes shining with eagerness and joy. He held out his arms to Nestorius and Celia, while the freedman and the young patrician exclaimed at the same time, touched with emotion and profound joy:

"Cyrus! ... Cyrus!"

"Father! Celia!"

The young man tried to hold them both in the same embrace of love and happiness.

Tulia Cevina watched this moving scene with her heart in sudden dread. Alba Lucinia had told her about her daughter's personal heartbreak, and now it was hard for Maximus's wife to accept the fact that she had led the young woman to that meeting of unpredictable consequences.

Polycarp's absence prevented her from requesting a prayer for her friend's domestic happiness according to her belief, and the fact that they had encountered Nestorius when she preferred her presence there to be a secret, as well as the unexpected meeting with Cyrus, were events that profoundly disturbed her. But Celia was radiant and unable to express her joy in finding out that Nestorius was her spiritual betrothed's father. She introduced the

young man, whom the patrician woman was obliged to greet respectfully under the circumstances.

The former slave embraced his son with his eyes wet with tears, sending Jesus his deep gratitude. He expressed genuine surprise in learning that his son was also a freedman of Helvidius Lucius, which increased his thankfulness to his liberators.

And while everyone was leaving, the group conversed with increased interest.

To a question from Celia, the young man explained that he had been delivered to the commander Quintus Vetus, a personal friend of Helvidius, at the port of Caesarea. The man had insisted that he remain free and took him to the coasts of Campania with exceptional kindness. From there, a boat brought him to Ostia with the crew, at which point he decided to stay in Rome in the vague hope of obtaining news of his father or the one who had filled his heart with loving and everlasting memories.

Celia smiled happily in that lonely and sad cemetery, feeling like the most blessed of all women.

The moonlight, however, had disappeared. Only the stars in the dark cloak of the firmament shone with brighter scintillations, foretelling the dawn.

Tulia Cevina then recalled the importance of heading back as soon as possible.

Nestorius had an immense desire to hear his son about all the events of the past in order to find out the minutest details of their long and grievous separation. However, noticing his son's intimacy with the young patrician, he held back his many words and remained expectant and calm, although by now he divined the love of these two who had barely left their adolescence. The former slave maintained his reserve, and while Tulia Cevina seemed apprehensive, the two young people spoke of their memories or their hopes in Jesus all the way back under the friendly light of the stars turning pale in the firmament.

Mixed in with those who were returning to the city, one could now see carefree happy country folk heading toward the small urban area in the early morning hours, carrying produce from their fields to the open markets. However, no one in our characters' group noticed the two figures that

followed them with close attention, albeit unrecognizable because of the hoods covering their faces.

Nestorius and Cyrus accompanied the two patricians to the vicinity of Helvidius Lucius's residence, where Tulia Cevina would also stay in keeping with their pre-established plan. Father and son returned along the same route until they reached Porta Salaria, where they entered the father's apartment.

It was there that Nestorius, completely sleepless due to the emotions of that night, listened to his son's story, realizing that a new phase of sacrifices was about to be imposed on him because of the circumstances in play.

The sun had spread its rays of gold everywhere, when Helvidius's freedman, somewhat downhearted, despite the joy of seeing his beloved son again, embraced him and said tenderly:

"Son, I rejoice in the Lord for the happiness of finding you free and safe, and with your thoughts illuminated by our deep hope in Jesus Christ. But as a loving and devoted father, I fear for you henceforth.

"I believe that, despite the faith you have shown me, you were unable to control your young, idealistic heart at the right moment. Since you already understood life as you do now, you should have recognized the futility of any fantasy regarding the transitory happiness of the world! ... On the other hand, I commend you for your honest behavior and I rejoice in your efforts to sanctify your love.

"I am of the opinion that we are now being called to the most painful testimonies of moral courage, because Celia's family would never, ever tolerate any of your aspirations ...

"But rest now, son! You need energy and repose! As for me, sleep would be impossible ... I'll use the time to go to Velabrum where, following your instructions, I will have your belongings sent here. At the same time, I'll tell Censor Fabius Cornelius that I cannot come in to work today."

And emphasizing his words with a happy smile, he concluded:

"From now on, we will always be together for the same task and we shall stay here as long as Jesus allows it."

Cyrus kissed his hands tenderly in reply.

Before heading to Velabrum – one of Rome's poorest and most populous neighborhoods – the freedman looked for the praetorian Prefecture. He met



with lictor Domitius Fulvius, a man of trust among the Prefecture's commanders, and asked him to tell the censor about his absence that day. Then, he made the arrangements for his son's move to his home to be completed as soon as possible.

He felt apprehensive and anguished in light of the events; however, he put his faith above everything else, praying to Jesus to grant him the needed inspiration to resolve all the problems.

Meanwhile, Tulia Cevina, somewhat disappointed, told her friend in the morning about the remarkable events that had occurred. Alba Lucinia listened to her, highly surprised, her heart filled with bitter expectations. She called her daughter into her private room, but noticing her calmness and receiving her promise that she would follow her father's orders to the letter, she tried to reassure herself in order to lessen her own grief.

When he arrived at his office mid-morning, Fabius Cornelius was immediately approached by Pausanias, who, in Rome, was still head of the servants in his son-in-law's house. After bowing respectfully, he said to him:

"Honorable Censor, I have come in obedience to a sacred command of the gods in order to inform you of serious events that occurred last night."

"What do you mean? What serious events?" asked Helvidius's father-in-law, visibly concerned.

Pausanias told him everything that had happened, stating that he had followed the two women due to his loving zeal concerning all matters relating to his master's name and position. He saturated his assertions with flattering and exaggerated expressions to bolster his authority and prestige.

"Nestorius a Christian?" asked the censor, surprised. "I find that hard to believe."

"Sir, for the love of Jupiter, I'm telling the truth!" Pausanias answered with his humble attitude in front of someone more powerful.

"Helvidius acted too hastily," said the proud patrician as if talking to himself, "giving such a man so much responsibility in our sphere of work; however, I will take all the steps that the case requires before the day is over, and I thank you for your outstanding service."

Pausanias left and Fabius Cornelius, aware of the romance between Cyrus and his granddaughter, gave way to his rage against the two former

slaves that had come to disturb his domestic tranquility.

Due to the absence of his son-in-law, who was still in Tibur, he took all the measures he deemed necessary, following without hesitation the fulfillment of his personal decisions in the matter.

In the early afternoon, a detachment of praetorians, in compliance with orders issued from the imperial justice, arrived at the collective dwelling where father and son were staying.

Upon being summoned, the two freedmen understood the gravity of the situation, concluding that someone had reported and betrayed them. They embraced each other in a mutual prayer as if they wished to renew their trust and faith in Divine Providence. They promised each other the utmost courage and resignation in the grievous trials they saw ahead.

Standing with the soldiers, Nestorius calmly asked the lictor in command:

“What do you want from me, Pomponius?”

“Nestorius,” replied the leader, his personal acquaintance and friend, “I have come on behalf of Censor Fabius Cornelius. He has ordered your arrest as well as your son’s and has advised us to use utmost precaution to prevent your escape.”

Unrolling a parchment, he showed them the handwritten order, to which the freedman replied:

“Did you really think we would resist? Put your order and your sword away because the best weapon does not belong to the one who orders, but to the one who knows how to obey.”

That being said, the prisoners positioned themselves in front of the soldiers and headed for the Prefecture, where the censor made a point of interrogating his former aide alone.

Separated from Cyrus, who was taken to a holding cell under the watch of the praetorians, Nestorius was led to a large room, where minutes later the old Roman arrived showing the wrath of his wounded power in his eyes.

“Nestorius,” he said rudely, “I have been informed of serious incidents that occurred last night. I cannot assess this situation without having met with you face-to-face so that you can deny the accusations brought to my authority.”

“Question me, sir,” said the former captive with respectful calm, “and I will answer with the sincerity of my character.”

“Are you a Christian?” asked the censor with deep interest.

“Yes, by the grace of God.”

“What nonsense!” retorted Fabius Cornelius, scandalized. “Why have you deceived us like this? Do you think it right to mock the consideration we have shown you? Is this how you repay the esteem and trust given you?”

“Sir,” replied the former captive with sorrow, “I have always had the greatest respect for the positions and beliefs of others; as for having deceived you, I ask permission to better clarify your statements, because no one until now has demanded any declaration from me concerning my religious convictions.”

Fabius Cornelius understood the serenity of the man standing before him and realized it would be useless to resort to this or that measure to obtain a denial as a remedy to the sensitive situation between the two of them. Looking him up and down with great haughtiness, he stressed forcefully:

“I consider your statements an affront to my authority as well as the utmost ingratitude toward someone who offered you the hand of a benefactor and friend.”

“But sir, could it be an insult to tell the truth?” asked Nestorius, anxious to be understood.

“Do you realize the punishment that awaits you?” retorted the old censor sullenly.

“I cannot fear bodily punishment if I have a clear and edified conscience.”

“This is too much! Your words are those of an intractable and odious slave! ... Enough! I shall tell Helvidius about your despicable behavior.”

And calling Pomponius Gratus to record Nestorius’s statement, the proud patrician stomped out of the room. Nestorius was obliged to declare his condition as follower and propagandist of Christianity, reaffirming that he was Cyrus’s father and providing other information in order to satisfy the authorities with a disclosure of his background.

“Nestorius,” said Pomponius Gratus, assuming an air of importance in his role as investigator for the case, “you must be aware that your statements

will form the basis for a procedure whose result will be your condemnation. You know that the Emperor has been fair and magnanimous to all those who timely repent of unreasonable and unfortunate attitudes like yours. Why not renounce this sorcery right now?"

"To deny the Christian faith would be to betray my conscience," replied the freedman calmly. "Moreover, I have done nothing that would induce me to repentance."

"Weren't you a slave? Because you came from such a painful and miserable condition, why not give up your personal ideas as a sign of gratitude to those who have given you your freedom?"

"While a slave, I never ceased to cultivate the truth as the best way to honor my masters; even so, I always bore another gentle and light yoke – that of Jesus. And now I believe that the divine Lord is calling me to bear witness!"

"You are digging the grave of your evils with your own hands," said the lictor with indifference.

And emphasizing his words with the deepest curiosity, he added:

"Now, it is your duty to tell me where these assemblies meet so that the authorities can carry out their campaign to rid the city of its most dangerous elements."

"Pomponius Gratus," replied Nestorius loftily, "I cannot inform you in that regard, because sincere followers of Jesus do not know betrayal, nor do they deny the responsibility of their faith by accusing their brothers and sisters."

The lictor became angry and retorted bitterly:

"Do you not fear the punishments that will force you to do so in due time?"

"Not at all. Called to bear witness to Jesus Christ, we cannot fear worldly circumstances."

Pomponius, however, made an expressive gesture as if recalling other means, and emphasized:

"Well, we have other methods for finding those foolish conspirators. Later today, right here, we will hear those who gave us the proper information about you."

“Yes,” replied the freedman, undisturbed. “They will be able to better explain the justice of the Empire.”

Immediately thereafter, a group of armed soldiers came out of the Prefecture and escorted the two defendants to the Mamertine Prison, where they were put in one of the dampest dungeons.

It was not only the information coming from Pausanias, whom the lictor Pomponius Gratus, as authorized by the censor Fabius Cornelius, had made a point of calling to facilitate the investigations, that added to the case.

That same day, as the shadows of twilight fell, a figure entered the residence of Lollius Urbicus to make the same accusation.

It was Hateria who, independently from Pausanias, had also gone to the catacombs to carry out her heinous activities, putting into play her skill and cunning to inform Claudia Sabina of everything that had occurred.

So, before she returned to Tibur after a week of rest at home, the former plebeian notified Quintus Bibulus about the Christian gatherings beyond Porta Nomentana, painting terrorist pictures to exacerbate the fear of conspiracies that characterized the political administrators of that time.

Several praetorian detachments appeared at the abandoned cemetery at the next meeting.

Hundreds of arrests were made.

The dark dungeons of Capitolinus and the prisons of Esquilinus were filled, and the most serious aspect was that among the prisoners were people from all social classes. Enraged, the Emperor ordered that individual prosecutions be instituted in order to determine isolated responsibilities, designating numerous dignitaries of the Court for this essential inquiry.

Aelius Hadrianus never proceeded like Nero, who ordered the extermination of Christians without considering the guilt of each individual according to the law in compliance with the juridical evolution of the Roman Empire; but neither did he ever pardon the followers of Christ who had the moral courage not to betray their faith before his authority or that of his agents.

The investigations began, terrible and grim.

Families in desperate sorrow flocked to the prisons, begging for mercy from the torturers.

Those who recanted their belief in Jesus before the image of Jupiter Capitolinus, swearing eternal fidelity to him, could freely return home and recover the benefits of life and liberty. Those who did not prostrate themselves before the Roman idol and kept their unwavering Christian faith could expect whipping and perhaps death.

Of more than three hundred individuals, only thirty-five affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ with unshakable sincerity and fervor.

For these, the prison doors closed without pity and without hope. Among the convicted were Nestorius and his son who, faithful to Jesus, rested in his merciful purpose, convinced that any sacrifice for his cause was an open door to light and freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference to the book *Two Thousand Years Ago*, when Nestorius, incarnated as the proud Senator Publius Lentulus, met Jesus face to face. – Tr.

## 6

# Visit to the Jail

The news of these events reverberated in Helvidius Lucius's home, giving way to the saddest worries and the most distressing forebodings.

Despite the faith that strengthened her heart, young Celia felt the most profound anguish. Her only consolation was the possibility of listening to her paternal grandfather, who by this time was avidly reading the Gospels and Paul's letters, harboring within him the same faith that had already illumined so many heroes and martyrs. Both of them spent hours on end out on the Aventine palace terrace in loving confidences, watching the long clear ribbon of the Tiber, or rapt in contemplating the skies. The venerable Cneius Lucius comforted her forlorn heart with his wise and experienced words. They now cited the same gospel texts, simultaneously expressing analogous opinions.

As for Alba Lucinia, after hearing her elderly father's forceful reprimands concerning Pausanias's accusations, she felt more comforted in the certainty that her husband would return soon and definitively to their home in obedience to unexpected orders from the Imperial Government.

The poor woman attributed this joy to the prayers of Tulia and her daughter. She thanked the new god in her innermost soul, for Helvidius's return would be a balm for her tormented heart.

Indeed, a few days later the tribune did return to his household with a sigh of satisfaction and relief after having fully complied with all the obligations that had bound him to the place of Caesar's predilections.

The patrician was painfully surprised when told about Nestorius and his behavior, and he earnestly wanted to get the former slave out of his delicate situation. But when Helvidius Lucius found out that Nestorius was also the father of Cyrus, who had resurfaced in Rome to aggravate his moral concerns, he made a gesture of astonishment and disbelief. Nevertheless, he listened to

his father-in-law's whole story, deeply offended by his wife's behavior in allowing their daughter to attend a meeting that, in his opinion, was condemnable.

Alba Lucinia, however, knew how to accept all his reprimands with the humility necessary for domestic harmony. Instead of displeasing him even more by complaining, she silenced her anguish. She hid Lollius Urbicus's hateful behavior as well as her fears concerning Claudia Sabina, arising from Tulia's confidences that had deeply wounded her heart. The noble woman, with her high virtues of devotion to the home and her reflection on life's general problems, performed true miracles of love and dedication to restore her beloved husband's peace-of-mind.

The day after his return, Helvidius Lucius made arrangements to meet Nestorius at the Mamertine prison.

Cyrus's appearance in the Empire's capital seemed unfathomable to him. He could not believe that his trusted freedman, whose behavior had won his greatest sympathy, could be the father of a man he detested. Thus, he wanted to find out the truth for himself. If it turned out that what had happened was not true after all, he would employ all his personal prestige with the Emperor to avoid the prisoner's martyrdom and death.

Reality, however, would contradict his intentions, without any trace of illusion.

When he arrived at the prison, he managed to obtain from Sixtus Plocius, the official who supervised the establishment, an unconditional license to meet with the prisoner according to his wishes.

Soon, he was going down hallways and descending underground stairways that flanked filthy cells, where there was a terrible and clamorous lack of light. It was not long before he found Nestorius and his son. Both were gaunt and disfigured to the point that, perhaps because of the young man's physical weakness or because of the darkness, the patrician did not recognize Cyrus right away. He addressed the freedman in these terms, which deeply moved him:

"Nestorius, I know why you are here, but because I was so astonished when told what had happened, I didn't hesitate to come here to hear you out personally!"



His words carried a tone of sensitivity and wounded sympathy that fell like a soothing balm on the former slave's heart.

"Sir," he replied respectfully, "I thank you from the bottom of my soul for your benevolent gesture ... There are madmen and lepers in these cells; nevertheless, you didn't hesitate to bring a word of compassion and comfort to your miserable servant!"

"Nestorius," continued Helvidius with kindly esteem, "my father-in-law told me some things about you that I find hard to believe, despite his honor as a public figure and his paternal interest in me."

At this point, father and son looked anxiously at the man who might hold their freedom in his hands. Cyrus was huddling in a corner in dread of Helvidius Lucius's suspicious gaze.

The tribune continued:

"I could not wholly accept what they told me, so I came here to find out for myself from your personal testimony."

And accentuating his words, he asked abruptly:

"Are you really a Christian?"

"Yes, sir," uttered Nestorius, as if answering uneasily in light of such benevolence. "I promised Jesus in the tabernacle of my conscience not to deny my faith at any time."

The tribune rubbed his face in a typical gesture when vexed, and added in a hurt tone:

"I never imagined that I had placed a Christian in the privacy of my home; even so, I have come here sincerely willing to plead for your freedom."

"I thank you, sir, with all my heart and I shall never forget your intentions," added Nestorius with sorrowful serenity.

"Because of my interest in your fate," continued Helvidius uncomfortably, "I sought Senator Quirinus Brutus, who has been commissioned by the imperial authority to conduct the investigation involving Christian agitators. He told me just yesterday that thirteen of those who were involved have received a sentence of perpetual banishment and twenty-two have been sentenced to death by torture."

Despite their religious fervor, both prisoners turned pale.

Helvidius Lucius, however, remained unperturbed.

Among the latter, I saw your name and the name of a young man whom they said was your son. What do you say to all this? Wouldn't you be willing to renounce a faith that will bring you nothing but an infamous death by the most atrocious torture? And this other man here – is he really your son? Tell me something to enlighten me or that will give me what I need for a just defense.”

“Sir,” said the freedman, invoking all his energies so as not to fail in his testimony, “my gratitude for your kind interest will be everlasting! Your words touch every fiber of my heart! As I listen to you, I feel I should follow you with humility and submission on every pathway. But it is also out of love that I cannot give up my faith for the temptation of freedom! ... Jesus exerts a divine and gentle yoke over me ... Although I have great esteem for you, sir, I cannot betray Jesus in the current circumstances of my life ... If the pure and innocent Master of Nazareth let himself be sacrificed on the cross for the redemption of all the sinners of this world, why would I excuse myself from sacrifice, when I am full of the mire of sin? I could never, in good conscience, renounce a faith that has been the light of my soul for my whole life! ... I do not fear death, because beyond martyrdom and the grave, an immortal dawn shines for our spirits!”

Helvidius Lucius listened in amazement to that demonstration of hope in a spiritual life that his mind was far from comprehending. Nestorius continued to speak, now resting his moist, tender eyes on the young man that accompanied him.

“On the other hand, sir, I am a father, and as a father I am still very human! Don't be concerned about me. I am useless and sick, and being sentenced to death for the cause of Jesus is like a divine blessing! ... But if possible, save my son, so that he can live to serve you!”

Cyrus followed his father's attitude with the same spirit of fervor and decisiveness, desirous to protest against that request and show that he too preferred death. But the freedman continued amid barely restrained tears, addressing the tribune, who listened to him eminently impressed:

“Sir, I know all about the anguished and painful past and I regret my son's behavior at your house in Antipatris ... But I ask your forgiveness for the mishaps of his youth! ... My poor Cyrus yielded to the impulsiveness of his heart without listening to the reason that should have counseled him. But

in the anguish of these dark dungeons he gave me his word that if he returns to freedom, he will never again lay eyes on that lovely child, who is an angel of heaven in your home ... If you command it, sir, Cyrus will leave Rome forever so that he will never again disturb your domestic bliss!”

However, Helvidius Lucius’s face was hardened, showing that he had made an unyielding decision.

From the purest benevolence, he turned to the most violent refusal due to the presence of his former slave of Antipatris, someone his principles could never, ever tolerate.

“Nestorius,” he said almost rudely, “you know the sympathy you have always inspired in me, but if I never imagined you to be a Christian and conspirator, even less could I have believed that you could have fathered a man like this. As you know, I cannot intervene for both of you ... Certain trees sometimes die because the branches are rotten! ... I came here to rescue you, but I found a reality that is unbearable to me. So I would rather forget about both of you.”

“Sir ...” said the freedman as if he wanted to save their friendship, asking him for forgiveness in order to die in the certainty that the tribune had acknowledged his sincere gratitude.

Helvidius Lucius, however, cast an angry look at both of them, adjusted his toga to leave and concluded impulsively:

“Impossible!”

That said, he turned his back on the prisoners, called the two guards that had accompanied him and left hurriedly. The two condemned men’s gaze followed his steady, austere bearing, straining their ears to hear his final steps on the tiles of the prison as if they were watching for the last time the hope that could bring them their freedom.

Nestorius’s throat was choked up, but a cloud of tears fell as if to alleviate his sorrows, while Cyrus threw himself at his feet, kissing his hands and saying:

“Father! Father!”

Both longed to return to the bright sunshine of life, to feel the emotions of nature, but the stifling environment of the prison was asphyxiating.

The following afternoon, Sixtus Plocius, who had received orders from the imperial court, removed the thirteen prisoners destined to perpetual exile and placed the others in a less gloomy, more spacious cell.

The two freedmen were taken from their cell and put together with the other prisoners.

The new cell was also underground, but from one of its sides the sky could be seen through the reinforced bars.

Twilight descended, spilling its wonderful hues over the city, and all those tormented hearts, seized with infinite joy, contemplated the houses and the horizon.

Far above, the first stars appeared on the dark blue screen of the firmament.

Polycarp, the venerable preacher of Porta Nomentana, who had been brought from Esquilinus to Capitolinus in order to be reunited with his companions, made the sign of the cross in the air with his calloused and wrinkled hand ... Then, all the brethren of the faith – among whom were a few women – knelt down. Gazing up at the beautiful, starry Roman sky, they began to sing hymns of devotion and joy, hopes in verse that would ascend to Jesus, conveying the love and trust of those resigned hearts, who lived captivated by the sweet promises of his Kingdom ...

Gradually the voices rose, harmonious and clear, in stanzas of hosannas and hope! Imperceptible spirit beings knelt beside the prisoners, into whose ears came the soft echoes of harps from the invisible world.

Listening to their songs of faith, some of the praetorians standing guard over them compared the voices of those anguished hearts to the cries of nightingales wounded in the moonlight of the vastness of space.

While the prisoners await the day set for their deaths, let us follow our characters as they go about their daily lives.

After a visit to Tibur, Aelius Hadrianus was able to verify Lucius Helvidius's valuable collaboration on his capricious building projects, and thus invited him to come for a visit with his family in order to be recognized by the Emperor.

On the appointed day, with the exception of Celia, who could not conceal her despondency, they went with Caius Fabricius and Gavius

Cornelius to the celebration the Emperor offered the tribune and his family.

Hadrian welcomed them with great amiability, the conversations covering the most varied aspects of the social and political life of the Empire.

At one point after the usual libations, Hadrian addressed Helvidius Lucius in these terms:

“My friend, the main point of my invitation is to thank you for your invaluable collaboration on my Tibur project. Quite frankly, your accomplishments exceeded my most optimistic expectations!”

“I thank you, Augustus!” replied the happy patrician.

And as shifting his words to other matters, the Emperor asked with obvious interest:

“When will your daughter’s wedding take place? I intend to make a lengthy trip to Greece before settling in Tibur for good, but I wouldn’t want to leave before witnessing the joy of the betrothed couple.”

Nodding to Caius, who felt the greatest happiness for the imperial interest in his situation, Helvidius replied:

“Augustus, you honor us greatly with your benevolent attention. My daughter’s wedding depends only on the groom, who is gathering life’s experiences before attending to the demands of love.”

“What’s this, Caius?” asked the Emperor with a broad smile. “What are you waiting for? If Venus hasn’t yet knocked at the doors of your soul, you cannot use mere promises to win a heart that’s waiting for you in the springtime of love.”

“Your words, O Caesar,” Caius replied like a perfect courtier, “comfort me like the rays of the sun; however, since I will have to replace Venus with Juno in my domestic sanctuary, I am waiting for the ideal opportunity for my future tranquility.”

Aelius Hadrianus made an expressive gesture, set his enigmatic look on Helvidius Lucius, and added:

“The opportunity you’ve been waiting has just arrived. The wisdom of the ancients states that what parents appreciate most is the good done to their children, and that is why I am taking Helvidia’s dowry under my personal care. I have decided to give her a splendid property in the vicinity of Capua at the mouth of Vulturnus, where the fruit of vineyards and olive trees are

enough to ensure the happiness of a family for a hundred years, with no other concerns of a material nature.”

A breath of joy brightened every face, especially those of Helvidius Lucius and his wife, who looked at each other happily. They were overcome with sincere appreciation for the spontaneous generosity of the Emperor, whom Fabius Cornelius addressed with the most respectful courtesy, thanking him on behalf of everyone for the royal gift.

Unable to contain his joy, Caius Fabricius clasped his betrothed’s hands saying:

“After Fabius’s words, we want to confirm our appreciation for your generosity, O Augustus! Your gift expresses the benevolence and power of the lord of the world! ... And since setting the wedding date depends on me, we shall set it for next month – if it please you! ... Our only desire is that you honor us with your presence, for due to your paternal watch-care, we feel that the gods are blessing and guiding us.”

“Yes,” Hadrian pondered thoughtfully, “in the coming months I intend to make my final trip through Italy and Greece. I promised my friends in Athens that I wouldn’t retire to Tibur before visiting them one last time! Before I leave, I want to celebrate the inauguration of the new buildings in the city<sup>3</sup> with public festivities. So let’s use the occasion to acknowledge your good fortune.”

Alba Lucinia’s eyes were moist as she hugged her daughter happily. Thus ended the banquet with unsurpassed joy.

The next day, the Emperor ordered all the arrangements for the gift, and while Helvidius Lucius and his family were preparing for the family event, Caius Fabricius went to the ancient “Terra di Lavoro”<sup>4</sup> to familiarize himself with the region where his future villa was located.

However, along with this great rejoicing, serious concerns and great sorrow persisted.

Helvidius and his wife could not hide the vexation that tormented their souls at seeing Celia languishing, despite her efforts through the powerful intensity of her faith not to sadden her parents’ hearts.

Comparing his daughter to a wilted, sad flower, the tribune increased his hatred of Christian ideas as he remembered Cyrus with disgust and rancor. The painful contrast between his daughters’ destinies was an object of

profound pondering for him. He loved them both with the same affection, yet despite his good intentions, the younger seemed distant from his paternal devotion. She was unable to frequent social events and did not fit in comfortably with the dynamics of the home, as desirable. Her eyes had never manifested any interest in the fantasies of youth, and immersed in constant ponderings, they seemed to be set on another direction, which his paternal heart had never been able to define accurately. In his opinion, she was the victim of a number of weaknesses that in his zeal he attributed to the influence of Christian principles acquired from the slaves in Palestine ... It was good that Helvidia, at least, would be happy, and this consoled him somewhat. As for Celia, later on he and his wife would take her to foreign lands, where her unwholesome sensitivity could be satisfactorily changed.

While the tribune made every effort to conceal such thoughts, festive rejoicing multiplied in his home.

But while family hopes and joys increased, Celia found that her moral sufferings surpassed her strength.

The news of Cyrus's conviction as a conspirator deeply distressed her heart. Furthermore, a single word from the Emperor would suffice to consummate the dreadful torture. Such anguishing prospects were thwarting all her hopes. Beside her, her sister's trousseau was covered with pearls and flowers! She didn't envy her happiness, but she wanted to save the life of the one chosen for her destiny. She continued to pray, but her prayers were beset with earthly anguish. They lacked the sweet lightness that in other times made them ascend to heaven. Now, spiritual emotions blended with distressed and painful anxiety! ... She wanted to see Cyrus, to hear his words, to learn from his own lips that his heart was still strong and resigned in the face of death so that her soul would draw courage from his bravery. But she could not aspire to that. Her parents would never consent. Such painful thoughts started to take over her mind, weakening it.

Within a few days, she could no longer stand up. Alba Lucinia, however, with the common sense that characterized her actions, thought of the benefit of sending her to Aventinus, where she would be treated appropriately in the company of her grandfather and Marcia, who adored her.

Everyone accepted this suggestion and Cneius Lucius came for her personally with fatherly solicitude.

In his house, the young woman recovered from the feverish condition that had debilitated her, but her particular moral despondency defied all the care of the venerable old man, who tried a thousand ways to restore joy to his loving granddaughter.

One day, calling into play his tenderness-filled psychological abilities, he approached his granddaughter and said with great kindness:

“Celia, my dear, it weighs on my heart to see you so despondent and ill, in spite of all the efforts of our unfeigned love.”

And seeing the tears in her eyes, he continued lovingly:

“My child, in my innermost conscience, I too am now a follower of Christianity with all the fervor of my spirit! Led by the tender suggestions of your candid and benevolent soul, I have come to know the essence of the Gospels! ... For me, sacrifices to our old silent and cold gods no longer have any value, but only the offerings of our hearts to the one who watches over our destinies from his throne in Heaven! But listen, dear child: don’t you know that Jesus does not desire the death of the sinner? Don’t you know this teaching, so full of life and joy?”

And as if sensing the hurt lacerating that loving, believing heart, his eyes also filled with tears.

His granddaughter welcomed his words like a soothing balm, and replied:

“Yes, I understand all that and I pray to Jesus to give me strength so that I can find in his own example a reason for my own life.”

But her reply was cut short. A wave of tears flooded her wide, serene eyes as if she were hesitant to confess her incessant and painful worries to the venerable old man.

Cneius Lucius held her tenderly while she said in a pleading voice:

“Grandpa, I promise to have faith and to triumph over all my sufferings, but I just wanted to see Cyrus one last time before his death!”

The respectable old man understood how difficult it would be to satisfy that desire, but he answered without hesitation:

“You shall see him with me tomorrow morning. I’ll talk to your parents about it before the day is over.”



The girl gave him an elated, profound look in which the tenderest of all joys could be read, mixed with love and gratitude. In the afternoon, a litter left Aventinus to take the venerable patrician to the house of his son, who, at his wife's side, received his request with the deepest constraint on his face.

Alba Lucinia, with her woman's sensitivity, understood at once that it was fair to grant her daughter's wishes and accommodate her eager plea.

The tribune, however, struggled with himself, and if he did not deny the request outright, it was only in consideration of the intermediary, who besides being his father was also his master and best friend for life.

"But Father," he replied after pondering for some time, "Coming from you, this request surprises me deeply. To act upon this wish will attract numerous comments and suspicions to our house and name. What would the administrators of the prison say if they saw my daughter interested in a condemned man?"

"Son," Cneius Lucius replied, unperturbed, "I understand and your concerns are justified, but we must realize that Celia could worsen fatally if we refuse to satisfy her desire. Besides, I myself propose to accompany her. As for keeping our entry into the prison free from slanderous curiosity, I've already thought of the best way to do that. I will take my granddaughter as a pupil from my house, as if she were the daughter of one of the convicts, since we know very well that the prisoners will not die as Christians, but as conspirators and revolutionaries. With my privileges, I will enter the prison with her without the intrusive presence of officials or praetorians, so that only I myself will witness what happens between the two of them!"

Helvidius listened to him in silence. But without giving up on his plans, the venerable patrician took his hands in his own, uttering humbly:

"Say yes! Don't deny your ailing daughter the satisfaction of such a just desire! ... Think of it as just a simple meeting for the last time."

The tribune was repulsed by the idea of his daughter visiting the despised servant with his consent, but there was such tenderness in his father's words that his heart suddenly gave in to his caring, humble attitude.

Looking at the benevolent old man as if he were consenting only out of consideration for him, his father and best friend, he muttered somewhat vexed: "All right, Father, have it your way! I leave the matter to your discretion."

And showing that the subject displeased him, he spoke of other things and took the elderly man inside, where preparations for Helvidia's nuptials were intensifying.

Cneius Lucius, who had understood his son's soul since childhood, commended him on all his undertakings with good humor and joy. He opined with optimism on all his accomplishments, simultaneously rejoicing in his initiatives, displaying spontaneous and sincere happiness as if there were no other concerns on his mind.

Early the next day, the venerable patrician's litter stopped next to the Mamertine prison. He and his granddaughter, who had disguised herself in very simple clothing with a large peplos concealing her facial features, entered the gloomy building. Informed beforehand, Sixtus Plocius welcomed Cneius Lucius and the girl whom he introduced as an adopted daughter from his home, and gave them complete freedom to mingle with the prisoners.

In the large cell where the twenty-two convicts were crowded together, the first rays of the sun penetrated like a blessing.

Nestorius and Cyrus, mixed in with the others, were profoundly disfigured. Little food, dire expectations, punishments inflicted in the prison – all had combined to break down their physical strength. Nevertheless, in the serene eyes of all the condemned there was a flash of sublime, ardent faith that revealed mysterious energies. They lived by and for their faith, placing all their hopes in the divine kingdom that Jesus had promised in each of his teachings.

Volusius and Lepidus, two praetorians who had the full trust of the prison administrators, led the visitors to the condemned men's cell.

Cyrus let out a cry of joy when he caught sight of Celia as she walked toward him with a loving, although anguished smile. Nestorius didn't know how to express the gratitude that flooded his heart, because even though he did not reveal himself as a companion in the faith, Cneius extended his kindly arms to them.

At first, emotion and joy left them mute; the young patrician, however, in a natural and very feminine impulse at noticing her beloved's condition, burst into convulsive sobs while her elderly grandfather spoke in a low voice with benevolence and love:

“Weep, child! ... The tears will do your heart good!”

And kindly, as if leaving to the young freedman the task of consoling her, he kindly withdrew with Nestorius to another corner of the cell, where the former captive introduced him to the other prisoners.

Almost alone, the two young people could now share their last feelings.

“Celia, how can you give in to suffering like this?” asked the young man, calling up all his strength to show courage and serenity. “Isn’t it better to die for the Master that we love so much? I’m very grateful to Jesus for your visit to this lonely, sad cell. Ever since I was arrested, I have fervently implored his mercy not to let me die without comforting you!

“Why, just last night, dear, I dreamed I had reached the Kingdom of the Lord and I saw many lights and many flowers there ... Arriving at those gates of indescribable paradise, I remembered your love and felt a deep longing! ... I wanted to find you to enter Heaven with you ... Without your company the dwellings of light seemed less beautiful. But a divine being, one of those we call the angels of God, came to enlighten me with these words: ‘Cyrus, soon you will knock at these gates, free of any ties that bind you to the perishable body! Show your gratitude to the Father of mercy who has granted you so many favors, but do not think about rest when the struggles have just barely begun! You will still have to make amends for many centuries of error and darkness, ingratitude and impenitence ... Comfort your broken spirit by contemplating the sublime plans of Creation so that you can love the earth with its most pain-filled experiences, which also represent divine learning in God’s school of love!’

“So, dear, I asked that pure, loving being to help me be reborn near you after my death, either with the responsibilities of earthly wealth or in abject poverty. And I know that Jesus, who is so powerful and good, will grant me such grace. Don’t cry anymore! Gladden your heart with the divine promises of the Gospel! ...

“Let’s just say that I’m going on a long trip, imposed by the circumstances ... but if God allows it, I’ll be back in the world the next day so we can meet again. What will that reunion be like? It’s not important to know, because, in any case, we’ll continue to love each other through the spirit within our immortal realities!

“Promise me that you’ll be happy and strong while you wait for my return. Don’t let destructive forces taint your soul!”

And assuming that the young woman might later become discouraged about her fate, he emphasized:

“I trust in your courage, and I hope you will never feel uneasy about the social position the Lord has given you. During the troubling times of life, remember that after the love of God, we must honor father and mother above all things and sacrifice ourselves for them with the best of our strength!”

She had stopped crying, but a mist of sadness had invaded her disenchanted eyes. She contemplated his face with a tenderness that the heart could never describe. Betrothed or brother? Sometimes she felt down deep that he could also be her son. Twin souls love each other throughout eternity, assimilating the alternatives contingent on the links of the spirit. They aspire to a pure and immortal bliss and live happily only when joined together in an eternal and indissoluble union.

With the moral fortitude that concealed his most painful emotions, the young man continued:

“Celia, tell me that you will always love life, that you will have much faith and that you will wait for me, filled with trust ... I want to face death with the certainty that you will continue as always, strong in the fight and resigned to the designs of the Creator!”

“Yes,” she said with a shimmer of faith shining in her eyes, “because of you, I will never hate life! Through my faith in Christ’s promises, I will rejoice when you arrive ... I will feel the gentle caress of your loving presence again, for my heart will recognize you out of a thousand others because I have loved you with heavenly devotion as Jesus taught us.”

“Yes, dearest,” replied the comforted young man. “That’s the way I’ve always envisioned your humble, generous heart.”

“Cyrus,” the girl said candidly, “I pray to Jesus that we may keep the faith in the anguish of this hour! I shall wait for your return, full of trust in you, knowing that you have always loved me as I have loved you!”

After a pause, she continued teary-eyed:

“You know what? I remember our trip to the lake in Antipatris ... Do you? I was surprised to see you when that wind-driven wave dragged me down ... Now, I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better if I had died. I would have learned to love Jesus outside a world like this one, and I would be waiting for you in the other life with my great and holy love! I still feel the

emotion of the moment when you saved me and brought me back to the surface!”

“That’s true,” said the young man, making every effort not to betray the emotion of those memories. “But remembering all this, aren’t we led to believe that Jesus wanted, and still does, want you alive? It was not I who saved you but the divine Master, who wanted you to remain on earth.”

“Yes,” she said, deeply moved, “I will continue begging Jesus to let you come back as you promised! The world, Cyrus, is a lake stirred by the wind of passions, and at the bottom of the waters there is always mire that chokes the soul’s noblest aspirations. May Jesus not leave me without your company in the future, because I want to live to serve him in the light of your memory, which I shall honor my whole life!”

“Celia, do not doubt the Lord or fail to believe in my return. I shall always think of you, just as I have never forgotten you.”

And to dispel the bitter expectations of that moment, he turned around and lifted a filthy mattress that served as a bed. Taking a piece of parchment from under it, he offered it to the young woman, adding:

“Just the day before yesterday we wrote a hymn to glorify the Master on the day of sacrifice. I thought I would suggest that song I taught you under the cedar trees at your house, and my idea was accepted. Since that moment, dearest, my great concern has been to find a way to leave a copy for you, because I was convinced that Jesus would grant me the bliss to see you again. There’s a praetorian here named Volusius, who is quite sympathetic to Christianity, and he gave me what I needed to write down these verses.”

Handing her the piece of parchment, he said:

“Keep this hymn as a remembrance of me before my departure! We all worked together to write the poem, but recalling our eternal love, I added a few rhymes to express my hopes. I dedicate them to you, to confirm my devotion at every moment!”

“May God bless and watch over you!” uttered the young patrician, concealing the precious memento.

They gazed at each other with the powerful attraction of their purified sentiments, but Cneius Lucius, after speaking at length with Nestorius and his companions and examining every detail of the prison, approached them with an affable smile.

Knowing his granddaughter's sensibility, he spoke to her in these terms:

"My child, time flies, and I am ready to head back whenever you are."

She turned to the venerable old man, who was accompanied by his son's freedman, and looked at Nestorius sadly. The former captive, however, addressed her with these words:

"Celia, your coming to this prison has been like a visit from an angel. Do not be troubled by our sentence, which in the eyes of God must be useful and just. Paul's inspiration declared that death is our last enemy. Thus, we shall win this next phase with Jesus and through Jesus. Despite this, don't forget that the gift of life is a precious blessing that Heaven has entrusted to us. For the fervent soul, the best sacrifice is not death by martyrdom or the iniquitous reproach of men, but the one that is realized during an entire life through work and sincere selflessness, bearing all the struggles in the renunciation of self to gain the eternal life the Lord spoke of in his divine lessons!"

Celia felt that her faith was reaching a higher level through those kind and loving exhortations. She turned to Cyrus, who seemed to be urging her with his gaze to heed them. She replied, very moved:

"I shall remember your words with the respectful love of a daughter."

She turned to her grandfather and asked his permission to say goodbye to both the prisoners. Approaching the young man, who was hiding his emotions in the depths of his soul, she kept his hands in hers for a moment and kissed them gently.

"May God watch over you!" she said softly, almost imperceptibly. Then she turned to Nestorius and embraced him respectfully, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

Both prisoners wanted to thank her, but they could not. A powerful force seemed to hold back their voices. They stood motionless, silent, while Cneius Lucius, moved by the touching scene, took his leave with a slight wave of the hand.

Until the end, Cyrus showed an expression of strength and a kindly smile on his face that deeply comforted that soul that was a twin of his own ...

Another gesture of farewell in that silence that words would have violated, and the prison door creaked on its sinister, dreadful hinges.

The young Christian's smile had disappeared from his disfigured face. He approached the prison bars, clinging to them like a bird longing for light and freedom. His anxious eyes looked outward trying to get one last glimpse of the litter that would take his beloved away.

But little by little, his restless youth turned to Jesus with all the fervor of his passionate aspirations. He backed away from the rigid bars and knelt down. The resplendent mid-morning sunlight bathed his face and hair. He prayed, pleading to Jesus for strength and hope. The sun's rays seemed to cover his forehead with the graces of heaven, but even so, he let his head drop and hid his face in his emaciated hands to humbly weep.

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<sup>3</sup> Among Hadrian's numerous buildings during his reign, among the most modern is the famous Castel Sant'Angelo - Emmanuel.

<sup>4</sup> The capital of *Terra di Lavoro* was Capua for many centuries. <http://faculty.ed.umuc.edu>. – Tr.

## 7

# Hadrian's Festivities

Cneius Lucius noticed that his granddaughter's visit to the prisoners had had a very beneficial effect. Despite her despondency, Celia proved to be courageous in her faith, calmer and in a better mood. Nevertheless, her grandfather was aware of the sensitivity of her heart and made arrangements with his children for her to stay with him until after Helvidia's wedding.

Meanwhile, we cannot forget that Lollius Urbicus's wife was once again in Rome and was making frequent trips to Subura, where she had the most intimate conversations with the sorceress whom we have already met.

For hours on end, Claudia and Plotina quietly exchanged ideas, finessing criminal measures or designing sinister plans. Moreover, Hateria had won the utmost esteem of her masters and was keeping the former plebeian informed of all the facts regarding the couple's private life.

On the eve of Helvidia's wedding, we find the Empire's capital in the typical excitement of festive occasions.

Preparing for his final pilgrimage to one of the most ancient centers in the world, Hadrian wanted to toast the Roman people with unforgettable spectacles. On such occasions, political authorities would get close to the people, nourishing their extravagant and joyful thrills. The inauguration of new buildings, the preparations for the trip and the involvement of the people in the official program justified the highest whims of imperial magnanimity. The excitement of extraordinary endeavors could be seen everywhere, filling the city with transforming improvisations: the building of new arches, bridges or aqueducts, distributions of wheat and wine, the organization of religious processions, tributes to specialized temples, popular lotteries, and lastly, the circus with its unsurpassed innovations.



The people always anticipated these demonstrations with unrestrained jubilation.

On Palatinus, Aelius Hadrianus thought about distracting the Roman masses by organizing festivities of this nature. It would get the authorities involved and would help support the main goal of all the celebrations: his trip to Greece, which had already won him the broadest admiration. Classified in history as the major benefactor of the ancient cities where the cradle of culture and civilization had originated, this great Emperor designed the best buildings for Athens, as well as a specialized study of the ruins of all Hellas in order to benefit Greek heritage to the extent of all his resources. On the threshold of these events, we find the sovereign in private with Claudia Sabina and Phlegon, his trusted secretary, analyzing the details of the voyage that the imperial galleys would be making on Mediterranean waters.

At one point Hadrian asked his secretary:

“Senecius, have you carried out my orders concerning sending the invitations?”

“By Jove!” replied Phlegon happily. “I would never neglect complying with an order from Augustus.”

“As you can see,” said the Emperor, turning to Claudia “everything is ready and in running order. However, I need someone to accompany me, not so much in the sense of art or critique, but for the purpose of working; someone attentive to my desire to transport some columns and other famous relics to Tibur from the magnificent ruins of Phocis and Corinth. I plan on decorating our buildings with the treasures of the ancient world. At my retreat in Tibur, I cannot do without the visions of the garden of the gods, with their invaluable impressions on my senses.”

The prefect’s wife listened to him with particular attention. Taking advantage of this opportunity to further her own plans, she suggested, feigning the utmost disinterestedness:

“Divine One, is Cneius’s son on your list?”

“No, he isn’t. Helvidius Lucius would be an excellent guest, but I abstained from inconveniencing him, given his very special situation as a married man and head of a household.”

“Well,” replied the former plebeian casually, “allow me to disagree somewhat with your thinking on that regard. Don’t I also have a home that

requires dedication and care? Aren't I going to be separated from my husband, who will have to stay here because of the duties of his office? Nevertheless, I consider myself honored to accompany you, because for all of us, you represent the sovereign and magnanimous leader. I believe that Fabius's son-in-law would think as I do, without disagreement. Two days from now, his older daughter's wedding will take place before your magnanimous eyes. After having received so many favors from your generous hands, would he turn down the opportunity to be of use to you in some way?

After a pause, in which her eyes gazed deeply at the Emperor in order to surmise the innermost effect of her words, she continued:

“Personally knowing the works of Tibur that entice the artistic taste so much, I think that only an esthete like Helvidius could work the miracle of choosing the precious materials and supervising their transportation to Tibur. Furthermore, Divine One, this trip will take us away from Rome for more than a year, and I think that it would be greatly pleasing to his patrician heart! ... In think that new possibilities, new achievements and new perspectives would bring him benefits for his family, since the Empire, represented by your magnanimity, would reward him for all his merits.”

Aelius Hadrianus thought for a moment while his secretary was taking some note.

Taking Claudia's comments into account as she looked at him eagerly, he replied solicitously:

“You're right. Helvidius Lucius is the man I'm looking for.”

Sabina made an expressive gesture of satisfaction while the Emperor instructed Phlegon to deliver the respective invitation in his name.

Caught by the messenger in the middle of his festive home activities, the tribune was greatly surprised. He was not expecting anything like this at all. Others might be honored by such kindness, but sentimental by nature, Helvidius preferred domestic peace rather than the whirlwind of frivolous court trifles. Under such conditions, the trip to Greece seemed tiresome and untimely. Furthermore, he would have to leave within a week. And who could even think about returning? The sovereign was accustomed to taking long and frequent trips through the ancient world. On the trip of 124, he was away from Rome for more than three years, and he had fallen so much in love with Athens that he had gone to the extreme of being personally initiated into the mysteries of Eleusis.

However, before these painful thoughts could rob him of his good mood, he called his wife into the tablinum, where they carefully pondered the matter.

“As for me,” said the tribune with his resolute spirit, “I shall try to politely turn down this invitation. These absences from Rome entailing the separation from the family upset me. I feel dislocated, vexed and unhappy.”

Alba Lucinia listened to him with an alarmed heart. To her sensitive soul, such prospects were indeed distressing and worrisome. Of course, Claudia Sabina would also travel to far-off Hellas, and for an amount of time no one could determine. To consent to her husband’s trip would be to deliver him to the ignoble seductions of that woman, whose unspeakable sentiments her female intuition could sense. But this was not all that worried her. Her situation in Rome would become dire once again during her husband’s absence. Lollius undoubtedly would harass her more vehemently and obstinately.

She thought about telling Helvidius what had happened the last time he was away and to openly discuss her misgivings, but the figure of her father immediately came into her mind. Fabius Cornelius absolutely depended on the prestige and support of the prefect, and her mother and inexperienced younger siblings depended on her elderly father.

In a glance, the noble woman realized the impossibility of revealing her direct complaints under such circumstances. And remembering the Emperor’s kindness toward her daughter, generously ensuring her future, she felt that the voice of gratitude should speak louder than personal conveniences.

“Helvidius,” she said after an intense inner struggle, “no one will feel your absence more than I. You know that your presence at home is my protection and that of our family, but duty, my dear, where does duty lie in our current life situation? Shouldn’t the Emperor’s invitation represent for us proof of his trust? And what about Hadrian’s generosity towards us? Didn’t the gift of Capua happen in order to win us over forever?”

“All true,” agreed the tribune calmly, “but I hate the totalitarianism of the Empire. It robs us of our personal autonomy and annuls our own wills.”

“Still, we need to think it over to adapt to the circumstances,” she replied to comfort her husband’s downcast spirit.

“It’s not just the politics that I find disagreeable,” vented Helvidius, “it’s also the prospect of our indefinite separation! Away from your thoughtful and

loving heart, I feel prone to discouragement at facing the siege of all sorts of temptations, which make the necessary initiatives difficult for me. Furthermore, I'll be with people I do not like and whose social relations I totally detest."

Alba Lucinia understood her distraught husband's indirect allusions, and taking his hands with tenderness, she said sweetly:

"Helvidius, often those who hate have not known how to love rightly. Let's do our part to maintain the harmony and peace in the circle of our relationships. Since the concept of duty speaks more loudly in the traditions of our name, I don't think you will let yourself get caught up in dissolute sentiments! ... Be calm and just, and know that I'll be praying for you, loving you and waiting for you. Won't this sweet perspective be a consolation for you every hour?"

After thinking about his wife's considerations, the tribune pulled her to him and kissed her in gratitude.

"Yes, dear, the gods shall hear your prayers for our happiness. I too feel that Helvidia's dowry demands this sacrifice. However, when I return, we'll take the steps we need to change our life."

Alba Lucinia felt a little relief in realizing that her words had reassured her husband; however, when she returned to her small domestic world, she began to reflect on her distressing personal situation, pondering the painful trials that fate had in store for her during the course of her life. She isolated herself in the sanctuary of her home during the breaks from her busy activities, imploring the protection of the deities that had presided over her marriage, but it seemed useless. Despite her fervor, the ivory gods seemed cold and implacable, and in the whirlwind of domestic joys, her smile hid the many silent tears that never fell from her eyes but scalded her heart.

Hadrian's festivities were held amid the sounds of general joyfulness, and with them the auspicious date of the nuptials of Lucius Helvidius's daughter.

Wedding ceremonies were one of the most notable events of the society of that time, bringing forth the very best Rome had to offer in patrician circles.

Wanting to celebrate his favorite granddaughter's happiness, Fabius Cornelius was prolific in inventing the most beautiful lighting arrangements

in his children's residential park.

Everywhere, the scent of beautiful flowers; in every corner, passionate songs and ballads mingled with the sounds of zithers and cymbals played by the hands of skilled masters ... While the slaves hurried back and forth to satisfy the whims of the guests, famous dancers danced to the melodious refrain of lutes. Ponds set up to resemble natural aquariums were decorated with superb plants from the East and exotic fish elicited the admiration of those delighting in the joys of the night.

The entire festive scene had been finely prepared with foresight and refinements of good taste, particularly the pool, where light, graceful boats carried nymphs and troubadours, and the arena where, as a finishing touch to the party, two young athletic slaves lost their lives to the powerful swords of stronger fighters.

Nothing was missing except Cneius Lucius. According to the hosts, he had stayed on Aventinus with the ailing Celia.

The next day, while Helvidia and Caius were leaving for Capua under a shower of flowers at the height of the people's festivities, Alba Lucinia was unable to dissipate the wave of fear that assailed her heart. Her conscience was clear concerning what she had told her husband, and taking into consideration the gratitude they both felt toward the Emperor, she did not even consider undermining the trip to Greece. However, Helvidius Lucius had told her of his own fears about temptation ... Her hands still felt the warmth of his after they had finished sharing their painful confidences. Was she right in urging him to accept the new duties imposed by the Empire? Should she not also protect her husband from all difficult situations determined by politics with its perverse unrest?

The idea then came to her to go to Claudia Sabina and humbly ask her to intervene. Such an approach was not compatible with the traditions of pride of her lineage, but the desire to do the good, coupled with the impetus of her pure sincerity, might, she felt, change the illegitimate intentions that might perhaps be living in the heart of that femme fatale.

Ever since she had noticed Helvidius's indecision, she had felt the need to work actively for his moral peace, deflecting all dangers from him by mobilizing the powerful forces of her love, which would overcome even the imperatives of her innate pride.

Thus, after much thought, the day after Helvidia's wedding she decided to visit Claudia Sabina for the first time in her palace on Capitolinus.

Her litter was welcomed in the atrium with general pleasure, but the prefect's wife, despite her herculean efforts to conceal the displeasure the unexpected visit caused her, welcomed her with annoyance and haughtiness.

Helvidius's wife, however, in spite of the pride that the hierarchy of her birth had kindled in her heart, remained calm and dignified in her attitude of sincere humility.

"Madam," explained Julia Spinter's daughter after the usual greetings. "I have come here to request your cooperation concerning the tranquility of our home."

"I am at your service!" replied the former plebeian with an air of superiority, cutting off Alba Lucinia's words. "It would be a great pleasure to be of use."

Since she could not fathom the innermost feelings of Lollius Urbicus's wife towards her, the noble woman continued with simplicity:

"With the magnanimity and gentlemanliness that mark his character, the Emperor has invited my husband to accompany him to Greece, where he may have to remain for more than a year. Helvidius, however, has numerous plans connected with our future. This excursion, with the noble task entrusted to him, is reason for our honor and happiness. Even so, I have decided to appeal to your substantial influence with Caesar to excuse my husband from this commission."

"Oh, but that would completely upset Augustus's plans!" said Claudia Sabina with visible sarcasm. "So the wife of Helvidius isn't happy to share the sacred trust of the Empire with him? I've never heard of a patrician woman by birth not participating with her husband in the valuable efforts that raise a man to the heights of official service."

Alba Lucinia listened to her in surprise, fully grasping her sarcastic, insolent remarks.

"To respond to a request of this nature is humanly impossible," she continued with an almost brutal look on her face. "Lucius Helvidius cannot sidestep the administrative plans; so I think you will have to conform to the circumstances."

Fabius Cornelius's daughter listened to her cutting words remembering Tulia's comments about her husband's past. She watched the gestures of the former plebeian elevated by destiny to the highest positions in the circles of nobility, and felt in the totality of her annoyed and peculiar expressions a vast web of hateful, repressed sentiments. Only jealousy could have transformed her to the point of modifying her face's most graceful features.

They were not of the same age, but they both had the same physical attractiveness of a beautiful woman who has not yet reached the autumn of life and is still holding on to the better part of spring. Although Alba Lucinia had reached thirty-eight years of age and Claudia forty-two, both of them reflected the same youthful appearance.

Noticing that Alba Lucinia was watching her every gesture and analyzing her slightest expressions with her intelligent observation while maintaining her superiority in light of her hasty opinions, Lollius Urbicus's wife became extremely aggravated.

"After all," she said almost harshly to the patrician listening in silence, "you're asking the impossible. You should know that we're going through a difficult period where women are forced to leave their husbands to the whims of chance. Even I, having the prestige you came here to plead, cannot avoid such contingencies. Married to the prefect of the praetorians, I have heard from his own lips the painful declaration that he will never be able to love me."

As she spoke, she fixed her angry eyes on Alba Lucinia, who felt her heart beating rapidly.

"And do you know who the woman that my husband prefers is?" asked the former plebeian with a hateful, indefinable expression.

The noble patrician understood her insolent allusion with tearful eyes, in which the dignity of her soul transpired.

"Your silence," muttered Sabina arrogantly, "speaks for itself."

Flushed, Alba Lucinia stood up and said with dignity:

"Unfortunately, I was wrong to assume that the sincerity of an honest wife and devoted mother would touch your heart. In exchange for my loyal sentiments, I receive insults of scathing, unjustifiable sarcasm. I do not condemn you. Education is not the same for all people of a social group and

we have to subordinate it to a sense of relativity. Furthermore, we give what we have.”

And without even saying good-bye, she walked bravely to the atrium. There, her litter was waiting surrounded by attentive servants while Claudia Sabina, as if frozen in her hatred by the lesson of superiority and contempt she had received, let out a nervous little laugh that would explode soon thereafter in a barrage of insults against her slaves.

In the privacy of her home, Alba Lucinia prayed, imploring the gods for strength and protection. Her husband’s journey would proceed without delay and she did not think it fitting to reveal anything to Helvidius about her inner worries. Resigned to the facts, she would stay in Rome, trusting that her hopes for domestic peace and happiness would flourish later on. It was imperative to preserve her husband’s harmony and moral courage so that he could withstand every difficulty and bravely overcome the most trying situations. The poor woman hid her inner tears as she prepared all his travel gear with the utmost care. Helvidius would leave with her love and trust, and that should suffice for his kind, sensitive heart.

The final day of Hadrian’s festivities dawned and Court protocol obliged Alba Lucinia to accompany her husband to the closing exhibitions of the circus, where Nestorius and his son would meet their death.

The prospect of such a spectacle chilled her blood as she foresaw the horror of the brutal scenes in the amphitheater, organized by callous souls.

She recalled that two days earlier she had gone with Helvidia and Caius Fabricius to Aventinus for their goodbyes to Cneius and Celia, and she had noticed that the poor girl was extremely haggard from the grief of her great and ill-fated love. Her maternal heart still felt the warmth of the loving embrace of her daughter, who said in her ear, in an almost inaudible voice: “Cyrus is to die in the final spectacle.” She remembered Celia’s tear-filled eyes as she resignedly told her this. She also recalled how benevolently Celia had embraced the good fortune of her sister with her fraternal vows of happiness and peace, as the latter, smiling and happy, was leaving for the delights of Capua.

Alba Lucinia thought for a long time about the painful problems that were tormenting her soul. She pondered the need to hide them from one day to the next under the veil of pretended, false joys, and she lingered sorrowfully over the causes of suffering and the contrasts of fate.



Yet, it was essential for her to try to change her spiritual disposition.

In fact, a few hours later, Helvidius reminded her of protocol obligations, and it was not without painful emotions that she put on her gala tunic and turned herself over to the female slaves for one of the bizarre hairdos in vogue.

That afternoon, after strict observance of the traditional procession, the jubilation of the populace spilled over into the circus amid jesting and laughter.

Caesar's entourage had already arrived under a hail of deafening applause.

Aelius Hadrianus surrounded himself on a golden grandstand with patricians and the most highly renowned Augustans, among them the aristocratic characters of this story. Surrounding the platform of honor were the vestals, presenting a magnificent sight, and the hierarchical ranks of the highest representatives of the Court. Purple-robed senators, military leaders with their shiny silver armor, and imperial dignitaries mingled in symmetrical lines over a virtual ocean of human heads. The plebeians gave way to their joy.

On the imperial stand libations were flowing, when the sovereign addressed Lollius Urbicus in these terms:

"I have decreed the torture and execution of the conspirators for later this afternoon in celebration of the marvelous services with which the Prefecture of the Praetorians has been marking the deeds of the Empire."

"Divine one," the prefect replied with a smile, "we owe this great endeavor to Fabius Cornelius, whose utmost dedication to the services of the State is becoming increasingly known in administrative circles."

The old censor thanked him with a nod for the direct reference to his name, while Hadrian added:

"I was careful to exclude from the sentence all the individuals recognized as Romans among the agitators being handed over to justice. I ordered the majority to be freed during the first phase of the legal procedures, exiling thirteen of the most fanatical permanently to the provinces. That left only twenty-two foreigners, that is, Jews, Ephesians and Colossians."

“Divine One, your decisions are always just,” said Censor Fabius Cornelius, eager to change the subject so he would not remember the case of Nestorius, who, guaranteed by his son-in-law, had worked in the department of the prefecture’s parchment sector.

Taking advantage of the natural pause, the proud patrician emphasized:

“But the grandeur of today’s spectacle is truly worthy of Caesar!”

He had not finished his sentence when everyone fixed their gaze on the center of the arena, where, after the exotic twirling of the dancers, the fabulous hunts would begin. Young athletes began fighting ferocious tigers, along with elephants, antelopes, wild dogs and aurochs with sharp horns.

Now and then a hunter would fall, bleeding, to delirious applause. This was followed by all the other spectacles of the afternoon to the sound of hymns that exacerbated the bloodthirsty instinct of the crowd.

Sometimes cries of “Christians to the lions” and “death to the conspirators” exploded threateningly from the angry mob.

By late afternoon, with the last rays of the sun falling on Coelius and Aventinus Hills, between which the famous circus was located, the twenty-two prisoners were led to the center of the arena. Black poles had been erected, to which they were tied with thick ropes held by bronze rings.

Nestorius and Cyrus were part of that small group of beings disfigured by the most brutal corporal punishment. Both were skeletal and almost unrecognizable. Only Helvidius and his wife, extremely distressed in the presence of such infamous torture, noticed their former freedmen among the martyrs, and tried the best they could to hide the discomfort that the cruel scene caused them.

The condemned, with the exception of seven women dressed in “indusia”, were almost naked, wearing only a loincloth that covered their waist up to their kidneys. Each was tied to a different post, while thirty black athletes from Numidia and Mauritania appeared in the arena to the sound of harps that strangely blended with the cries of the mob.

It had been some time since Rome had witnessed such a scene, given the upright and tolerant character of Hadrian, who had always done everything possible to avoid religious clashes; thus, it was viewed as an amazing spectacle.

While the African giants fitted their bows with poisoned arrows, the Christian martyrs began to sing a sweet hymn. No one could describe those tones, saturated with anguish and hope.

In vain did the authorities of the amphitheater order the noise of the cymbals and the shrill sounds of the flutes and lutes to be increased to drown out the indescribable voices of the Christian hymn. The harmony of those resigned, sad verses rose higher and higher, standing out from all the noise in their majestic melancholy.

Nestorius and Cyrus sang with their eyes turned to the sky, where the sun gilded the last clouds of twilight.

The first arrows were shot into the martyrs' chests with singular mastery, opening roses of blood that immediately turned into long filaments of suffering and death; but the song continued like an anguished arpeggio that spread across the dark and pain-filled earth ... Its melody indistinctly blended longing and hope, the joys of heaven and the disillusion of the world, as if that handful of forsaken beings were a flock of wounded larks hovering in the atmosphere of earth on the way to Paradise:

*Holy Lamb of God,  
Lord of all Truth, Savior of humanity,  
Sacred Word of Light! ...  
Shepherd of Peace, of Hope;  
From your divine dwelling,  
Lord Jesus, illumine  
The sorrows of our cross! ...*

*You, too, had your Calvary  
Of pain, anguish and scorn,  
Giving to the whole world  
The light of redemption;  
You were thirsty, tormented,  
But amid malice, amid pain,*

*You redeemed sinners  
From the saddest slavery!*

*If you also drank from the cup  
Of bitterness and mockery,  
We want the joy  
Of suffering and weeping ...  
For we are lost sheep,  
And the children of error,  
Who in the world of exile,  
Live awaiting you.  
Grant, O Lord, that we may  
Live happily  
In the blessings of Eternity,  
Which are not to be found here;  
The joy of finding you again  
In our final sufferings.  
Light in us the pleasures  
Of dying well for you! ...*

*Lord, forgive the torturers  
Of your holy doctrine!  
Protect, sustain and uphold  
Those who are dying in evil ...  
On the pathway to your kingdom,  
All pain is transfigured,  
Every tear is blessedness,  
And the good consists of suffering! ...*

*Beloved Jesus, console  
Those we love,  
Who will be left in the extremes  
Of longing and anguish;  
Grant them the faith that transforms  
Suffering and weeping  
Into the sacrosanct treasures  
Of the life of your love!*

Other stanzas rose to heaven like sobs of resignation and hope ...

With his chest riddled with arrows that bled his heart, and at the sight of his child, who had died before him due to his physical debility, Nestorius felt a whirlwind of indefinable memories flooding his already faltering, confused thought in the throes of death. With the light in his eyes gone due to the agony of death stealing his strength, he perceived the crowd jeering them and heard their animalistic howls ... He looked at the imperial grandstand, where surely all those who had earned his pure and sincere affection would be; but with inexplicable emotions, he also saw himself in his confused memories, sitting in the grandstand and wearing a senator's toga trimmed in purple ... Crowned with roses<sup>5</sup>, he himself applauded the massacre of Christians, who, without the poles of torture or poisoned arrows piercing their chests, were devoured by hideous and insatiable wild beasts ... He wanted to walk, to move, but at the same time, he felt himself kneeling beside a large lake before Jesus of Nazareth, whose gentle, profound look penetrated the recesses of his heart ... Kneeling, he reached out his hands to the Divine Master, begging for help and mercy ... Ardent tears burned his gaunt, sad cheeks ...

To his dying eyes, the angry mobs of the circus had disappeared ...

It was then that the figure of an angel or a woman<sup>6</sup> came to him, reaching out her loving and translucent hands ... This messenger from heaven knelt beside his bloodied body and stroked his hair, kissing him gently. The former slave felt the caress of that divine kiss, and his tired and weakened soul fell into a light sleep, as if he were a child.

Invisible radiations from the highest spirit realms vibrated throughout the arena ... Selfless, resplendent beings reached out their fraternal arms to their companions who were leaving their perishable envelopes behind in their testimonies of faith through injury and suffering.

In a few minutes, the amphitheater's servants removed the bloody remains from the death poles to the shouts of applause from the crazed crowd. In the grandstand, Helvidius Lucius nervously clutched his wife's hands, letting her perceive the inexplicable turmoil stirring inside him, while she, obliged to maintain protocol, gazed at her husband with tear-filled eyes.

But in the palace on Aventinus on that clear and serene afternoon, the spectacle had perhaps been more moving because of its painful and silent majesty.

After having retreated to a resting room, Cneius Lucius and his granddaughter watched all the movements of Hadrian's festivities outside, noticing that the sea of people had stayed at the circus for the final acts of the program.

As the Roman sky grew pale, the young woman looked for the piece of parchment where Cyrus had written the rhymed octaves of the last hymn, saying softly to the elderly man:

"Grandpa, right now Nestorius and Cyrus must be going to their deaths! Do you believe that our loved ones can come back from heaven to soften our destiny?"

"Why not, my child? If Jesus promised to come back to meet those who gather together in his name, why wouldn't he allow the return of his messengers who have loved us in this life?"

Celia looked at the elderly man with her big, sad eyes, illumined by a wonderful candor.

She got up very calmly and walked towards a wide window facing the Tiber, whose waters reflected the hues of the twilight hour.

Gazing at the scroll, she silently read all its contents. Then, she sang all the verses of the Christian hymn, resting especially on the last stanza, which she reread with a tear, trying to imagine her loved one's thought in it.

The venerable patrician listened to her tender voice as if he were listening to a featherless bird, abandoned and lonely amid the winters of the

world, unable to externalize the emotions besetting its grief-filled inner depths.

The saddest thoughts filled his mind and he felt his heart beating rapidly at an alarming rate.

His soul ached as he watched his granddaughter, who was now looking up at the sky as if she were searching for the heart she idolized among the clouds of the blue evening.

A few long and painful minutes passed before his weary and anguished mind.

At one point, when the firmament had darkened, the young woman fastened her eyes on the sky more attentively, her eyes tender and deep as if she were beholding some vision that entranced her.

She seemed oblivious to all the sensations of the outside world, to all the objects surrounding her, and even seemed not to sense the presence of her grandfather, who accompanied her ecstasy, deeply moved.

After a few moments, however, her arms began to move again, as if her usual expressions had returned to reality and life.

“It’s true!” sighed Cneius Lucius almost in a whisper.

“Grandpa,” she said with a divine serenity shining in her eyes, “I saw a flock of white doves in the sky, as if they had just left the circus of martyrdom!”

“Yes, child,” said Cneius Lucius in sorrow after standing up to contemplate the serene blue sky, “they must be the souls of the martyrs on their way to the heavenly Jerusalem!”

A deep silence fell between them.

The anxiety in their hearts in the melancholy grandeur of the moment said more than any words.

Celia, however, broke the divine stillness by asking:

“Grandpa, have you ever read the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus blesses all those who suffer?!”

“Yes, I have,” replied the old man sadly.

“Of course,” replied the young woman in her loving and devoted innocence, “Jesus would rather I stay in the world without Cyrus’s love, to suffer the sacrifice of separation and longing in order to save me one day for heaven, where all his blessed ones are gathered together!”

Cneius Lucius felt deeply the sweet resignation of those words. He wanted to respond and encourage her toward the sublime perseverance of that sacrifice, but his old chest felt suffocated. Instead, he drew his granddaughter to his heart and kissed her forehead tenderly. His white hair blended with her abundant hair, as if his venerable old age were a starry night kissing the dawn.

The final clamor of the people could be heard in the distance, but the Roman firmament was touched with a sublime, mysterious beauty. The immense calm of twilight seemed to be filled with sacred appeals from the Infinite.

And then the two, gazing at the Tiber and the sky in silent prayer, began to weep ...

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<sup>5</sup> Nestorius was the reincarnation of the proud senator Publius Lentulus Cornelius (See *Two Thousand Years Ago*) – Emmanuel

<sup>6</sup> Livia. (See *Two Thousand Years Ago*) – Emmanuel



# PART TWO

# 1

## The Death of Cneius Lucius

It had been two months since the Emperor and his favorite courtiers left Rome.

At the end of spring in the year 133, the lives of our characters in the Empire's Capital were moving along in apparent serenity.

Alba Lucinia focused her daily life on her daughter and her parental affections. However, she felt worn out due to her profound moral concerns, not just because of her husband's absence but because of Lollius Urbicus's conduct. Without anyone to answer to, he abused the authority he held in Caesar's absence and had redoubled his harassment with even more determination and vehemence.

The noble woman did everything she could to conceal the unpleasant situation; Lollius Urbicus, however, relentlessly kept at his frenetic plans and was barely able to endure the indefinite postponement of his unspeakable hopes.

Formerly, Helvidius's wife had had in Tullia Cevina the friendship of a loving, devoted sister to comfort her on days of her harshest trials. But before Caesar went on his trip, Tribune Maximus Cunctator had been assigned to a lengthy political mission in far-off Iberia and had taken his wife with him.

Alba Lucinia found herself nearly alone in her moral anguish, but she could not reveal to her loving elderly parents the tears hidden in her tormented heart. She often spent hours on end talking with her daughter, whose simplicity of spirit and fervor of faith delighted her; but in spite of all her efforts, she could not overcome the physical weakness that was beginning to worry her family.

Another fact had come to disturb even more the seemingly peaceful existence of our characters in the Empire's Capital. Cneius Lucius had taken

seriously ill with heart trouble, which his doctors regarded as natural because of his age.

They made use of elixirs and cordials, medicinal teas and panaceas, but nothing worked. The venerable patrician became more debilitated by the day. However, Cneius still wanted to live a little longer, at least until his son returned so he could hold him in his arms before dying. In his paternal love, he wanted to ask Helvidius to support his two sisters, Publicia and Marcia, and to explain all his desires to him. But his experienced knowledge of political obligations forced him to be resigned to the circumstances. In accordance with his habits, Aelius Hadrianus would not return for a year, at best. And an inner voice told him that by then his exhausted body would be lowered, reduced to ashes, into the peace of the tomb. Somewhat sad, in spite of the strength of his faith, the venerable old man harbored serious and profound thoughts of death in his mind.

Only Celia's visits managed to pull him out of his sorrowful ruminations for a few hours.

With a smile of sincere happiness, he would embrace his granddaughter and both would go to the window facing the Tiber. And when the girl would tell him of the joy she felt at being able to pray in such a beautiful place, Cneius Lucius usually clarified: "Child, I used to feel a need for the household shrine with its outward expressions. I couldn't do without the images of the gods or dispense with offering the richest sacrifices. But now, I've given up all those religious symbols to better listen to my own heart. I am mindful that Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the foot of Mt. Gerizim that a time will come when the Almighty Father will be worshiped not in stone sanctuaries but on the altar of our souls ... And, my little child, to meet with God in the depths of their conscience, people will never find a better temple than that of nature: their mother and teacher."

Such concepts were shared at every moment in his conversations with his granddaughter.

She in turn would transform dashed hopes into heavenly aspirations, turning suffering into consolation for the elderly man she idolized. Her ardent soul, with the sublime intuition of faith that expanded her sphere of understanding, felt that it would not be long before her beloved grandfather would take the path to the grave. She lamented beforehand the absence of that

loving, friendly soul who had become a refuge for her disillusioned thoughts. At the same time, she prayed to the Lord for courage and strength.

On a day of great prostration, Cneius Lucius saw Marcia open the bedroom door gently, with a smile of surprise. His eldest daughter had come to announce the visit of someone very dear to his kindly heart. It was Silanus, his adopted son, who had returned from Gaul. With sincere and tender joy, the patrician told him to come in. Unsteadily, he stood up to embrace the young man, who, in the healthy youth of his twenty-two years, clasped him in his own arms, nearly weeping with happiness.

“Silanus, my son, it was so good of you to come!” he said serenely. “But tell me! Have you come to Rome on an errand for your superiors?”

The young man explained that he had not, that he had requested permission to see his adoptive father, whom he missed so very much. He added that he planned to settle in the Imperial Capital if Cneius agreed. He further explained that his commander in Gaul, Julius Saulus, was a crude, cruel man, who subjected him to constant abuse under the pretext of discipline. He begged his father to protect him before the authorities and prevent his return.

Cneius Lucius listened to him with interest and replied:

“I shall do everything within my means to satisfy your rightful desires.”

Then, he sank into deep thought while his adopted son noticed his great physical weakness.

Emerging from his grave thoughts, Cneius Lucius added:

“Silanus, you know all about the past, and I already told you once about the circumstances that brought you to my paternal heart.”

“Yes,” replied the young man in a resigned tone, “I know the story of my birth; but the gods wanted to give the wretched foundling a loving and selfless father like you, and I certainly do not regret my fate.”

The old man stood up, and after embracing him emotionally, walked around the bedroom, supporting himself with effort. At one point, he stopped his slow steps before a wooden chest decorated with acanthus and opened it carefully.

He took out a small medallion from among the parchments and addressed the young man with these words:

“Son, to Divine Providence there is no such thing as a foundling. Not even in returning to the past should you nurture any inner bitterness because of your fate. All destinies are useful and good if we are able make the most of the opportunities that Heaven gives us for our happiness.”

And as if immersing his thoughts in the abyss of the most distant memories, he continued after a pause:

“When Marcia kissed you for the first time in this house, she found this medallion on your newborn chest and I safeguarded it to give to you later on. I have never opened it, son. Its contents mean nothing to me, because no matter what, you would still be my beloved son ... Now, however, I feel that the time has come to give it to you. My heart tells me that I won’t live much longer. I must be spending the final days of an existence whose wrongs I ask Heaven to pardon with all my strength. But whereas I myself am close to the tomb, you are young and have ample rights to this earthly existence ... Maybe you will live in Rome from now on, and it’s highly probable that the time will come when you’ll need a memento like this ... So, keep it with you.”

Silanus was moved in the sensitive depths of his heart.

“Father,” he said very touched as he carefully took the medallion, “I shall keep this memento without any interest in its contents. In any case, I would never acknowledge any other father but you, in whose benevolent soul I found the maternal love that I lacked in the early days of my life.”

They embraced tenderly, and continued their loving conversation about events in the Province and the Court.

That same evening, the venerable patrician received a visit from Fabius Cornelius, from whom he requested the appropriate measures on behalf of his adopted son.

The censor was greatly moved due to the solemn circumstances in which the request was made and examined the matter with the utmost interest. In a short time he obtained Silanus’s transfer to Rome by employing his services in his own administrative sphere and making the young man a trusted official.

At the entry of this new member into the circle of her family relationships, Alba Lucinia recalled Tulia’s confidences but decided to guard her inner impressions, graciously accepting the respectful friendship Silanus offered her.

At the home of Helvidius Lucius, however, the moral situation was becoming increasingly complicated on account of the onslaught of Lollius Urbicus, who had not in the least decided to abandon his foul intentions.

One afternoon, after Alba Lucinia and Celia had returned from one of their regular walks on Aventinus, they received a visit from the praetorian prefect, whose tormented face showed trouble and profound despair.

The young woman went inside while the noble patrician began a polite and dignified conversation. The prefect, however, addressed her almost frantically in these terms:

“Forgive my repeated and impertinent boldness, but I cannot hide from the urgency of the feelings assailing my heart. Would it not be possible for you to give me the slightest hope?! ... In vain have I tried to forget you ... The memory of your charms and superior virtues is engraved on my mind with powerful and indelible force! ... The love you’ve awakened in me is an ardent, indestructible light burning in my heart for all eternity!”

Alba Lucinia listened to his declarations of love with fear and astonishment, incapable of expressing the disgust his words caused her.

Blinded by his passion, the praetorian prefect continued:

“I love you deeply and madly ... For a long time while I was still young, I tried everything to forget you in obedience to the parallel lines of our destinies; but time has only increased this passion that overcomes me and annuls all my good intentions. Now, I trust in your magnanimity, as I wish to keep a faint hope in my miserable soul! Answer my pleas! Grant me just one glance! Your indifference pierces my heart with the painful prospect of never realizing my lifelong divine dream ... I worship you! Your image follows me everywhere like a shadow ... Why will you not respond to the sublime devotion that vibrates in my soul? Helvidius Lucius could never be the heart destined for yours as far as understanding and love are concerned! ... Let’s break the chains of the conventions that separate us and live the desires of our souls. Let’s be happy in union and love!”

Stunned, Alba Lucinia remained silent, unable to find the right answers in the torture of her emotions.

Behind the curtains, something significant was taking place.

Walking absentmindedly towards the visitors’ room, Celia surprised Hateria, who, like a shadow, was standing in the hall listening to the prefect’s

loudly spoken and reckless words.

As she approached, she too heard the final impassioned words of Claudia's husband and turned pale in anguished surprise.

Although she distinctly heard what the prefect had said, she noticed that her mother had remained strangely silent. Could such an affair be possible under their roof? Her innocent heart did not want to harbor such dishonorable thoughts, which would be harmful to her mother's chastity. She wanted to pray first so that her heart would not succumb to hasty, unworthy judgments; but she felt it urgent to get the servant away from there before the situation became more complicated, attracting the gossip and curiosity of the other servants.

"Hateria, what are you doing here?" she asked kindly.

"I was bringing the mistress her flowers," she replied, feigning casualness, "but I was afraid of disturbing the peace of the lady and the prefect, who appreciate each other so much."

Claudia Sabina's accomplice stressed those last words with such simplicity that Celia herself, in the holy innocence of her affectionate soul, did not perceive any malice. "All right. Give me the flowers. I'll give them to her myself."

Hateria withdrew immediately to avoid suspicion, while Celia put the roses in a vase in the anteroom and retired to her bedroom with a heavy heart, letting out in a sincere prayer the sorrowful tears of her disturbed soul.

Her mother's silence had affected her deeply. Was it possible that she loved that man? Had such profound personal differences sprung up between her parents that a sentimental calamity would come upon that home always filled with the purest affections? She had not heard her mother respond to that womanizer with the necessary force. That silence terrified her. Was it possible that the passions of the world had overcome her mother, so dignified and sincere, in her father's absence? The most painful conjectures filled her overexcited and sorrowful mind.

Nevertheless, she resolved not to let her doubts and concerns transpire. She refused to believe in her mother's moral ruin, but even so, with her Christian reasoning, she knew that if Alba Lucinia did commit adultery one day, the time would come when, as a daughter, she would show her the most holy love with the sublime demonstrations of supreme selflessness.

Harboring these ideas, her loving spirit felt comforted as she recalled the precious teachings of Jesus.

Meanwhile, Helvidius's wife, without her daughter hearing her indignant words, replied forcefully after a long pause:

“Sir, I have always tolerated your insults with resignation and charity, not only because of the ties that bind you to my father, but also because of the warm relationship between you and my husband; but patience has its limits.

“How has your dignity as a patrician reached such a low level, inconceivable in even the vilest criminals on Esquilinus?! There, in the provincial environment, I never supposed that, in Rome, men of the government availed themselves of their prerogative to humiliate defenseless women with the heinousness of their unspeakable passions!

“Are you not ashamed of your conduct, trying to stain the reputation of an honest home and a woman who takes pride in cultivating the loftiest domestic virtues? Under what conditions do you attempt this unprecedented crime! Your incredible statements in my husband's absence constitute a shameful betrayal and the vilest cowardice! ...

“Just look at your unbelievable behavior! The hospitable doors of this home, which have been constantly opened to welcome you as a friend, are now open to cast you out like a monster!”

With her face ablaze, Alba Lucinia expressed her resolute spirit in those distressing circumstances. Indignantly, she pointed out the door to Lollius Urbicus and asked him to leave.

“Madam, is that how one receives true love?” muttered Lollius Urbicus in a muffled voice.

“I do not know the code for dissolute behavior, and I could never understand friendship by harming someone,” said the dignified woman with the heroism of her womanly strength.

Hearing her and seeing her indomitable virtue, the praetorian prefect opened the door to leave, uttering angrily:

“You shall hear me with more kindness another time. My patience is endless!”

And he dashed off into the shadows of the night that had darkened the gray sky.



Finding herself alone, the patrician let the bitter tears she had been holding inside flow without restraint. The longing for her husband, her moral concerns, the insults of that ruthless womanizer, and the lack of a friend who could protect her and share her anguish – all contributed to darken the clouds blurring her mind.

Celia sought in vain to console her distressing concerns. Three painful and sad days passed.

Celia could tell her mother was anguished, but she could not determine the cause. She still felt troubled and confused by the prefect's words. Putting aside any thought that could compromise her mother's dignity, however, she tried to forget the matter by increasing her tokens of love.

Alba Lucinia, on her part, pondered with sorrow the nefarious influence Lollius Urbicus and his wife exerted over her family's destiny, and prayed fervently to the household gods for compassion and mercy.

The situation continued in the same painful way, when one day, the old servant Belisarius, a person of the Lucius family's confidence, arrived to inform them that the elderly man's condition had deteriorated unexpectedly. Marcia had sent him with the news, urging them to come to Aventinus immediately.

Within the hour, Helvidius's litter was on the way.

Soon, Celia and her mother were with the kindly old man, who welcomed them with a broad smile, despite his obvious physical debilitation. His white head was resting on the pillows and he could no longer raise it, but his white wrinkled hands grasped his daughter-in-law and granddaughter with unsurpassed tenderness. Alba Lucinia noticed his general collapse, surprised at his condition. The strange glow in his eyes suggested the worst.

The ailing man replied with serenity and lucidity to their first questions:

“There was nothing to justify Marcia's fears ... I think that by tomorrow I shall get back to my life as usual. The doctor has already come and prescribed what is proper and necessary.”

And noticing Alba Lucinia's profound despair, he added:

“What is it, my daughter? You have come to care for a sick man while worse off than he is? ... Your frailty concerns me ... You're eyes are sunken; your face, pale and sad!”

Sensing that her grandfather wanted to talk to her mother in private, Celia left with Marcia, who had confided her concerns to her about the state of the venerable old man's health.

Alba Lucinia sat on the edge of the bed and kissed the sick man's hand with love and tenderness.

She wanted to apologize for the impression she had given him, to give the excuse of a headache or some other banal reason that would justify her lassitude, but an overwhelming sadness had seized her soul. Besides all her sorrows, something whispered to her heart that her old father-in-law, whom she loved like a father, was about to depart for the fogs of the tomb. Faced with this grievous prospect, she gazed at him with the compassionate tenderness of her feminine heart. She looked for a pretext not to bother him with her agonizing reality, yet Cneius Lucius's strange and effulgent gaze seemed to read the truth by itself.

"Why so quiet, daughter?" ... he asked after waiting a few minutes for an answer to his tender questions. "Has someone wounded your loving and devoted heart? Your silence leads me to believe you are enduring a very deep moral pain ..."

Sensing that the ill man had identified the anguished state of her soul, Alba Lucinia let a tear fall, coming from her dilacerated heart.

"Father, please don't worry about me or be troubled by this tear! I feel prey to the strangest and most torturous thoughts ... Helvidius's absence, problems at home and now your health have filled me with a lot of distressing and indescribable thoughts! But the gods will have pity on our situation and will protect Helvidius and restore your precious health!"

"I know, daughter, but that's not all that's troubling you," replied Cneius Lucius with his calm and insightful gaze. "Other torments are straining your heart! ... For a long time I've been thinking about the different life you led in the Province compared to the one you are living here in the abyss of our social conventions ... Your sensitive spirit has surely been wounded by the thorns along the rough roads of these times of decadence and painful conflict!"

And as if his analysis were probing even deeper, he added:

"I also feel that certain people in our social circle have been tormenting you deeply ... Am I right?"

Looking into his calm, bright eyes, whose transparency admitted no subterfuge, Helvidius's wife replied with a sigh of distress:

"Yes, Father, you're right; but I hope you'll trust me, because according to the nobility of our family codes, I will fulfill my duties as wife and mother under any circumstance."

The venerable patrician entered into deep thought for a while as if searching within for a solution to comfort his daughter-in-law, whom he had always thought of as his own loving and worthy daughter.

Then, as if he had heard the silent voice of his own soul, he added:

"Have you ever heard that we have several lifetimes?"

"What do you mean, Father? I don't understand."

"Yes, some of the most ancient philosophers have left such comforting truths in the world for us. Ever since the studies of my youth, I had always fought against them and remained faithful to our most respected traditions; however, old age and illness have their great virtues! ... Human experience has taught me that we need many lifetimes to learn and to purify ourselves ... Now that I'm at the threshold of the grave, the deepest thoughts are visiting my mind. The question of successive lives has become clear with all the beauty of its wondrous consequences. Old age makes me feel that the spirit doesn't change only as the results of the lessons or struggles of one century, and illness has helped me recognize that the body is a poor garment that disintegrates with time. We live beyond the tomb with our strongest and most sincere impressions, and then we return to earth to continue the same experiences to aid our spiritual evolution."

Noticing that his daughter-in-law was listening to his philosophical words with astonishment, the venerable old man pointed out:

"I am making these remarks, my daughter, to make it clear to you that, in spite of the decrepitude that brings death, I have a lively spirit filled with the same dispositions and hopes. Without the assurance of immortality, earthly life would be a ludicrous and painful comedy. But I know that another life flourishes and new possibilities greet us beyond the grave.

"That is why I can empathize with the pain you are feeling right now; but I believe that in the future, Divine Providence will grant us new experiences and new pathways ... Those who hate or persecute us now may be converted to the good through our devoted, compassionate love. Who knows?"

After this life, we may come back to redeem our souls for Heaven and to help with the redemption of our enemies. Let's have faith, mercy and hope, believing that time should be a divine heritage! ... According to the lofty principle of multiple lives, blood ties are an opportunity for the most sublime possibilities to transform the vileness of hatred or unspeakable sentiments into caressing manacles of selflessness and love ...

“With no physical strength to save my dear children from the pitfalls and dangers of the world, I hold on to my fond hopes for the still-distant future, without questioning the wisdom that governs the work and trials of earthly existence.”

Cneius Lucius was exhausted. His wise and inspiring words rose from his throat with indefinable difficulty. Furthermore, Alba Lucinia had failed to grasp his loving, transcendental exhortations. She attributed them to possible mental changes arising from his physical condition. Showing herself stronger in light of her own anguish, she conveyed to the old man that his condition required rest and that he should refrain from prolonged exertion, inappropriate at that moment.

With a loving and resigned smile, the wise patrician realized that his daughter-in-law had not understood his words.

A few minutes later, Helvidius's wife shared her impressions with the others in the household regarding the ailing old man's mental state. Marcia replied that it was not surprising because the kindly old man had shown sympathy for the Christian doctrines.

Only Celia understood the situation and rushed to comfort him. With her immense tenderness, she embraced her grandfather while he warned her:

“I know why you're kissing and hugging me like this ... It's a shame that our whole family can't grasp the principles that enlighten and comfort our hearts! ... I cannot speak to the others with the openness with which you and I share our thoughts ... To you, therefore, I must confess that my body is living its final hours. Soon, I shall have departed to the world of truth, where all human conventions cease. Instead of entrusting you to your parents, I entrust them to you! ... I feel that Helvidius and Lucinia are experiencing many torments in the environment of Rome, from which they had weaned themselves long ago ... Sacrifice yourself for them, my child ... If more difficult situations arise, love them even more ... You yourself led me to the Gospel and you must remember that Jesus said that he was the remedy for the

sick and the sinner ... His merciful words were not meant for the healthy but for the sick, and his hands, to save the lost sheep of his divine fold ... Do not be afraid to renounce or sacrifice all the things of this world ... Pain is the sacred price of our redemption ... If God has pity on my spiritual indigence, I will come from the mystery of the tomb to strengthen you with my love if necessary.”

While his granddaughter listened to his words deeply moved but serene in her faith, the venerable patrician continued after a long pause:

“Ever since yesterday, I have felt that I’m entering a new and different life ... I hear voices calling me from afar, and beings of light imperceptible to others surround my desolate bed ... I can tell it won’t be long for the throes of death to overcome my body ... but before that happens, I want to tell you that you will always be in your grandpa’s heart, wherever or whenever.”

His voice became sluggish and wheezy, but the young woman, understanding the situation of her beloved grandfather, held his snow-white head with more care and greater tenderness.

“Celia,” he murmured with difficulty, “all my wishes about ... material life ... are expressed ... in a letter to Helvidius ... in the strongbox containing my ... mementos ... My sinner’s conscience ... is in prayer and I know ... that Jesus will not despise my pleas. But I’d like you ... to say the Lord’s Prayer now in my final hour ...”

His lips were still moving as if a sudden drop in energy impeded elocution, but his granddaughter, a soul tempered in ardent faith and the great emotions of earthly anguish, understood the dying man’s calm and profound gaze. Holding back her tears, she murmured:

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven ...”

She finished the prayer serenely, as if her words had reached Paradise.

The old man fixed his tender gaze on her as if in the silence of his final hours he had concentrated his last thoughts on her love.

Full of caring, Celia straightened his pillows after a kiss wet with tears. Immediately thereafter, she left the room to inform her mother.

Cneius Lucius had fallen into profound prostration. Unrelenting shortness of breath cut off his speech, and he entered into the agonies of

death, which would last more than seventy hours.

The medical resources of the day were of no avail with their rubbings and concoctions. The dying man was slowly losing his “tonus vital” amid the most painful afflictions. Marcia’s and Publicia’s tears mixed with Alba Lucinia’s and her daughter’s as they watched the beloved old man’s harsh suffering. A servant was sent in haste to Capua to request the presence of Caius Fabricius and his wife, who might perhaps be able to arrive in Rome in time for the final tributes.

On the morning of the third day of painful agony – as occurs with the elderly – Celia realized that her grandfather was in the final throes of his earthly existence. His breathing was almost imperceptible and an intense cold had begun to come over his feet and hands.

His family realized that his final moment had arrived ... In her resigned sorrow, Marcia sat beside her venerable father and lovingly put his head on her knees while Celia held his cold, wrinkled hands ... Her soul in fervent prayer, asking Jesus to receive her grandfather in the light of his mercy, the young Christian, in the ecstasy of her faith, felt that the spacious chamber was starting to fill with strange and indefinable light. It appeared to her that luminous, aerial beings were crossing the alcove in all directions ... Sometimes she could even make out their facial features, although she could not identify them, and she was surprised by the sight of shining white tunics, similar to peplos robes of translucent snow.

Among those radiant beings, she glimpsed someone she knew. It was Nestorius, who comforted her with a tender smile. She then understood that our loved ones who precede us to the tomb come to welcome those who have reached their last day on earth. In that luminous moment, her heart filled with loving joy and radiant hope ... She wanted to speak to Nestorius’s figure and ask about Cyrus, but refrained from saying a word, fearful that her blessed vision would vanish ... However, as if her innermost thoughts were heard by her discarnate friend, she realized that the former slave was speaking to her. She strangely heard his voice, as if the phenomenon obeyed a new process of inter-cerebral hearing.

“Child,” Nestorius’s spirit seemed to lovingly say to her, “Cyrus has already returned and you shall see him soon! ... Calm your heart and keep your faith without disdaining sacrifice! ... Farewell! ... We have come here with other devoted friends to take a righteous soul back with us!”

With her eyes awash in tears, Helvidius's daughter saw Nestorius embrace the dying man, while an irresistible force pulled her from her ecstasy, making her return to normal life.

As if she had arrived from another realm, she heard Marcia and her mother sobbing and knew that the dying man had breathed his last.

Cneius Lucius, with his conscience edified in the extensive sufferings of a long life, departed at daybreak when the wonderful Roman sun was beginning to gild Aventinus with the first kisses of dawn.

Deep mourning overtook the palace that for so many years had served as a home for his noble sentiments. For eight days his remains were laid out for public viewing, during which both nobles and plebeians mingled together with thoughts of gratitude.

The news of the unfortunate event was sent to Helvidius through the Emperor's own messenger service, while Caius and his wife arrived from Campania to attend the final tributes to the illustrious and beloved deceased.

Cneius Lucius had not had the comfort of Helvidius's presence, but Cornelius took every measure to see to it that he would not lack the honors of the State. Thus, the venerable patrician, known and esteemed for his moral and civic virtues, received homage from the entire city before being lowered into the grave.

## 2

# Slander and Sacrifice

Helvidius Lucius was between Thessaly and Boeotia when the news of his father's death reached him. It was pointless for him to think about a visit to Rome to comfort the bereaved hearts of his family, not only because many days had already passed, but also because of his intense work in the position entrusted to him by the whims of the Emperor.

Amid the marble and treasures of ancient Phocis, on whose ruins he had to use his talents in choosing materials that could be employed in the buildings of Tibur, he felt a huge void in his heart. His father had been a support and symbol to him, and his death left an undying longing in his soul.

The long months of separation from his home dragged on heavily.

He threw himself in vain into his work to escape the despair that often overwhelmed his heart.

Although the imperial entourage remained in Athens with Hadrian, Helvidius was never free from social and political conventions in the environment of his daily activities. In particular, Claudia Sabina was never absent in the toil of their common efforts. She cooperated in the task with decisiveness and success, and thus regained Helvidius's former sympathy and friendship. Although he did admire her working capabilities, however, he never compromised his sacred conjugal duties, keeping his wife's image in the sanctuary of his fondest memories with loyalty and reverence. He received her loving, trustful letters as an indispensable stimulus for his work and cherished the hope of returning to Rome before long, like someone who eagerly awaits the day of peace and freedom.

However, for some time now, the kindly patrician had harbored a heavy presentiment of worries and anguish.



Having changed her method of seduction, Lollius Urbicus's wife now presented herself to him as a devoted and loyal friend, a sister in his ideals and concerns. Nonetheless, deep down the former plebeian held on to the same demented passion as before, along with the same plans for revenge against Alba Lucinia, whom she considered the usurper of her happiness.

However, as the tribune observed her reiterated and apparently sincere dedication, he began to believe in her lack of interest. He had noticed the comforting transformation of her sentiments away from her profound tendency for artificiality. Yet, Claudia Sabina continued to be madly in love with him. The constant postponement of her hopes solidified her passion even more. Inside, she felt the sufferings of a wounded lioness, but the truth is that with every attempt to win Helvidius's love, he made her perceive the sacredness of their marital obligations, indifferent to her anxious looks and unspeakable aspirations. Lollius Urbicus's wife did want to be loved in that way – with fidelity and devotion – but her heart's unrefined sentiments did not let her feel the spirit's nobler vibrations. All she knew was that she loved Helvidius Lucius with all the impulsiveness of her lascivious temperament. To achieve her unconfessable purposes, she would not back down. She hated Alba Lucinia and would not hesitate to extract the cruelest revenge if she could return to the delights of her former, exclusive and violent love.

Claudia realized that since the tribune was steadfast to his concepts of duty, he could be won over only by complete dissimulation, so she showered Helvidius with loving attention and constant dedication. Whenever she incidentally referred to his absent wife, she was careful to praise her, forcing herself to color her remarks with the best hue of sincerity.

Slowly, Cneius Lucius's son was once more getting caught in the web of that woman's charms, giving her undue attention. He felt touched in the innermost fibers of his heart, although he never forsook his most sacred obligations.

Claudia Sabina cherished new hopes, however. From her point of view, all she had to do was remove the bothersome figure of Alba Lucinia to ensure her dishonorable happiness.

One day the prefect's wife, assuming a casual manner in her words as usual, assured Helvidius in private conversation:

“The last letter from one of my friends in Rome informed me of a curious detail regarding my husband. Musonia tells me that most of the time

when Urbicus has some time off from the labors of the State, he spends it at your house.”

“My house?” replied the tribune flushed, divining the malice of such information.

“Yes,” said Claudia, feigning great indifference. “I have always noticed my husband’s singular predilection for your family. Lucinia and your daughter have always been the object of his special kindness. Well, that shouldn’t be surprising. After all, Fabius Cornelius has been Lollius’s best friend for many years now.”

“Yes, that’s undeniable,” said Helvidius, somewhat dissatisfied with such allusions to his home.

Sabina realized that this was a good time to initiate her dark plan, and thus feigning interest in Helvidius Lucius’s domestic peace, she added cunningly:

“My friend, just between you and me, I must tell you that my husband is not a man who upholds the most precious Roman customs. You can imagine how hard it is for me to tell you this, but I want to ensure the peace of your home above all. Hypocritical and impulsive by nature, Lollius Urbicus has made many victims in his risky behavior as an inveterate womanizer. I fear his frequent visits to your home, for your wife’s and daughter’s sake.”

Helvidius went pale. Realizing the effect of her words, Claudia went on ruthlessly:

“We live in a time of frightful surprises, in which the most solid reputations can be ruined unexpectedly ... Ever since I married the prefect, I’ve had to put up with a lot of hardships. His amorous adventures have brought me a lot of sorrow due to the cries of his victims echoing in my soul.”

“By Jupiter!” exclaimed the tribune, greatly impressed, “I cannot contest your assessment, but I’d like to believe that Fabius Cornelius could never have been deceived for so many years in choosing the prefect as one of his best friends.”

“Well, that argument might seem strong at first,” said Sabina astutely, “but we have to remember that you, my friend, restarted your life in the Imperial Capital after many years of being accustomed to the tranquility of the Province. Time will reveal that the censor and the prefect have often been

together in state affairs. They have to respect and like each other; but as for their individual conduct, the gods know the truth of my statements.”

Helvidius Lucius changed the subject to other matters, realizing the sensitivity of those remarks about the honorability of someone else and regarding his own home; but after Sabina left, he felt poisoned by unjustifiable and profound concerns. What was the meaning of Lollius Urbicus’s repeated visits to his home? Was it possible that Alba Lucinia had forgotten her sacred duties? Was Fabius Cornelius so attached to his material interests that he could forget his family’s name and respectable traditions? These numerous thoughts were boiling in turmoil in the tribune’s mind. Thankfully, his dolorous absence was about to end. Aelius Hadrianus had already given orders for the galleys to sail from Italy for their return.

In Rome, meanwhile, Alba Lucinia and her daughter’s situation had reached the peak of moral suffering. Several times Celia had overheard her mother’s talks with the ruthless womanizer, but due to her naiveté she could not perceive her mother’s repulsion before such infamy and cruel audacity. Lucinia, on her part, sometimes came across the prefect in his visits to her home, when, after having been away briefly with her friends, she would find the relentless pursuer in conversation with her daughter. Celia welcomed him with the tolerance of her good sentiments so as not to wound her mother’s heart. Helvidius’s wife, however, sincerely feared the presence of that cruel man who had become a demon of her home’s tranquility.

Worn out and ill, the noble woman thought of explaining the situation to her elderly father. On the other hand, she believed that the censor must have noticed from the moral point of view her distressing position for a long time; hence, she assumed that if he had remained silent, it was because he had strong reasons for doing so.

She had often tried to talk to her daughter about the sensitive matter, assuming that she, too, was a victim of the insidious persecutions of the enemy of her peace. Celia, however, with her natural modesty, did not open up to her mother’s confidences. She would change the course of their conversations and increase her love towards her, sensing her mother’s agonizing concerns.

Finally, with only two months to go before Helvidius’s definite return, Alba Lucinia took to her bed in extreme weakness.

It had been more than a year since the Emperor had left.

It had been fourteen months of anguish for Fabius Cornelius's daughter, whose health could not endure the impact of such painful trials. Celia, too, was pale and sad. Her physical weakness could be seen in her face. Her filial worries played out in long nights of insomnia that eventually ruined her previously sound health. In her innate tenderness, she did everything to console her ailing mother.

Four large galleys were sent from the ports of Italy to bring back Hadrian and his entourage. The first ship that arrived on the coast of Attica was fought over by those most eager to return to Rome. Among them was Claudia Sabina, purporting the utmost necessity to return as soon as possible in light of the demands of her domestic endeavors.

Helvidius Lucius was surprised by her hurry, but could not have imagined the scope of her plans. He too wanted to return immediately but was obliged to accept the Emperor's invitation to join him on the ship of honor, which would arrive in Ostia eight days after the first galleys.

A few days later, the praetorian prefect's wife arrived in the Empire's Capital a week early so she could ponder the execution of the sinister plans for revenge developing in her mind. Her husband welcomed her with his habitual coldness, and the household servants, with the distress that her presence caused them.

Claudia Sabina had means to get the news of her return to Hateria and insisted that she visit her immediately.

Alone with her accomplice, who received her exceeding generosity, the former plebeian told her eagerly:

"Hateria, the time has come to play my last hand. I will carry out my plan without hesitation. As for you, you will now receive the reward of your dedication."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the servant with a greedy look, thinking about her reward.

"How is Helvidius's wife?"

"My mistress is debilitated and very ill."

"Good," said Sabina happily. "That will work in favor of the execution of my plans."

And looking anxiously at her accomplice, she emphasized in a peculiar way:

“Hateria, are you prepared for what might happen?”

“Absolutely, ma’am. I went to the patrician Helvidius Lucius’s house to serve you exclusively. “

“You won’t regret it,” said Sabina decisively. “Listen: we’re almost at the end of the mission that has kept you with Alba Lucinia. I’m counting on your help. This will be your final task in cooperation with my efforts to alleviate my painful past. I have been very generous toward you, but I would like to ensure your future for the good service you have rendered me. What would you like for rest in your old age amid the destitute plebeians?”

After thinking for a moment, the old servant replied happily, as if she had already pondered the precise calculations for an exact answer.

“Ma’am, you know that I have a married daughter, whose husband has had to endure the greatest misery in his days of torment and poverty. Valerius, my son-in-law, has always had a great love for the country life, but in his difficult position as a poor freedman, he has never been able to save enough money to acquire a tract of land that would make his family happy. So, my dream is to have a place far from Rome, where I could settle down with my children and grandchildren, who will love me in the coming days of my decrepitude and inability to work as much as they do today.”

“Your wishes shall be fulfilled,” said the prefect’s wife, while Hateria listened, filled with joy. “I’ll find out the cost of a pleasant location, and when the time comes, I’ll give you the amount you need.”

“And what must I now do to deserve such good fortune?”

“Listen,” said Claudia gravely, “Helvidius Lucius should be back a week from today. On the afternoon of his arrival, you are to come here to receive your instructions. That same day, you’ll have the money you need to realize your wishes. For now, go in peace and trust me.”

Hateria was radiant with the prospects for the future, unmindful of the criminal means she would need to use to achieve her ends.

The next morning, a modest litter left Lollius Urbicus’s residence in the direction of Subura.

Needless to say, it was Claudia Sabina. She was on her way to the familiar house of the seller of sorceries to conclude her sinister plans.

The sorceress of Cumas was not surprised, as if she had been waiting for her.

After dipping her greedy hands into the pile of sestericii Claudia had brought her, Plotina concentrated before her tripod and then said:

“Madam, this is a unique moment! We must take care of all the details for what you need to do so that we do not waste our efforts.”

Claudia Sabina then listened to the detailed plan the sorceress submitted for her consideration.

Plotina spoke in a low voice as if she feared the very walls due to the iniquity of her criminal suggestions.

After the long exposition, Claudia replied pensively:

“But wouldn’t it be better just to murder my rival? I have someone in her home that can inflict the fatal blow. I know you’re familiar with the deadliest potions and that you can give them to me right now.”

“Madam, your suggestions are reasonable, but you must remember that the death of the body only takes care of things of a material nature. But in our case they are spiritual; so, an infallible blow is indispensable. Who’s to say that the man you love will return to your arms if his wife is reduced to ashes and put in a tomb? Those who depart for the Afterlife usually leave behind a lifelong yearning that feeds an everlasting passion.”

And while the prefect’s wife was considering these strange insinuations as true and exact, Plotina continued:

“It is necessary to instill hatred in the heart of the man you desire, so that your happiness is ensured. To do so, one must afflict the soul, striking it and destroying it.”

“Yes, your advice is well thought-out and I mustn’t disregard it; but according to your plan, my husband will have to die.”

“And what does it matter to you if his death is necessary? Aren’t you forcing destiny so you can enjoy possible happiness with another man?”

“Yes, your plan is best; after all, you have been able to foresee all the consequences.” And as if she were envisioning the imaginary figure of her

rival, the victim of her insanity and hatred, she accentuated with her eyes lost in a void:

“Alba Lucinia must live! ... Relegated to a lower plane because of her shame, she shall suffer the same scorn and loathing that I have been suffering!”

Plotina stood up. She took some bottles and packets out of a strange-looking cupboard and gave them to her client with special instructions.

Having embraced the hateful plan openheartedly, Claudia Sabina left, promising to return.

A few days later, Aelius Hadrianus arrived at the Port of Ostia with his impressive entourage, cheered by a huge crowd of patricians and plebeians.

The Emperor, with his predilection for ancient relics, ordered Helvidius to oversee all the work of unloading the peculiar pieces from Phocis meant for Rome. But the tribune delegated the job to one of his trusted servants and headed for the city to embrace his wife and daughter.

Lucinia and Celia welcomed him in raptures of inexpressible joy.

The tribune, however, embraced them taken with great surprise. Both looked debilitated and ill. Nevertheless, they exchanged loving feelings, filled with the delight and joy of seeing each other again. To mark this touching happiness, the kindly patrician – a true family man – pulled a superb bracelet of precious stones from a small box and gave it to his wife as a souvenir from Athens. He gave his daughter a beautiful pearl he had bought in Achaia, as a memento of faraway Greece.

Afterwards, there was a long account of fond and sweet memories. Alba Lucinia described all the details of Cneius Lucius’s illness, suffering and death.

While the city filled with spectacles to mark the Emperor’s return, Helvidius Lucius and his family entertained themselves with endearing conversation, putting an end to their repressed longings.

As the final rays of the sun foreshadowed the twilight, the patrician said to his wife with great tenderness:

“My dear, I have to return to Ostia to spend the night. But tomorrow I’ll be home for good so that we can organize our new life. I’ve already met with Fabius Cornelius, who accompanied the Emperor along with the prefect. But I

won't be able to see Marcia until tomorrow to hear about my father and his last wishes."

"Are your responsibilities in Ostia that imperative?" asked Alba Lucinia, concerned. "Wasn't being away for a year enough for the Emperor's service?"

"Dearest, I have to fulfill my duty to the letter. Hadrian instructed me to check all the relics brought here from Greece, and I can't rely solely on the work of servants given the considerable value of the cargo. But don't worry! Remember that tomorrow I'll be here to structure our family plans."

Alba Lucinia acquiesced with a sad smile, as if facing the inevitable. Her heart, however, wanted her husband's presence so she could immediately convey her innermost sorrows to him.

That evening, Helvidius's litter hurried from the house.

Filled with new hopes, Alba Lucinia went to bed, while her daughter returned to her meditations.

Someone left the tribune's home cautiously and hastily, however, without arousing the curiosity of the domestic servants. It was Hateria, bound for Capitolinus. Claudia Sabina welcomed her eagerly, and leading her into a more discreet room, she said to her:

"It's a good thing you have come early! I have a lot of measures to put in place."

"I'm at your service," said Hateria in her feigned humility.

"Hateria," said Sabina in an almost inaudible voice, "these are decisive moments for my destiny. I'm trusting you like my own mother."

Handing her a heavy bag with the price of her betrayal, she added:

"Here is the reward for your dedication to my happiness. These are the funds for you to buy a piece of land far from Rome, as you wish."

Hateria greedily took the small fortune with a strange joy burning in her eyes. Lolius Urbicus's wife, however, continued in a discreet tone:

"But in exchange for my generosity I must ask you to remain as silent as a tomb, do you understand?"

"I welcome that requirement, believe you me," said her accomplice.



“I believe you.”

After a pause, her eyes lost in a void as if foreseeing her horrible deeds, she asked:

“Are you familiar with the lactary column<sup>2</sup> at the produce market?”

“Yes, it’s not far from the Portico of Octavia. Years ago I used to walk around there looking at the abandoned children.”

“In that case, it’ll be easy to explain what I’m planning.”

She began to explain her plans to the elderly servant in a very low voice. Hateria listened in great amazement but agreed to all her suggestions.

Claudia Sabina looked demented, her eyes fixated, her face sinister. As if concentrating solely on the purpose of carrying out her plans, she turned to the servant mechanically:

“Hateria,” she said, handing her a tiny bottle, “this potion produces physical repose and prolonged sleep ... To administer it, Alba Lucinia must be resting peacefully.”

Entrusting her with another bottle, she added hastily:

“Take this one, too! You’ll need all of it!”

And while the maid put away the elements of the crime, she stressed:

“May the gods of my revenge protect us ... At last, the moment of my retribution has arrived ... Yes, Hateria, tomorrow Helvidius Lucius will know for all intents and purposes that his wife has been unfaithful, as he will be presented with the fruit of her crime ... The choice of a child will be at your discretion ... Can I absolutely count on you?”

“By faith in the power of Jupiter, you can trust me, ma’am. I’ll go to the lactary column after midnight and get a child. Newborns are abandoned there every day by the dozen.”

Night had already covered Rome with its mantle of dense darkness when the sinister plan was finalized.

However, while Hateria returned to her masters’ house, Claudia Sabina abstained from the Emperor’s nighttime festivities and hurried to the Port of Ostia. Finding Cneius Lucius’s son there, she asked him for the favor of a word in private, which was immediately granted.

“Helvidius,” said the wicked creature with her facility for falsity, “I’ve come to warn you privately of serious events – the ones I foresaw when we were in Greece.”

“What events?” asked the patrician anxiously.

“Please hear me out. I believe that the praetorian prefect, with the crassness of his sentiments, has tarnished the honor of your home.”

“Impossible!” replied the tribune vehemently.

“Nevertheless, you should talk to Alba Lucinia immediately to find out just how far Lollius Urbicus has gone in your home.”

“I cannot doubt my wife for even a minute,” he replied sincerely.

“Do you or do you not want to hear me out so you can learn the details?” Sabina asked angrily.

“I will gladly hear you out, provided the subject doesn’t refer to my family or the honor of my home.”

“Well, you just might have to change your mind tomorrow.”

And after abruptly saying goodbye to the man of her passions – who knew how to uphold the traditions of home and family – the former plebeian went back to Capitolinus, more intent than ever on carrying out her sinister designs. The spirit of evil that spoke to her heart was preparing the most terrible events for that evening.

While we leave her at dawn examining documents and scrolls in Lollius Urbicus’s office, let us follow Hateria to the produce market.

Roman society had gotten used to seeing the wretched little foundlings at the lactary column. This place of sad memory, from where many selfless mothers took in poor abandoned children, was somewhat like the beginning of the famous “foundling wheels” of the Christian charities that would flourish later on.

In the dim light of the moon before dawn, the elderly servant found three abandoned little ones. One, however, caught her attention with his soft newborn cries. It was a babe with delicate, noble features that Claudia’s accomplice could examine in detail by the light of her torch. Wrapped in shabby clothes, the foundling seemed to have been born only a few hours ago. Hateria took him in her arms, almost tenderly, and thought to herself: This

child must be the worthy son of Roman patricians! ... What painful story must be hidden in his shabby, ordinary clothing ...

She took him with her and very cautiously entered her masters' house.

Dawn was breaking ...

The perpetrator had added the narcotic to her mistress's medicines the night before.

She went into the room where Helvidius's wife was resting quietly, placed the child beside her and covered her with the warm bedclothes. Then, she staged the appropriate scene, without the victim of the potion, which had immersed her in a long and deep sleep, having any idea of what was happening.

The little one began to cry weakly, however, even though the criminal servant did everything possible to calm him down.

In the room next to her mother, the unusual sound awakened Celia.

She woke up perplexed and deeply moved. She had just dreamed that she was at the gloomy Porta Nomentana cemetery again, just like on the memorable night when she had been able to see her soul's beloved. She seemed to see Cyrus by her side, while Nestorius was preaching as before, asking: "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Her mind was still caught up in these loving emotions and the tenderest memories of her heart ...

But just then, the unusual sound reached her ears. A child crying? What could it mean?

She got up quickly, her anxious thoughts immersed in troubling premonitions.

When Hateria saw that someone was approaching, she tried to make a quick escape, but the young woman had already come through the door and saw her there.

Celia looked at the child next to her sleeping mother and the obvious signs that a birth had taken place. With the anguished suspicions of her filial heart, she presumed to divine what had taken place.

A flurry of grievous thoughts assailed her weakened mind. Yes, that child must have been born there as the inevitable result of an unforgettable tragedy.

“Hateria,” she said with a moan, “what does all this mean?”

“Your mother, my good girl,” replied the criminal servant, completely unruffled, “has given birth to a little boy.”

“This is unbelievable!” sobbed Helvidius’s daughter in a choked voice.

“It’s the truth, even so,” replied Hateria in a very low voice. “I haven’t slept because I have been helping her in her suffering!”

And pointing to the tribune’s unfortunate wife, she said almost calmly:

“She’s asleep now ... she needs to rest.”

Celia couldn’t describe the intense pain of the thoughts that overwhelmed her. She had never believed that her mother could behave immorally in her father’s absence. To her, her mother’s loving heart had always been a model of virtue, a symbol of honesty. Lollius Urbicus had obviously taken his infamy to the most horrifying extremes. After all, she herself had heard the words of that heartless and cruel womanizer! Besides, her mother had been feeling ill for a long time. Surely her kind and honest heart was filled with pangs of remorse and repentance. She felt an infinite tenderness for her mother. Her father had returned the day before, full of new hopes. She had seen tears in her mother’s eyes, tears that should have been of intense joy and happiness. How she must have suffered during those long months of agonizing waiting! And now Alba Lucinia, her mother and best friend, had a son who was not the fruit of her marriage. Helvidius Lucius would never forgive her. Celia knew her father’s benevolent but impulsive character. Furthermore, Roman society did not accept compromises when it came to a tragedy like this among patricians. With tears flowing from her eyes at those harsh and singular thoughts, the young Christian remembered her dream from that night and still seemed to hear Nestorius repeating the words of the Gospel: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Taking her memories even further back, she recalled his exhortation on the eve of his death, when he stated that the best renunciation for Jesus was not just death, but the testimony believers give with examples from their lives. Then, the figure of her grandfather appeared spontaneously in her mind. It seemed that Cneius was returning from the tomb to entrust her with her father’s peace and her mother’s happiness in the harshest of trials.

With tear-filled eyes, she approached the little one, who had opened his eyes for the first time to the first light of day ... The foundling made a motion with his tiny arms as if he were lifting them to her, begging her for comfort

and love. Celia felt her tears falling on his tiny face and she experienced infinite tenderness in her heart. She picked him up as she would a little brother ... She felt his little heart beating against her own like a frightened bird with no direction and no nest ... Her soul, as if touched by mysterious and unexplained sentiments, was taken over by the deepest maternal emotions.

After a few minutes, Hateria watched in shock as Celia knelt at her feet and said in her sublime spirit of sacrifice:

“Hateria, my mother is honest and pure! This child that you see in my arms is my son! He shall be mine now and forever, do you understand?”

“I’ll never say a word!” said Claudia’s terrified accomplice.

“But listen! Since you were my mother’s confidant, help me save her! ... For the love of your beliefs, agree with my plan! ... My mother needs to take care of my father while they are alive and my father adores her! If she erred, why shouldn’t we help her happiness by giving her back the bliss she deserves? My mother would never have erred on her own! ... She has always been good, loving and faithful ... Only a very wicked man could have induced her to commit a wrong like this!

Weeping while the maid listened to her petrified, she continued:

“Yield to my wishes! Forget what you’ve seen tonight, since the tyrants of our times often violate righteous women by giving them potions to make them forget! My poor mother must have been the victim of one of those wretched procedures! ...I want to save her and I’m counting on you! I’ll give you all my most precious jewelry. My father does not usually give me money, but I have the richest keepsakes from him and my grandfather ... You can have them! You can sell them wherever you want ... You’ll have a small fortune.”

“But what about you?” asked Hateria, shocked by this unexpected turn of events. “Have you even considered that this idea of sacrifice is impossible? Who will you stay with? Will your father be able to stand seeing you as the mother of an unfortunate child?!”

“I ...” said the young woman reticently, as if wanting to remember someone who could help in such painful circumstances, “I’ll ... be with Jesus!”

Immediately thereafter, amid the silence of Hateria, who obeyed her automatically, the entire scene was moved to Celia’s room. Celia nestled the

little one against her heart and gave the covetous servant her most precious jewelry, keeping only the pearl Helvidius had given her the day before.

Alba Lucinia, however, had suddenly awakened from her stupor. Dazed from the effects of the narcotic, she was surprised at hearing the baby's cries from her daughter's room.

Seeing Hateria through the curtain, she called to her out loud to find out what was happening.

The criminal maid appeared in front of her, pale and terrified.

Lifting her hands to her head in a gesture of feigned despair, she clamored in a strange voice:

“Ma’am! ... Ma’am! What a terrible disgrace!”

The tribune's wife, pale and dazed, with her heart pounding, was about to question the servant when someone came through the door and entered the room. It was Helvidius. Fabius's son-in-law had not been able to sleep. After Sabina's perfidious insinuations, it seemed as if a dreadful poison was sapping him of all his strength. He had worked hard to ensure that the nighttime hours would be less distressing, but at the break of dawn he mounted a speedy horse that had carried him swiftly back home to reinforce his spiritual tranquility with his wife and daughter.

Just as he was arriving, he could still hear the elderly servant exclaiming in desperation:

“A disgrace! ... A terrible disgrace!”

As Lucinia looked at him, afflicted and distressed, Helvidius Lucius walked over to her and the maid with an oppressed and sad expression.

“Explain yourself, Hateria!” Alba Lucinia had the strength to mutter in her distress.

At that moment, however, after a long prayer, the young Christian appeared almost stumbling at the door of her mother's alcove.

Her eyes were red and downcast, her clothes disheveled, her hair in disarray. Lulled in her loving arms, the baby had calmed down, like a bird that has found its way back to its warm nest.

Helvidius and his wife stared at their daughter, astonished and aghast.

“What is the meaning of this?” the tribune exploded, turning to the servant.

Celia wanted to explain herself but her voice died in her throat, while Hateria clarified:

“My lord, tonight the girl ...”

However, facing the patrician’s harsh look, her voice got lost in the silence of her remorse and doubt regarding the terrible consequences of her infamy.

Celia, however, full of faith in divine providence and sincerely wishing to sacrifice herself for her mother, knelt humbly and said in a firm voice:

“Yes, father ... Mother ... It grieves me to confess my wrong, but this child is my son!” The tribune felt an unfamiliar jolt in his whole being. His head was spinning, while a white pallor covered his rage and anguish-twisted face. His wife displayed the same emotions, but her terrified eyes could not find tears to cry. However, Alba Lucinia still had the strength to say as she looked upward:

“God in heaven!”

On her knees, Celia said with tears of humility while Hateria looked on coldly and impassively:

“If you can, forgive your daughter who was unable to be happy! I know the crime I’ve committed and willingly accept the consequences of my wrong!”

With downcast eyes, her tears covering the face of the innocent little child, the young woman continued to address her father, who listened to her horrified as if the terror of that moment had petrified him:

“In your absence, a tyrant visited our home. Welcomed as a friend, he harassed my mother with all his infamous manipulations ... However, as you know, she remained faithful and pure! Realizing her incorruptible virtue, the praetorian prefect took advantage of my innocence, which led to what you see here! ... I never confessed my wrong to my mother, but tonight I sensed the reality of my misfortune! At the height of my suffering, I sought Hateria’s help to save the life of this little innocent one!”

And lifting her pleading eyes to the impassive maid, the young woman added:

“Isn’t that right, Hateria?”

Alba Lucinia and her husband did not want to believe what they saw, but the criminal servant confirmed it with feigned sorrow:

“Yes!”

“I know that our traditions will not forgive my wrong,” continued Celia sadly, “but all my grief comes from the fact that I have tainted my paternal home by accepting dishonor and causing shame! I cannot be forgiven, but please consider my repentance and have compassion on my broken spirit! I will expiate my wrong as the circumstances demand, and if death is necessary to wash away the stain, I shall die with humility!”

Tears choked her voice, even though she felt supported by intangible arms from the spirit plane in her painful moment of sacrifice.

Helvidius Lucius emerged from his stupor, took a few steps toward his trembling wife and asked in a strange, almost sinister voice:

“So, Lollius Urbicus is in fact the criminal?”

Feeling her strength failing, Alba Lucinia recalled her domestic Calvary due to the onslaught of the womanizer, whose pursuit of his daughter she had guessed. Far from knowing the whole dreadful reality of the events the criminal genius of Claudia Sabina had set in motion, she stated faintly:

“Yes, Helvidius, the prefect has been a merciless persecutor in our home!”

“But my heart doesn’t want to believe what my eyes see,” said the tribune in a low voice.

Celia was still kneeling, her eyes filled with tears as she held the crying little child. Overcome with grief and astonishment, Alba Lucinia gazed at her daughter. She now thought she understood why she had avoided all social activities of late and why she had stayed isolated in her room, absorbed in prayer and meditation. She had attributed Celia’s withdrawal to her grandfather’s death, which had left a terrible longing in them both. However, her mother’s suspicion now understood that the cowardly womanizer had taken advantage of her daughter’s naiveté. She had often been afraid to leave Celia alone at home, her motherly intuition warning her that Lollius Urbicus would try to seek revenge by carrying out his terrible threats. Now, the bitter reality tortured her mind.



“Alba,” Helvidius continued darkly, “Explain yourself! Didn’t you exercise your necessary maternal vigilance in this house? Is it true that the praetorian prefect insulted your dignity?”

“Helvidius,” she sobbed, her voice trembling, “Everything that’s happening is absolutely strange and incredible, but the fact of the matter is obvious, attesting to the bitterest reality! I suspected our poor daughter was also a victim of my father’s perverse friend, because, ever since you left, I myself have been suffering the most atrocious persecutions, turned into incessant threats because I resisted his unspeakable desires.”

Faced with the crumbling of his last hopes due to his wife’s sincere explanation that attested to her anguish and surprise, the proud patrician let the apparent realities of that hour completely dominate him.

With his fists clenched and his hard, dark eyes revealing his inflexible disposition towards vengeance, Helvidius Lucius, his facial features taken over by profound despair, said in a terrible voice:

“I shall mercilessly avenge myself against that criminal!”

And looking at his daughter, still on her knees with her eyes lowered as if avoiding her father’s eyes, he declared in horror:

“As for you, you shall die to purge this heinous crime! You began afflicting me by preferring slaves and have ended up by ruining my name and dragging this home into an execrable situation! But I shall remove this criminal stain with my implacable decisions!”

With that, the proud tribune pulled out a steel dagger that glittered in the brightness of the morning sun. Alba Lucinia, however, had foreseen his inflexible decision and with a leap, grabbed his arm, crying out in distress:

“Helvidius, by the gods! ... Isn’t the immense pain of our shame and misfortune enough? ... Do you want to aggravate our suffering with death and crime? No! Not that! After all, Celia is our daughter!”

Just then, the tribune remembered the loving pleas of his father, as if asking him for calm, resignation and clemency. It seemed to him that Cneius Lucius had returned from the shadows of the tomb to plead for his idolized granddaughter, adding to his own wife’s exhortations.

Feeling his heart overflow with unspeakable moral suffering, he said in a hollow voice:

“The gods will not permit me to be a miserable daughter killer ... But I shall crush that traitor as I would crush a viper!”

He turned suddenly to his humiliated daughter and spoke forcefully:

“I shall spare your life; but from now on, in our immeasurable sorrow, you are dead forever, for your indignity does not allow you to live one more one minute under your parents’ roof! ... You are damned forever! ... Away with you! Forget your parents and your birth, for Rome will attend your funeral in a few days! You will be an outsider to our affections! ... Remember us no more, nor return to your past, because I would kill you with my own hands!”

Celia was still on her knees in her humble attitude, but her proud and offended father’s decisive words resounded in her ears.

“Get out! Leave; damn you!”

She got up unsteadily and gave her mother a final look, in which she seemed to concentrate all her belief and hope.

Alba Lucinia returned the loving gesture, looking at her with sorrowful tenderness. She seemed to detect in the clarity of that look all the innocence of her unfortunate child’s Christian soul, and her motherly heart inwardly thanked the gods for sparing her life.

Grasping the inflexibility of her father’s command, Celia took a few faltering steps, left through a side door and found herself out on the street without direction or destination. Behind her the doors of her parents’ home closed forever.

After reproaching his wife’s conduct, blaming her for her indifference and lack of supervision, and after promising to reward Hateria’s silence and threatening her with imprisonment if he found out otherwise, he sent one of his most trustworthy servants to his in-laws’ house for them to come to his home immediately.

Within an hour Fabius Cornelius and his wife were with the couple and were told everything that had happened.

While Julia Spinter’s heart was touched by the most sorrowful emotions, the proud old censor declared with conviction:

“Helvidius, we must find that traitor as soon as possible and kill him, whatever the consequences. But you should have killed your daughter too,

because according to our codes of honor, blood must compensate the damages of shame! In any case, she will be morally dead forever. After we eliminate Lollius Urbicus, we'll have Celia's ashes taken from Capua to the family vault in Rome.

While the disconsolate mother and daughter stayed in the room, consoling each other and praying for the protection of the gods for this unexpected, painful tragedy, Fabius and Helvidius hurried to Capitolinus to murder the enemy as if they were killing a foul, poisonous snake.

However, a surprise as great as the earlier one was waiting for them.

There was unusual, strange activity in the praetorian prefect's palace. Before reaching the atrium, the two patricians were informed that Lollius Urbicus had died minutes before, apparently of suicide.

The death of her husband had been part of Claudia's sinister plan. She was now the owner of his opulent financial assets, and most importantly, there would be no voice to explain to Helvidius Lucius the infamy the former plebian believed she had inflicted on his wife's name. Furthermore, at dawn Sabina had taken a blank scroll containing the prefect's signature and had written in a perfect imitation of his handwriting a laconic note in which he confessed he was tired of life, pleading Fabius Cornelius, his longtime friend, to forgive the moral damage he had caused him.

As Fabius and Helvidius entered their dead enemy's house in disbelief, they were met by Claudia Sabina, who seemed tearful on that tragic morning.

After lamenting her fate and commenting on her husband's gloomy resolve to desert life, Sabina gave Urbicus's last note to the censor, which she said was written by her husband at the last minute. She expressed curiosity about that unjustified and strange request for forgiveness. This was her way of trying to discover the initial results of Hateria's malevolent work, her vengeful spirit waiting anxiously for indirect information from Helvidius's lips or from some hint by Fabius.

The censor and son-in-law, however, took Urbicus's supposed note curtly and indifferently. And since they had to say something, considering that unexpected event, Fabius Cornelius remarked:

"I shall keep this note as evidence of his mental imbalance in his final moments, because that is the only way to justify this request." And now,

Madam,” he stressed enigmatically to Claudia, who listened to him attentively, “You will forgive our departure, since we have our own woes ...”

The elderly patrician extended his hands in farewell, but her curiosity greatly stirred by his words, the former plebeian asked with interest, as if trying to provoke a clarification from Helvidius Lucius, who had retreated into enigmatic silence:

“Woes? Why, what do you mean? Are you going to leave me alone in this situation? Why would you leave this house like that, when the body of a friend and leader demands your testimonies of veneration and friendship? Has something serious happened to Alba Lucinia?”

The last question clearly denoted some furtive purpose. As she had anticipated and derived from her plans, she hoped Helvidius would tell her about his domestic tragedy, his deep marital sorrows and his wife’s infidelity. Her degenerate heart was waiting for the man she loved to offer her all the amorous attentions she had so ardently yearned for over the past few months, in which her petty sentiments had cherished such great hope. The tribune, however, remained impassive, as if his lips were immovable.

Without betraying his proud fiber, Fabius Cornelius explained to Sabina in these terms:

“My daughter is doing well, thanks to the gods, but we too have just been wounded to the depths of our hearts! A courier from Campania brought us the sad news this morning of the sudden death of my unmarried granddaughter, who was with her sister at a resort. This is what is impeding us from offering our last homage to the prefect, for we came here to inform him of our immediate departure for Capua to arrange for the transport of the ashes!”

With that, the two men said their curt farewells and left amid the movement of friends and hurried servants who conveyed their final flattery in their demonstrations for Lollius Urbicus.

Faced with this enigmatic turn of events, Sabina let her thoughts wander in conjectures. Could Hateria have neglected to blindly carry out her orders? What had happened to her rival, whose news had left her perplexed after planning everything so carefully? But social conventions, the obligations of that extreme moment that her own evilness had caused, would not allow her to run like a mad woman to her accomplice, wherever she might be, to satisfy her curiosity.

While her mind was lost in anxious ponderings, Fabius Cornelius and his son-in-law went to the Emperor to obtain the necessary permission for the trip to Campania. In order to shorten the trip as much as possible, he immediately let them make use of a galley that would meet them in Ostia.

The vessel left port that same afternoon to take the family to their destination. Lucius Helvidius had not forgotten to take Hateria with their other trusted servants.

While the Roman patricians render homage to the praetorian prefect, and as Helvidius's galley is departing with four sorrowing hearts in its hull, let us follow the young Christian in her first hours of sorrow and sacrifice.

After leaving her parents' home, Celia crossed streets and plazas, afraid of encountering someone who might recognize her on her pain-filled path ...

She nestled the little child against her heart as if he were her own son, such was the tenderness the tiny figure inspired in her.

After wandering for a long time, caught up in anguished thoughts, she felt that the sun had been out for a while and she needed to find some food for the little one. She had crossed the aristocratic neighborhoods and now found herself at the Fabricius Bridge<sup>8</sup>, completely worn out. Beyond the Tiber were the modest buildings of Jews and poor freedmen. She could see the famous Tiber Island, where the temples of Jupiter and Aesculapius once stood ... Sons and daughters of plebeians passed by her, anxious and hurriedly. Sailors from the navy's Ravenna fleet, stationed in Trastevere, appeared once in a while, directing lustful gazes at her. Exhausted, she walked towards the house of some Jews, where a woman gave her something to eat and provided her with everything the little child needed. Feeling more comforted, and taking a small provision of donkey's milk with her, Helvidius's daughter continued her sorrowful pilgrimage along the public roads, as if waiting for a happy inspiration for her pain-filled destiny.

That afternoon, however, she returned to the same place, near where she had been helped by the humblest of the humble.

Sad and lonely, she rested in one of the nooks of the Fabricius Bridge, sometimes watching the poorly dressed passersby, sometimes looking at the waters of the Tiber, with her heart enveloped in painful thoughts.

Little by little, the sun slowly disappeared, gilding in gold the last clouds on the horizon.

A cold, cutting wind began to blow in every direction. As she watched the poor workers returning to their homes, the young Christian held the poor little child more closely to her. Feeling despondent, she began to pray and remembered that Jesus had also walked forsaken in the world and she felt a gentle comfort in this evangelical remembrance. However, a pungent longing for her home overcame her sensitive, caring heart. After the burdensome work of the day, women of the common folk were returning home with quiet joy on their faces, while she, the daughter of patricians, felt overwhelmed with the uncertainty of her fortune and exposed to the biting chill of dusk ...

Always snuggling the little one as if wanting to keep him from the glacial air of the early evening, she could not contain the tears as she reflected with dismay on her painful destiny, despite her faith and resignation!

Struck by the sun, the large clouds faded little by little and gave way to the first stars.

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<sup>7</sup> The lactary column [columna lactaria] at the produce market, or Forum Olitorium, was the place where abandoned newborns were exposed daily. – Emmanuel.

<sup>8</sup> The Fabricius Bridge was later named Ponte dei Quattro Capi, because of a statue of Janus Quadrifons placed at its entrance. It was built of stone, after the Catiline Conspiracy. – Emmanuel.

# 3

## Road of Sorrow

After disembarking at a port in Campania in the vicinity of Capua, Helvidius Lucius went ahead of the rest of his family to prepare his daughter and son-in-law for the execution of his wishes.

Caius Fabricius and his wife suffered a dire blow with the unexpected revelations about Celia, and obeying the tribune's decision, they created the necessary scenario for the city's aristocratic circles to receive the news from their home. Meanwhile, not disdaining the large financial compensation Helvidius was offering them, the temple priests facilitated the resolution of the matter. Thus, all memory of the young woman was relegated to a handful of ashes.

After receiving tributes from Capua's patrician society, which was surprised by the mysterious event, Fabius Cornelius and all his family headed back to Rome. There, they held the simplest of funerals, albeit following the conventions of the times and in keeping with family tradition.

However, while Celia's supposed ashes were being lowered into the tomb, a new affliction assailed the domestic circle of our characters.

Deeply wounded to the sensitive core of her maternal heart, Julia Spinter was unable to bear such deep sorrow in addition to the many that were already undermining her existence and suddenly departed the earth. Those close to her were not even forewarned of her approaching death, which occurred one night as the result of a heart attack.

Mourning once again enveloped Helvidius's home, with Alba Lucinia experiencing the most atrocious inner suffering. At that time, due to Lollius Urbicus's passing, Fabius Cornelius had received new duties from the Emperor, who bestowed great powers and major responsibilities on him for the solution of all financial issues.

His wife's death filled his heart with singular sorrow. Nevertheless, he tried to fight against the forces that were depressing his spirit and proceeded with his authoritative position with the same pride that tempered his character.

Feeling quite alone, Helvidius Lucius and his wife had been planning to return to the provincial tranquility of Palestine. However, the unexpected death of the noble matron prevented them once again from carrying out their long-cherished plans as they directed their attention to the aging censor, whose proud, impassive heart had always shown them the clearest demonstrations of love and dedication.

In elucidating the situation of all our characters, we must not forget Claudia Sabina after the unexpected outcome of the dolorous events that she herself had viciously set in motion. With her husband dead and knowing that all her plans had come to naught, she looked in vain to hear from Hateria, who had been elevated to a position of heightened trust in Helvidius Lucius's home and had resolved never to leave the house for fear of Claudia's retaliation. In possession of the large amount of money the tribune had given her in exchange for her silence, the elderly servant called her son-in-law and daughter to her masters' house. There, she gave them part of her small fortune, which they used to buy a beautiful place in her name in Benevento, where they would settle until the time came when she too would decide to leave for rural life.

In spite of her efforts, Claudia Sabina would never see Hateria again. While the servant never left the house, Fabius Cornelius also had increasingly stronger powers in the imperial city, indirectly forcing Claudia to keep her silence and distance. Consequently, the former plebeian left Rome for Tibur, accompanying the futilities of the Court of Hadrian, whose last years of rule were characterized by cruel indifference.

Surrounded by servants, yet in complete social ostracism, the prefect's widow had acquired a quiet country house, where she would spend many years refining her hatred in detestable ponderings.

After this brief news, let us return to Celia in order to follow her dolorous pilgrimage.

Leaving Fabricius Bridge, Celia walked aimlessly, trying to reach Tiber Island, where the poor people crowded together.



In the last light of the evening, she aimed to cross Cestius Bridge. Along the way she met a plebian woman with a cheerful, humble demeanor. Celia had sat down for a moment to quiet the little one and she felt that the unknown woman's look gently touched her heart.

Feeling the secret trust this simple woman inspired in her, she drew a small sign of the cross with her right hand on the dusty ground, a symbol by which all Christians in the city would recognize each other.

Both women exchanged a meaningful look of empathy and the stranger asked her kindly:

“You're a Christian?”

“Yes,” Celia whispered softly.

“Are you alone?” asked the stranger discreetly, showing the utmost caution in her few words so that they would not be spotted as followers of Christianity. “Yes, ma'am,” replied Celia, somewhat comforted by her spontaneous interest, “I am all alone in the world with this little child.”

“Then come with me, I might be able to help you out.”

Cneius Lucius's granddaughter followed her, eager for protection in the depth of her uncertainties. They calmly crossed Cestius Bridge like old friends who had run into each other and headed toward a block of ramshackle houses.

Away from the crowd, the woman began to talk kindly:

“My dear girl, my name is Orphelia and I am your sister in the faith! The moment I saw you, I knew you were alone and helpless in the world and in need of help from your brethren! You are young and Jesus is powerful ... I saw the tears in your eyes, but you shouldn't cry when so many of our brethren have suffered atrocious sacrifices in these distressing times.”

Celia felt comforted as she listened to her, but inwardly she did not know how to proceed under such difficult circumstances, in which a friend in the faith opened up to her with all sincerity.

When Orphelia became silent for a moment, Helvidius's daughter thanked her in a few words:

“Yes, ma'am, I'm deeply touched and don't know how to thank you.”

“I’m a washerwoman,” continued the plebeian with her simplicity of heart, “but I am fortunate for having a compassionate Christian husband, who at work or in the intimacy of our house tirelessly provides me with the most sacred testimonies of our faith! You’ll meet him ... His name is Horatius and he’ll be delighted to find that we can be helpful to you in some way ... I also have a son named Junius, who is our hope for the future, when in our material poverty, we will no longer be able to work.” As they got closer to the poor little house, she added:

“And you, my sister, what has happened to you to give you such a sad, downcast look? ... So young and already with a little one in your arms; so beautiful and yet so unhappy?”

“I have been widowed and abandoned,” said Celia in tears, “but I hope in Jesus to find what I need for me and my son.”

She had not yet finished her shyly formulated explanations when they crossed the threshold of a very poor and nearly unfurnished room.

Two men were talking in the dim light of a torch and immediately rose to greet the two women.

Properly introduced to the father and son, Celia noticed that Horatius indeed seemed kind and helpful. She sensed something in the son, however, that displeased her right away: he had the demeanor of a heedless, frivolous young man full of fantasies and idle talk.

“Mom, have you heard,” the young man started with his inclination to gossip, “about the big event that has shaken the whole city?”

While Orphelia made a gesture of being unaware, Junius continued:

“The first news that hit the vicinity of the Forum this morning was the death of prefect Lollius Urbicus, who shockingly committed suicide, obliging the government to stop and pay homage!”

“That’s strange,” said his mother. “I often saw that proud, strong man in public. Why, just yesterday I saw him in the victory chariots during the Emperor’s celebrations. His face was full of joy, and yet ...”

“Well,” interrupted the head of the household, “we’re going through a painful phase of terrible surprises for all social classes. Who can say for sure that the praetorian prefect actually committed suicide? Just last month, the city saw two similar events, and yet it was discovered afterwards that the two

patricians, who apparently had committed suicide, had actually been cruelly murdered by henchmen from their own group.”

Celia was very distraught as she listened to this news while sitting in a corner like a young beggar. The strange death of Lollius Urbicus horrified her. Although tense, she did her best not to show her emotions.

“But that’s not the only thing that happened,” Junius prattled on. “They told me at the Forum that some Christians were arrested while they were gathered near Esquilinus. They also said that censor Fabius Cornelius and his family had left Capua to bring back the ashes of Helvidius Lucius’s daughter, who died there recently.”

The young woman received this news with surprise, realizing the gravity of her situation in the eyes of her proud and inexorable parents. She felt sadly shaken upon learning of such dismaying news ... She thought about going back home to rest her broken body ... She had never been away before, except when she was staying with her ailing grandfather at the Aventine palace. She remembered the kind, devoted servants and recalled all the corners of her paternal home with its unique features. An immense longing for her mother invaded her soul, and yet her heart told her through secret intuition that her eyes would never again behold the serenity of her paternal home except after she left the prison of this world. According to Junius’s information, she realized that the doors of her father’s house were closed to her forever ... Symbolically dead, she could not return to her loved ones except as a shade ...

Noticing Celia’s tears and aware of her tremendous fatigue, Orphelia tried to break the frivolity of the conversation and said to her kindly:

“And you, my dear girl, we haven’t been able to continue our story. You said you’re a widow? What a shame! ... And so young?!”

She took her by the hand and led her farther inside by saying, under the surprised look of the two men, who noticed the noble features of the stranger:

“Let’s go inside, child! It’s very cold and you look worn out. Besides, we need to give the little one something to eat. Come!”

While Celia implored Jesus to inspire her in those difficult circumstances, understanding after Junius’s news that she would not be able to explain the reality of her situation to her chance friend, Orphelia went on with interest:

“What’s your name, my sister? Have you been widowed for long? Don’t you have any friends?”

Weighing the delicacy of the moment, Helvidius’s daughter gave her an invented name and explained:

“I was widowed only four months ago and I am completely on my own with my little son, who is only a few days old. I’ve gone through all the sufferings of an ill-fated daughter of plebeians, but I’ve kept my faith in Jesus as my only refuge. Even now, your fraternal charity in taking me into your home has been a living testimony to the protection of the Divine Master, to whose mercy I have directed all my prayers!”

Not only Orphelia, but her husband and son felt sorry for her.

“So what are your plans, child?” asked the wife, deeply touched.

At that question, Celia remembered Cneius Lucius, who had promised to support her in all her difficult times if the Lord allowed it. Thus, imploring him for a beneficial suggestion with the silent vibrations of her thought, she replied with a certain confidence:

“I need to get out of Rome at the first opportunity. Unfortunately, I lack the necessary resources, but I hope Jesus will help me ... I have some relatives on the outskirts of Naples and the borders of Campania. I want to turn to them because I can’t live here without the means to support myself and my poor little son.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Orphelia replied softly, “Horatius and I can help you with your first needs.”

“As a matter of fact,” said the head of the family with a fatherly gesture, “Junius has to travel later this month as an employee of the Forum to take some documents of little importance to Gaeta! Supplied with the small resources we can arrange, you’ll be able to begin what is necessary to be reunited with your relatives.”

Celia was comforted and grateful upon hearing this, while Orphelia took the baby to feed him properly, insisting that the young woman take a bowl of broth.

“That’s a good idea,” said Orphelia to her husband. “Although the nobility can go to Naples in luxurious galleys, we plebeians have to make use of the skimpiest resources.”

“Even so, everything is part of the plans of the divine mercy,” concluded Horatius with conviction.

And addressing his son while his wife became silent, he asked:

“When do you leave?”

“In two weeks, I believe.”

“Well, Orphelia, until then we will seek to provide our sister with all she needs for her trip.”

Celia smiled in gratitude, comforted amid those simple and generous people.

Soon, she was resting with the little one in a humble but very clean bed that the lady of the house prepared for her next to her own bedroom.

Helvidius Lucius’s daughter settled the baby gently between the plain blankets and began to pray, thinking about the painful events of that unforgettable day. When one suffers, life is like a whirlwind of intense nightmares. In her embattled mind, it seemed to her that she had been separated from her loved ones for many years, such was the excruciating agony of the endless hours she had been wandering along the public roads with no destination and no hope ... Without taking her eyes off the baby, she felt her exhausted body gradually giving way to renewing sleep. She fell asleep very peacefully, as if her soul had temporarily escaped from prison on the wings of the night, free from the pain of reality.

For two weeks, the young Christian availed herself of Orphelia and her husband’s protection as she prepared her own and the little child’s clothing. With the cloth her friends gave her, she cut out some poor, simple items to wear on her humble journey.

Where would she go? She could not say for sure.

She did not know Naples except through her old grandfather’s descriptions, when he took imaginary trips to illustrate it to his beloved granddaughter.

It was possible that she would not get to Naples at all or even to Campania, where she kept the memory of her sister and Caius Fabricius, who were living in Capua. It was useless to assume she would get any help from her sister, because, knowing what had happened in Rome, Helvidia and her husband would not be able to forgive her under any circumstances.

Nevertheless, she prepared to leave, filled with trust in God. At the precise time, Jesus would surely bless her footsteps and guide her to the right destination. In the mix of her thoughts, she kept remembering her grandfather's words on the day of Cyrus's and Nestorius's deaths, and hoped that the Lord's messengers or the souls of her loved ones would return from the grave to guide her heart through this maze of anguishing anxiety.

Fearful of complications, the young woman never left the humble neighborhood, where she had found shelter, until the day she said goodbye to her friend at the break of dawn with tears in her eyes.

Junius's wagon had been prepared the day before so that they could leave early in the morning. Orphelia and Horatius felt deeply moved, but in obedience to the imperative of earthly trials, Celia settled into the wagon, built in the manner of the carts of medieval times. She accommodated the bag of clothes and the generous provision of food for the little one that Orphelia had fondly prepared.

Loving embraces, wishes for good luck, and after a few moments, under the intense morning chill, Junius was cracking the little whip on the animals' backs down the public road.

Celia prayed for Jesus to strengthen her anguished mind and give her courage to face the stormy paths of life ... As she said goodbye to Rome, her eyes clouded with tears; her inner suffering seemed more intense, her heart lacerated by merciless longing. However, looking at the little one half asleep in her arms, she felt an irrepressible power that would sustain her through all sacrifices.

The first rays of the sun began to pour over the clear blue sky as the wagon passed through Porta Caelimontana<sup>9</sup>, with the horses trotting right afterwards onto the Appian Way. When she saw the Roman meadows on the stretch where the remarkable aqueduct of Claudius stood, Celia was captivated as she contemplated nature, her mind immersed in loving prayers and deep thought.

It was a little after ten in the morning when they arrived at Alba Longa, with its plain and comfortable rows of houses.

With an enigmatic look in his eyes, Junius had his traveling companion and the baby take a light meal before starting to climb the hills of Lazio.

Proceeding along the roads bordered with trees and wildflowers, they reached Ariccia, which was surrounded by lush olive trees and immense vegetable gardens. Later, they came to Genzano, a gracious village at the foot of Lake Nemi, where endless rose bushes bloomed on its borders.

Celia's mind was engulfed in tender thoughts in light of the wonderful charm of the landscape, whose beauty surpassed all the pictures of Palestine stored forever in her memory. Everywhere delightful olive trees, orange trees in bloom, immense, well-tended vegetable gardens, fragrant rose bushes and precious details the farmers of the region put together.

Whether it was the caressing influence of the scented air or fatigue from the long trip, the baby had fallen asleep on the lap of the young mother that heaven had sent him, while she caressed his tiny face with the tenderest devotion.

As the shade of the trees alleviated the hot rays of the afternoon sun, Junius, who was never silent as he called his traveling companion's attention to this or that detail along the route, suddenly addressed her differently. The young woman blushed, asking him to remember the Christian tradition of his parents, who had treated her so kindly, begging him to leave her alone in her sorrowful and unfortunate widowhood. She noticed, however, that the young man was saturated with the vices of the times, and she realized that her protectors' son would be indifferent to her most ardent requests. With his indecorous purposes rebuffed, Horatius's son said to his victim, with a repugnant expression of a wounded vulture on his face:

"We are close to Velitrae. We'll spend the night there. And since you'll have to proceed with me to Gaeta, I hope to convince you tomorrow. Otherwise ..."

Celia swallowed the insult, remembering her duty to pray and watch and keeping her thoughts in fervent prayer so that the Divine Master, through his messengers, would show her the best way.

Within a few minutes, they entered the beautiful city. It had been built in ancient times by the Volscians and was the birthplace of the great Augustus. Velitrae – later known as Velletri – sits on a high hill that offers the loveliest topographical views to the traveler. Its sunsets are touched with a soft and marvelous beauty ... Looking east, one can see the Sabina Hills next to the deep ravines of the city, and in the evening, when the sun disappears, the

snow on the mountains blends with the nighttime fog providing visual prisms of the most stunning effect.

Junius pulled in the reins in front of an inn of the humblest appearance. Welcomed with displays of joy by his old acquaintances, he immediately provided accommodations for Celia and the child and took the animals to the stable.

After the evening meal, the young Christian sought the silence of her room to reflect and pray. Junius had set the continuation of their journey for dawn. However, she was overcome with distress and uncertainty. Her benefactors' son did not seem to have his parents' lofty sentiments. His gaze seemed to suggest the venom of a snake. His attitudes were impudent and his ideas indifferent to notions of duty and responsibility.

Late at night, one of the inn's servants came to see if the guest needed anything and found her restless and anxious as she thought about what might happen to her the next threat-filled day.

After sorrowful reflections, she was inspired by her friends from the invisible realm to leave the inn very early in the morning in order to avoid any perversity of the enemy of her inner peace.

And so, before dawn, she fearfully left the unknown inn. Holding the little one close, she felt her heart beating rapidly.

She had never faced such difficult circumstances before, and yet she trusted that Jesus would rescue her with the necessary suggestions.

Leaving Velitrae on her left, she courageously took a wide road, carrying the little one and her bag of scanty things. She walked till the full break of dawn, when she found herself in the ancient town of Cora, famous for its temple to Castor and Pollux. There, a simple woman took her in for a few minutes, giving her new provisions as she thought about the young's woman's painful journey with the innocent little one in her arms.

Taken by a strange force as if someone were guiding her footsteps, in spite of her uncertain direction, she continued to walk and soon found herself on the banks of the Astura River. She passed through tiny villages, where there was always a good heart to lavish fraternal kindness on her.

Just before noon, she met some humble cart drivers who were paid by rich lords in the region for transportation work. With a patriarchal look, one



of them offered her a place beside him, thus mitigating the pain she felt in her feet.

Settled into a vehicle that was unusually fast for the time, the young Christian soon saw the famous Pontine Marshes, a vast flatland where the deep waters of a few rivers converged.

Celia passed by numerous groups of houses, nascent villages and ancient cities in ruins. She rested her sad eyes particularly on the humble buildings of the Appii Forum, where the Christian traditions of Rome asserted that Paul of Tarsus had met with his brethren from the city of Caesar.

Amid her ponderings, the traveler came to Anxur – later called Terracina – from which she left by riding on a steep mountainside, passing by the well-preserved ruins of ancient fortresses of the earliest rulers. At the top, her eyes took in the whole region of the famous marshes, as well as the vast expanse of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Here, her heart froze, filled with uncertainty. It was at this point on that hostile, mountainous road that the elderly driver, her benefactor and friend, had to turn back in obedience to his orders.

It was growing late. The elderly laborer said farewell to his companion with tears in his eyes. Celia had been sad and silent for the entire ride, but perceiving that her benefactor was afraid and uncomfortable about leaving her in such a godforsaken place at such an hour, she said to him courageously:

“Farewell, my good friend! May heaven reward your kindness. Your generous offer has spared me much fatigue on my way!”

“Are you going to Fondi?” asked the kindly old man with loving interest.

“I won’t have to go that far,” replied the young woman with unprecedented courage, “my relatives’ property is very close by.”

“That’s good,” he said, relieved. “I was afraid you still had a long walk ahead of you. This region is infested with wild animals and bandits.”

“You can rest assured,” said Celia, hiding her distress, “these roads aren’t unfamiliar to me. Moreover, I’m sure heaven will protect me and shield my son.” Upon hearing the invocation of heaven, the benevolent cart driver took off his hat in his simplicity of a soul devoted to God; after extending his hand to the young stranger, he prepared to go back down the mountain, which he had ascended only at the request of his gracious passenger. He descended the same steep paths to complete his duties in Anxur.

Celia watched him disappear around the steep curves, following his cart with a sad and anxious look. She wanted to turn back, too, but her great fear of ruthless men, who would not respect her chastity, impelled her to seek the unknown among the dense shadows of the thick forests of Lazio.

With her thought in prayer, she walked almost mechanically, noticing in distress that the shadows of twilight were approaching.

The road ran through a narrow valley, with the ocean on one side and a mountain range on the other. The final rays of the sun were gilding the immense canopy, when her eyes discerned on her left a providential grotto formed by the elements of nature. However, it was such an imposing natural structure that all it took was a closer look to recall her grandfather's lessons from times past. She identified the place from her recollections of those studies with him. That grotto was the famous site where Sejanus had saved Tiberius's life when the former Emperor, still a prince at the time, was going with some friends to the towns of Campania. Surrounded by the pale evening light, she went inside, where a natural cavity seemed a suitable place to stay the night. She thanked Jesus for finding such a resting site and arranged her poor clothing to accommodate the little one. Then, she collected bunches of the wild moss that hung from the trees and very lovingly lined a bed of stones. Just as she was trying to use stones and green branches to block off the passage into the cavity to keep any possible wild animal at bay, she heard the sound of horses trotting along the road.

Gathering the baby in her arms, she ran to the opening, eager to communicate with someone to remove the sad feeling of loneliness from her spirit. She hoped that, through some generous heart, divine providence would help her avoid the distress of that night that promised to be stressful and painful.

Was it a cart, or was it horsemen who might extend fraternal hands to her? On the other hand, it could be thieves on horseback roaming the forest in search of opportunity. As she considered the latter possibility, she tried to go back inside, but three figures appeared at her side in the night's darkness preventing her from retreating. Forcefully reined in, the gallant horses had stopped their fast, noisy trot.

Gathering new courage at the influx of powerful energies flowing from the Invisible to her spirit, Helvidius's daughter asked:

“Are you going to Fondi, gentlemen?”

Hearing her voice, someone who seemed to be the leader of the other two said in a startled voice:

“Urbanus! Lucretius! Light the lanterns!”

Celia recognized that voice in the night with dreaded astonishment.

It was Caius Fabricius. Impelled by his imperial obligations in Capua after Celia’s supposed funeral in accordance with the family plan, he was returning from Rome, where he had left his wife with her parents.

When she recognized his voice, the young Christian felt the most agonizing fears mingled with hope. Might her situation change because of this unexpected meeting?

Before she could carry those thoughts too far, two lanterns lit up the area.

Helvidia’s husband looked at her in astonishment. The sight of Celia alone and abandoned, holding the child in her arms that he supposed was her son, touched his heart. However, understanding the gravity of the events in Rome, according to his father-in-law’s grievous information, he tried to disguise his feelings by showing the coldest indifference on his face.

“Caius!” the young woman implored with an inexplicable inflection in her voice, while the light bathed her exhausted face.

“Do you know me?” asked the proud patrician.

“Don’t you recognize me?”

“Who are you?”

“Do I have to open your eyes?”

“I do not recognize you.”

“Could my face have changed that much? Don’t you recognize your wife’s sister?” she asked pleadingly.

“My wife,” said the traveler, while his two servants looked at him highly surprised, “had only one sister, who died eighteen days ago. You are obviously mistaken, because I have just come from Rome, where I attended her funeral.”

Those words were spoken with indescribable coldness.

Celia looked at him, her eyes filled with tears and her face transfigured with infinite sorrow. She realized it was useless to cherish any hope of returning to her family. For all intents and purposes, she was dead forever. It appeared to her that she was awakening more clearly to her dolorous reality; but sensing that someone was supporting her spirit in that distressing situation, she said:

“I understand!”

However, showing extreme coldness so that he would not betray his sentiments to his servants, Helvidia’s husband replied:

“Madam, if you are using this as an excuse to get money for your needs, I will give it to you willingly.”

But when the proud Roman dipped into his bag to give her some, she replied with nobility and dignity:

“Caius, go on your way in peace! Keep your money because a blessing from Jesus is worth more than a million sestericii!”

Extremely confused, Helvidia’s husband put his bag away and addressed his servants:

“Put out the lanterns and let’s go!”

And seeing the consternation of both his slaves, who were eminently impressed by the scene, he added haughtily:

“What are you waiting for? Let’s not be impressed with these incidents along the way. I’ve never traveled the roads of Anxur without running into some crazy woman like this one!”

As if they were suddenly awakened by his severe orders, Urbanus and Lucretius obeyed their master and put out the lanterns that flickered in the darkness of the night. A few moments later, the three horsemen were on their way as if nothing had happened.

Caius Fabricius was benevolent, but in her family’s eyes, Celia’s fault was too serious to be forgiven. He would never tell anyone about that meeting, especially because there was a promise of absolute secrecy between him and his wife about the matter. Thus, he resolved to stifle all his feelings of compassion for his unfortunate sister-in-law.

As for Celia, her eyes filled with tears, she seemed petrified as she listened to the rhythmic trot of the animals disappearing in the distance until a

mysterious and profound silence fell over the dark forest.

Seeing Caius leave, she had felt an impulse in her feminine fragility to beg for his help, to plead for his charity to take her to the village of Fondi, where she would certainly find someone who would house her for the night. But she had remained silent, as if her brother-in-law's insensitivity had frozen her soul.

She wept for a long time, mixing her bitter tears with prayers, her eyes lifted to the sky where only a few stars were twinkling.

With faltering steps, she went back to the wild grotto that nature had built.

Inside, she settled the baby in as best she could and began to meditate sorrowfully.

The winds of Lazio began to whisper a sad, strange symphony, and every now and then, she could hear the echoes of wild wolves howling in the forest.

Celia felt more forsaken than ever. Deep discouragement overwhelmed her spirit and she felt that, in spite of her faith, her moral strength was weakening in the face of so much suffering ... One by one she recalled all the joys of home, remembering each family member with the delightful particulars of his or her tender affection. Never had moral suffering affected her sensitive heart so deeply! While silent tears fell from her eyes, she remembered more than ever Nestorius's exhortations on the eve of his death, and she prayed to Jesus to grant her strength for purifying self-denial.

Immersed in profound darkness, she caressed the little one's face, afraid of an attack by reptiles. She wiped her tears so she could think more clearly about the future, without losing her trust in Jesus' mercy.

Then, with surprise and amazement in her afflicted eyes, she saw a point of light emerge from the darkness, growing larger with amazing speed. At first, she could not grasp what was happening ... Stunned and surprised, she was able to make out the figure of her grandfather, sending the tenderest smile to her tormented heart ...

So great was the sorrow and the bitterness in her distressed heart that she did not even express any surprise. In the light of her faith, she immediately recalled the Gospel lesson of the Divine Master's apparitions to Mary Magdalene and the disciples. She reached her eager arms out to her

grandfather. To her aching soul, the vision of Cneius Lucius was a blessing from the Lord to her unspeakable inner sufferings. She wanted to speak, but before the radiant figure of the kindly old man, her voice died in her throat and she was unable to say a word. Nevertheless, her eyes were filled with tears and there was such an expression of sublimity on her face that it seemed she was immersed in profound ecstasy.

“Celia,” whispered the loving and beneficent spirit, “God bless you in the harsh torments of material life! ... Blessed are you, who chose sacrifice as if you had received a favorable command from the Master! ... Do not weaken in your most grievous hours, because among the flowers of Heaven, there is someone who accompanies you in your sufferings and strengthens the fibers of your exiled spirit! Never feel forsaken, because we extend our fraternal hands to you from the Beyond. All pain, my child, passes like a flash of lightning or the veils of fog melted by the sun ... Only joy is perennial; only joy reaches eternity. Fulfilling our innermost selves for God, we understand that all suffering is the divine preview of spiritual joy in the realms of the true life! We know the intensity of your suffering, but consistent with your faith, keep your thoughts always pure! Believing that you are sacrificing yourself for your mother, you are fulfilling one of the most beautiful missions of charity and love in the Lamb’s eyes ... Never entertain the idea that your mother’s sentiments could have ever strayed from the code of loyalty and domestic virtue, but accept all your sufferings as sacred elements of your own spiritual redemption! Your mother never failed in her conjugal fidelity and your spirit of self-denial and renunciation will receive the most abundant harvest of blessings from Jesus.”

Hearing those words that fell like a divine balm onto her despondent heart, Helvidius’s daughter let tears of inner comfort roll down her cheeks as if only weeping could wash away all her sorrows. She recognized her loving and kindly grandfather there at her side, just as in the happiest days of her life. Haloed in a soft, gentle light, Cneius Lucius smiled at her with the benevolence of heart that he had always shown to her. When she heard his revelation about her mother’s moral integrity, Celia reconsidered the painful events at home. It was enough for her to outline such thoughts without expressing them verbally for the venerable spirit to explain to her:

“Child, do not think about anything except fulfilling the Lord’s plan for you ... Do not let your thoughts return to the past to contaminate you with the affliction of earthly life! Do not try to establish culpability or point to the

faults of others no matter who they are, because there is a tribunal of incorruptible justice that legislates over our heads! ... There are no unclear cases for this tribunal, nor is there any inaccurate information! If that sublime justice has determined that you shall walk the narrow paths of slander and sacrifice, it is because such a road is more conducive to your spiritual growth and to the work you must accomplish. You shall never return to the comfort of your father's home, to which you will feel connected by unbreakable bonds of love and longing along all your pathways; but this separation of your soul from our dearest loved ones will be like a point of undying light, signaling the transformation of our destinies! Your sacrifice, my child, shall be forever a renewing milestone for our spiritual energies in the grand movement of successive reincarnations in our search for love and wisdom! As I expand my resources to return to the earthly struggle, I bless your suffering because your resignation is great and worthy in Jesus' eyes."

Celia managed to break through the emotions that had choked her and said in a sorrowful and dolorous tone:

"More than words, my heart, which your spirit can examine, can tell you of my joy and gratitude! ... Protector and friend, watchful guide of my soul, since you have come from the darkness of the tomb to bring me the most comforting truths, help me triumph in the painful struggles of life! ... Encourage me! Inspire me with your wisdom and your compassionate love! Do not leave me unguided on these rugged precipices! ... Grandfather, my heart has been sad like this night, and hopelessness and suffering cry out within me like the ferocious wolves howling in these woods! ... But from now on, I shall know that you are with me! ... I shall walk in the awareness that you are following my steps in my search for true happiness! ... Pray to Jesus that I may strictly perform all my duties! And most of all, care for this little child, whose life I will try to protect in every circumstance!"

Celia's voice cracked. Listening to her supplications with the same expression of serenity and love in his eyes, Cneius Lucius moved slowly toward the baby's makeshift bed, illumining his little face with a gesture of his radiant hand and saying with a smile:

"This, my child," he said, indicating the child, "is how Cyrus has kept his promise to return to the world to be closer to your heart under the blessings of the Lamb!" "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" asked the young woman, feeling a sublime inner turmoil.

“Because,” said the benevolent spirit, divining her thoughts, “God wants all of us to spiritualize our love and seek its purest and most sublime expressions. By receiving a foundling as your brother, without allowing yourself to be led by any particular inclination, you learned how to sanctify your affection for Cyrus even more in the indissoluble bond of twin souls on the path to the most lucid spiritual achievements in the supreme redemption!”

“Yes,” said the young patrician in her spiritual joy, “now I understand my care for him more fully, and since you have brought me a joy so sweet, teach me how I should act. Give me the right counsel so I can fulfill all my duties blamelessly!”

“Child, guidance for all of us is outlined in the examples of Jesus Christ! We have no right to stifle the initiative and freedom of those who are dearest to us, because self-effort is indispensable on the pathway of life! Labor with energy, faith and perseverance so that the kingdom of the Lord may flourish in light and peace in your life ... Keep your conscience always pure, and if some day doubt comes to disturb your heart, ask yourself what the Master would do in your stead under the same circumstances ... In that way you will act with confidence, illumining your resolutions with the light of the Gospel!”

After a pause, in which Celia did not know whether she should look at her grandfather’s surviving presence or awaken the little foundling to see in his eyes once again the memories of her beloved, Cneius Lucius pointed out:

“After so many gripping surprises and so much fatigue, you need to rest! Rest your aching body. It must still undergo many struggles ... Continue with the same prayers and watchfulness as always, because Jesus will not abandon you on the stormy sea of life!”

Then, as if an invincible power were overcoming her resistance, Celia felt enveloped in a sweet and gentle magnetism. Little by little, she no longer saw the radiant figure of her grandfather, who posted himself by her side like a loving sentinel against the intrusion of every danger ... A gentle sleep closed her tired eyes, and embracing the little one, she slept peacefully until the first rays of the sun penetrated the grotto to announce the day.



## 4

# From Minturno to Alexandria

While the lives of Fabius Cornelius's family moved along in the imperial city without any major occurrences worth mentioning, let us follow Helvidius Lucius's daughter on her way of grief.

After rising in the morning, Celia reached the outskirts of Fondi, where a benevolent soul kindly and tenderly took her in for a day. It was enough for her to recuperate from her arduous trek. The following day she was back on the road, heading toward Itri, the ancient "Urbs Mamurrarum," still on the same Appian Way.

Along the way, she was overjoyed to run into Gregorius, the same humble cart driver who had left her behind in the Terracina Mountains two days before. In the difficulties and pains of this world, fraternity leads to profound connections, which is not the case with the always fleeting and transient pleasures of the world.

Gregorius offered her the same seat next to him in a gesture of protection that the young woman accepted and considered a blessing from Above.

This time they acknowledged each other as two good friends from earlier times. They talked about the landscape and little traveling incidents. Then, filled with interest, Gregorius asked her:

"Do you have other relatives besides those in Fondi? It was no small sacrifice for you to have ventured out on a journey as long as the one the day before yesterday ... How could they allow you to make another journey on foot?"

"Well, my friend," she said, trying to deflect his friendly curiosity, "my relatives in Fondi are very poor and I don't want to return to Rome without seeing my sick uncle again. He lives in Minturno<sup>10</sup>."

“Good,” said the kindly plebeian, satisfied with her answer. “If that’s the case, I can take you as far as you need to go because I’m going beyond the city’s lakes.”

They continued their journey between Gregorius’s pleasantries and Celia’s gratitude, touched and appreciative as she was of his kindness.

It was late afternoon when the cart finally reached the outskirts of the famous city.

Bidding her kindly companion farewell, the young Christian gazed at the superb landscape that unfolded before her eyes. Beautiful coastal vegetation sprouted from the marshy lands in a deluge of flowers. The first gate into the city was only a few yards away, yet her love for nature made her stop next to the large trees along the road. The setting sun sent its dying rays to the flowery scene. Overcome with glorious thoughts, and experiencing renewed encouragement from the words of truth and consolation her grandfather had spoken to her the night before from the confines of the tomb, she began to pray, thanking Jesus for his sublime and infinite grace.

In her endearing delight, she looked at the delicate little figure stirring in her arms and kissed his forehead in a burst of spiritual rapture.

The day before, she had welcomed nature’s hospitality, but now, facing the rows of huts near the road, she asked herself what might be the best way to appeal to the mercy of others. However, like the other times, she was counting on Jesus’ support, which would give her the right inspiration through his lucid messengers.

She noticed a hut surrounded by orange trees, where life seemed to be the simplest and most solitary. Its plain appearance emerged from a grove of trees two hundred yards from where she was standing. As if she were attracted by some detail she could not define, Celia went up and knocked on the door. The first stars were shining in the sky.

After much knocking, she sensed that someone had approached with difficulty to unlock the bolt.

Before long, a patriarchal and venerable figure appeared before her startled eyes. He welcomed her with solicitude and sympathy.

It was an old man with completely gray hair and beard. His silvery hair accentuated his flawless noble Roman traits. He looked to be over seventy years old, but his eyes were full of tenderness and life, as if his mind were in

the fullness of adulthood. He extended his wrinkled, trembling hands to her, and Celia noticed a small cross hanging on his chest outside his worn and discolored toga.

Greatly moved and understanding that she was in the presence of an elderly Christian, she stated humbly:

“Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ!”

“Now and forever, my daughter!” replied the old man, showing in his smile the joy that greeting had caused him. “Come into the shack of a lowly servant of the Lord and let me be yours as well.”

Helvidius Lucius’s daughter then explained that she was abandoned in the world with a baby a few days old. She blessed the happy moment she had knocked on the door of a Christian who, from that moment on, she would consider her teacher. Before long, a mutual warmth and affection was established between them that was so expressive and pure that they seemed rooted in Eternity.

Hearing her story, the elder of Minturno spoke to her gently and sincerely:

“After considering your situation, my daughter, you must allow me to help you as a father or elder brother in faith and experience. I too had a daughter, whom I lost not long ago, just as I was about to have her accompany me on my blessed and voluntary exile in Africa ... She looked amazingly like you and I will be very fortunate if you view me with the same sympathy that you have inspired in me. You may stay here as long as you want or need to ... I live alone, after a life full of pleasures and sorrows ... Before, a daughter’s love still tied my heart to worldly interests, but now I live only by my faith in Jesus Christ, hoping that his word of mercy will soon call me to his kingdom in order to examine my indigence!”

His voice was interspersed with sighs, as if the most terrible inner suffering were tearing at his heart by evoking his memories.

“For more than a year,” he continued, “I’ve been waiting for a chance to return to Alexandria, but my physical decline seems to be warning me that I’ll soon be forced to deliver my body to the soil of Campania, despite my wish to die in the solitary resting place where I transferred my spirit.”

As he paused, the young woman ventured casually:

“By your unmistakable patrician features, you are a Roman, I presume.”

The old man looked into her eyes as if he wanted to assure himself of the purity and simplicity of his listener’s soul, and answered slowly:

“Daughter, your stand as a Christian and the candor that radiates from your soul oblige me to be completely sincere with you!

“In this city no one knows who I really am! ... Ever since the day I became a devoted member of a Christian institution in far-off Egypt, I have called myself Marinus for all intents and purposes. In our community of sincere and believing men detached from material things, we made a solemn vow to renounce all the ephemeral privileges of earth, all its joys, so that we could bind ourselves to our Lord and Master with a clear and deep understanding of his doctrine. While the despots of the Empire plot the death of Christianity, thinking they can annihilate it by torturing its followers, outside of Rome powerful forces are being organized that will act in the future in defense of the sacred ideas. In all the provinces of Asia and Africa, Christians are gathering in peaceful industrious societies to guard the precious writings of the Lord’s Disciples and to protect the treasure of believers for a holier and happier posterity!”

While Celia listened to him with loving interest, the old man of Minturno continued after a pause, as if preparing his thought for more clarity of his memories: “I am being led by an impulse of the heart, my daughter, and I could not confide to anyone else what I am revealing to you tonight ... Perhaps my spirit is sensing the proximity of the tomb, and our Beloved Master wants to indirectly warn my guilty and sorrowful soul. Something is compelling me to confess my past to you with its anxieties and uncertainties ... I cannot explain what it is ... I can only say that the innocence in your Christian eyes, like those of a gentle and compassionate daughter, makes the divine blessings of trust rise in my exhausted soul!

“My real name is Lesius Munatius, a son of old warriors, whose ancestors distinguished themselves in the exploits of the Republic ... My youth was a long stretch of crime and wrongs, which my weakly spirit surrendered to because of my ignorance of Jesus’ teachings ... I did not hesitate to wield the murderous sword in those days, spreading ruin and death among the humblest and most-scorned beings ... I helped persecute nascent Christian centers and led defenseless women to martyrdom and death on days of nefarious festivities! ... But woe to me! Little did I know that one day the

same divine, profound voice that Paul of Tarsus heard on the road to Damascus would echo within me! After that adventurous life, I married late, when the flowers of youth had already lost their petals in the autumn of life! Better if I had not done it! ... To win my wife's love, I was compelled to spend the impossible and use all my resources! Without spiritual preparation, I built my home upon the saddest indigence! In a short time, a charming little girl came to light the dark core of my reflections about my destiny. However, tormented by the harshest needs in order to maintain the standard of our social life in Rome, I perceived that, all caught up in illusions, my poor wife would not drink the cup of poverty and sorrow with me! In fact, my home was soon vilified and deserted!

“Quaestor Flavius Hilas abused my friendship and trust and seduced my wife. He openly lured her away from the sanctuary of our home to the scorn of my hopes and suffering ... I wanted to die to avoid the shame, but my attachment to my little daughter warned me that such an extreme gesture would mean only cowardice ... I then thought of summarily killing Flavius Hilas and my unfaithful wife with a blow of the sword, but when I was about to carry out my sinister plan I ran into an old beggar near the temple of Serapis. He reached out his lacerated hand to me, not to ask for alms, but to give me a piece of parchment. I took it eagerly as if I were receiving a secret message from a friend. I walked a few steps and realized with astonishment that what was written there were some of Jesus Christ's thoughts. Afterwards, I learned that they were from the Sermon on the Mount ...

“Along with that hymn to the blessed was the information that some of the Lord's friends would be meeting inside the ancient walls of the Via Salaria that very night! ... I went back to get some details from the beggar, but I couldn't find him and never again had any news of him.

“Those teachings of the Galilean Prophet filled my soul ... It seems that only in great suffering can the human spirit feel the greatness of the principles of love and kindness ... I went home without carrying out my wicked plan. I thought of my daughter's innocence and how her childlike caresses encouraged me to live. I went to the Christian meeting, where I had the pleasure of hearing brave preachers of the divine truths.

“Suffering and humiliated men and women were gathered there, among them some acquaintances of mine, who had been flung into suffering and ostracism during the political uproar ... Humble people and a few patricians whom circumstances of fate had led to adversity, listened to the Good

Tidings. For everyone, Jesus' words constituted a gentle comfort and a mysterious energy ... On every face, in the dreary light of the torches, appeared an expression of new life, which communicated to my tired and grieving spirit ... That night I went home as if I had been reborn to face life!

"The next day, however, when I least expected it in the quiet of my soul, a platoon of soldiers surrounded my house and led me to prison under the most unjust accusation ... That night, the unfortunate Flavius Hilar had been stabbed to death under mysterious circumstances. Standing over his body, my own wife swore that I was the killer. Once this slander was raised, I tried to influence my friendships to regain my freedom and be able to care for my poor daughter, who had been taken in by generous and humble hands from Esquilinus; but my friends told me that only money could move the Empire's judicial system to act in my favor, and I no longer had any ...

"Forsaken in prison and unable to explain my whereabouts that night since I had been at a forbidden Christian meeting, I preferred silence to jeopardizing those who had offered consolation to my broken heart ... My most sacred sentiments trampled on, I was overcome by an unspeakable anguish as I waited for the decisions of the imperial justice. Finally, two centurions came to notify me of my unjust sentence. Considering the extent of the crime, the authorities canceled all my patrician titles and prerogatives and condemned me to death, since the murdered quaestor had been one of Caesar's trusted men ... I received the sentence with little surprise, although I wanted to live to serve that Jesus, whose magnificent teachings had been my light in the dense darkness of the prison. I also wanted to fulfill my parental obligations to my little daughter, bereft of a mother's love ...

"I waited for death with my thought in prayer, but at that time there was a righteous man in Rome. He was a bit younger than I, and his father had been my own father's childhood friend. This man knew about my defective but loyal character. His name was Cneius Lucius, and he went personally to Trajan to advocate for my freedom. Confronted with the wrath of Augustus, he didn't hesitate to request clemency for my case and managed to get the Emperor to commute my sentence to banishment from Rome, along with the suppression of all the privileges my name had granted me."

While the old man paused, the young woman began to cry, moved at the mention of her grandfather, whose memory filled her with immense longing.

“As soon as I was released,” continued the old man of Minturno, “I approached my former friends who had drunk from the same cup of political persecution with me and who now shared the same faith in Jesus Christ ... Banished from Rome and humiliated, we left for Africa, where we founded a solitary resting spot not far from Alexandria in order to cultivate the study of the sacred texts and to conserve the spiritual treasures of the apostles at the same time.

“When I left the Empire’s Capital, I entrusted my only daughter to some friends, a couple whose material poverty did not mar their noble sentiments. Providing for my little daughter’s future with all the resources I had left, I departed for Egypt full of new ideas in the light of my new belief! I submitted myself to disciplined meditation and austere spiritual exercises, and I was finally able to forget the great struggles and distressing sorrows of my destiny!

“Resting my mind in Jesus relieved me of all sorrow. The only bond that tied me to the Peninsula was my daughter. She was a young woman at that time and I wanted to bring her love to be with me in far-off Africa ... After twenty years of profitable prayer and meditation in our community, I asked our spiritual director for permission to bring a family member into our retreat. I said a ‘family member’ because I wanted to convince my poor Lesia to come away with me in men’s clothing on account of Jesus’ teaching that there are those in the world who make themselves eunuchs for God’ sake ...

“The community’s rules did not allow women due to a decision by Aufidius Priscus, revered there as the leader under the name of Epiphanius ... It was not my intention to disregard the laws of our order, but rather to remove my daughter from the seductive environment of these decadent times, when the most sacred intentions are caught by the wolves of vanity and ambition that howl along the way ... I wanted to keep her with me in the holiest of anonymity until I could change Epiphanius’s provisions about the rules of our order, given the special circumstances of my life!

“I got the permission I needed to come to the Peninsula and I arrived here nearly two years ago, only to experience the anguish of reuniting with my Lesia in the final moments of her life ... To describe my suffering at being separated from my beloved daughter after my absence of so many years and after I had cherished such high hopes is a task beyond my strength ... I accompanied her remains to the tomb, to which soon thereafter I also transported the two loving friends who had acted as her parents. They were

victims of a plague that some time ago afflicted the entire population of Minturno!

“Woe to me, who deserved nothing but anguish and torment along the harsh paths of life because of the unspeakable crimes of my youth! ...

“Nonetheless, I still have hope in the love of the Lamb of God, whose mercy came to this world to take away our humiliation and sin ...

“As the grave looms before me, I pray to the Lord not to forsake me ... Beyond the grave, I feel that the light of his teachings shines in a kingdom of merciful and compassionate peace! I am certain that my beloved daughter and my unforgettable friends are waiting for me there. I sense that the flourishing land of Campania will soon receive my weakened body, but beyond the exhausted forces of material life I expect to find the consoling truth of life after death! I will willingly receive the most severe judgment for my criminal past, and by renouncing all my personal sentiments, I shall fully accept Jesus’ commandments in his impartial and merciful justice!”

The old man of Minturno was very emotional as he spoke, his lucid gaze fixed on High as if he were contemplating a celestial assembly in the serenity of his vigorous and ardent faith.

As he ended his dolorous confidences, however, he saw that Celia’s eyes were filled with tears. She was unable to speak right away, so great was the emotion choking her voice in the depths of her afflicted heart.

“Why are you crying, my daughter?” he asked gently. “A poor old man’s story surely should not directly affect you.”

Celia did not answer, still overcome by the emotion of the moment, but the old man continued, surprised and melancholy:

“Do you too have a sorrowful story like mine? Regardless of the ardent faith I sense in your heart, such spiritual sensitivity is not right at your age. Tell me, dear, if your heart has also been touched by a painful wound ... If grief is weighing on your disillusioned soul, remember the words of the Master when he preached in Capernaum: ‘Come unto me all you who are burdened with the torments of the world and I will give you rest ...’ It is true that you are not in the presence of God’s Messiah, but even here we should remember the example of Jesus, who accepted the help of Simon of Cyrene in carrying the cross! He, who was the personification of the plenitude of love, did not hesitate to accept the support of a humble son of misfortune ... I too



am a miserable sinner, a son of the harshest and thorniest trials, but if you can, read my heart and you will see that within me beats the love of a father for you. Your presence has awakened an inexplicable and mysterious sympathy in me ... I have confided something to you that I would have said only to my beloved daughter, who preceded me to the darkness of the tomb. If you feel overwhelmed by the sorrows of the world, tell me something about your pain. Share your suffering with me and the cross of your trials will seem lighter!”

Celia had not heard such tender exhortations since the death of her grandfather, whose name had been mentioned by the old man as an icon of his trust; so, after settling the little one down to sleep, she sat next to her benefactor as if she had known him for a long time, and with a voice interspersed with hesitation due to her deep emotion, she began:

“Since you have called me daughter, allow me to kiss your benevolent hands and call you my father with the holiest affinities of my heart.

“You have invoked a name that makes me weep with emotion in the turmoil of my memories, which are also sorrowful and filled with pain like yours ... I will trust in you, just as I always trusted in my loving grandfather, whom you recalled with such gratitude. I too have come from Rome on the same harsh pathways of sorrow and sacrifice. And because I do trust in you, I shall reveal my unfortunate story, which happened at a time when youth seemed to smile on me in the full bloom of spring.

“Abandoned and alone, I will surely receive good advice from your experience on the pathways of life so that I may settle down somewhere to fulfill my mission as a mother to this poor little child! Ever since I left Rome, I have been feeling the direst need to communicate with a kind and loving soul that could guide and enlighten me. In my journey to this place, I encountered merciless men everywhere who enveloped me with perverse and lecherous looks ... Some even insulted my chastity, but I insistently begged Jesus for the chance to find a beneficent, Christian soul, who would strengthen me!”

Feeling overcome with inexplicable trust as the old man of Minturno listened to her in amazement, in spite of the immense serenity in his eyes, Celia began to tell her story filled with intense and moving events. She revealed the fact that she was the granddaughter of the magnanimous Cneius – which deeply moved her listener – and proceeded to tell him about

all the episodes of her life, starting from her early tribulations as a young girl and woman in Palestine and ending the long narrative with the vision of her grandfather the night before, when she had been forced to spend the night in the grotto of Tiberius.

When she finished, her eyes were swollen from weeping, like someone who had waited a long time to relieve her heart of the burden of grief.

The old man was deeply moved and stroked her hair as he would a daughter's after a long absence filled with anguished longing. Finally, he said:

“My daughter, I wanted to comfort you, but actually, it is your own youthful heart with its most beautiful examples of sacrifice and courage that has consoled me! ... I myself often embraced evil and got lost in crime; thus, I can see that our sufferings mark the justice of our destinies; but for your loving, good soul, earthly trials are a heavenly feat of heroism! ... May God bless your heart, buffeted by the storms of the world before the blooming of springtime. From the joys of Jesus' Kingdom, Cneius Lucius must be rejoicing in the Lord for your heroic deeds ... I feel that his soul, ennobled in the practice of goodness and virtue, is following your footsteps like a faithful sentinel!”

After a long pause, in which Marinus seemed to be pondering his gracious companion's future, he said paternally:

“While you were telling me about your personal suffering, I was thinking about the best way to help you in the twilight of my life! I understand your situation as a young person forsaken and alone in the world with the heavy burden of caring for a child you received under such strange circumstances. I wouldn't advise you to go back home, because I understand the rigidity of the traditions of certain patrician families. Besides, your paternal home considers you dead forever, and Cneius Lucius's tender words are invaluable only to us because we can grasp the extent of his sublime revelation. In view of his words, we must accept your mother's complete innocence; but if you returned to Rome, last night's apparition would not be enough to shed light on the situation, and the same suspicions about you would remain. And you know that between doubt and truth, sacrifice is always better, because truth belongs to Jesus and it will triumph when his mercy finds it suitable.

“Since I am familiar with our times of moral decadence and decay, I know that, due to your youth, almost all young men will approach you with

ignominious proposals because they are dominated by their physical instincts. The destruction of my own home will always be a living testament to the moral poverty of our epoch.

“I have pondered your difficulties and would like to save you from every danger and help you avoid the traps of insidious pathways; but my infirmity and decrepitude would make it impossible for me to defend you ... Nearly everyone in Minturno hates me gratuitously because of the ideas I profess. A sincere Christian will still have to suffer the incomprehension and torment of persecutors for some time yet. They haven’t hauled me off to my death during the regional festivities that are held here only because of my advanced and sorrowful age, my wrinkles and scars ... To deliver a poor old man to powerful beasts or for the exercise of the athletes of debauchery and cruelty would seem like inveterate cowardice, which is why I believe I have been spared.

“So, I have no friends who could help you in your difficulties.

“Remember that just moments ago I told you about my old plan of taking my daughter to Egypt in men’s clothes in order to get her out of this den of corruption and impenitence. This fatherly gesture certainly comes from a loving heart in utter despair about the spiritual future of this region of iniquity.

“Seeing you burdened with such noble sacrifices in your defenseless youth, I fear for your future; but I pray to Jesus to clarify our thoughts.”

After a few minutes of gathering her own thoughts, the young woman replied:

“But my devoted friend, you do regard me as your own daughter, don’t you?”

The calm glow in the old man’s big eyes showed that he had understood the allusion. He replied kindly:

“I know what you are saying, my daughter, but are you truly committed to one more noble sacrifice?”

“Why not, when the most fearful persecutions are surrounding me?”

“Yes, your praiseworthy actions show me that I can trust your resolutions. Well, then; if your spirit is willing to struggle for the Gospel, let’s not hesitate to prepare you for the journeys ahead! You may stay in this house

for as long as you wish, even though I am convinced that it won't be long before my journey to the Beyond. Tomorrow you will start wearing your new clothing to make your trip to Africa easier when the time comes. For all intents and purposes, you will be 'my son' in the world's eyes. I will ask the praetor of Minturno to come here tomorrow so that he can take care of your legal situation if I should die. I have enough money for you to get to Alexandria, and before I die I'll leave you with a letter introducing you to Epiphanius as my legitimate successor in our community headquarters. While there, I applied the last savings from my earlier times in Rome, so it's possible that they will not create any difficulties for you. Consequently, you should be able to devote yourself to a life of spiritual rest in prayer and meditation for as long as you wish.

"Epiphanius is strong-minded and somewhat dogmatic in his religious views, but he has been my friend and brother for many years, during which the same aspirations have united us in this life. Sometimes he can be harsh in his decisions and he has tendencies towards an organized priesthood, something Christianity must avoid at all costs so as not to jeopardize the mission of the Lord's apostles. But if one day you are hurt by his austere decisions as a leader, remember that humility is the soul's greatest treasure, the master key to all the virtues, and remember Jesus' supreme lesson on the arms of the cross! ... Humility can be the basic solution for any problem in every situation!"

"Yes, my friend, I do feel forsaken and alone in the world, and I fear the harassment of perverted men. Jesus will forgive my decision to wear other clothing before the eyes of our brethren. In his infinite goodness, he knows of the pressing needs that compel me to take this unusual step. Also, I promise in God's name to honor the tunic I shall possibly wear in Alexandria in the service of the Gospel ... I will take the little son that heaven has granted me and I will beg Epiphanius to allow me to look after him under the African sky with Jesus' blessings!"

"May the Master bless your good intentions, daughter!" replied the old man with an expression of serene bliss.

Both felt overcome by intense inner joy, as if they were two souls deeply connected from the past, happily reunited after a prolonged separation.

The roosters of Minturno were already greeting the first light of dawn. After having kissed the hands of her elderly benefactor, this time the young

patrician had sought her nighttime rest with a contented soul, with no distressing concerns about the next day. She had thanked Jesus with a prayer of love and recognition.

That morning, the poor people of the neighborhood heard that the old man's son had come from Rome to assist him in his final days.

Celia took the old clothes her benefactor had presented to her to solve the situation and did not hesitate to put them on to escape the irreverent persecution of those who might have abused her feminine fragility.

Marinus introduced her as a dear son to the few neighbors who were interested in his health. He further explained that his son had recently lost his wife and had brought him his little grandson to brighten the darkness of his desolate old age.

The patricians' daughter, now dressed by necessity as a handsome beardless young man, lovingly engaged herself in all the household tasks, trying to serve the benevolent old man with the most devoted solicitude.

One thing, however, grievously impacted Celia's sensitive heart. Whether due to the poor conditions he had endured till then, or due to the deprivations of so many miles on the road, the little child began to waste away, soon showing all the signs of inevitable death.

In vain did the old man use every resource at his disposal to save the little one's flickering life.

Touched in the most sensitive fibers of her heart in light of her grandfather's revelations about Cyrus, the young woman felt inwardly the intensified repercussions of all the physical sufferings ailing the little one. She wanted to sustain his existence with all the energies of her desolate spirit, to perform a miracle with all her loving strength, to snatch him from the clutches of death. She blended tears and prayers in her emotional pleas, all to no avail.

Contemplating her agony, the child seemed to speak to her loving and sensitive soul with a deep, intense look dominated by the expressions of a singular and indescribable pain.

Finally, after a night of anguished sleeplessness, Celia begged for Jesus in his mercy to end that situation of intense sorrow. Filled with faith, she beseeched the Lamb of God to take her beloved to the spirit realm, if that was his inscrutable will. She loved him so much and had sacrificed so much to save his life, but she would conform herself to the decisions of the Most High,

as she did before on the day she had seen him go to his death, condemned by the wickedness of impious men.

As if her sorrowful plea, full of tears of faith and hope in the goodness of the Lord had been heard, the little child closed his eyes of flesh forever at the break of dawn, like a celestial swallow which, fearful of the world's winters, quickly soars back to paradise.

Celia mourned her indescribable pain over the rigid little body with burning tears, experiencing the sorrow of her broken hopes and shattered maternal dreams.

The wise and evangelical words of the old man of Minturno, however, were there to uplift her from all her sadness, and after the grief-filled time of separation, she sought to concentrate her longings in the sanctuary of her humble and fervent prayers.

Indeed, her loving heart knew that Jesus never forsakes the souls of the sheep gone astray in the abysses of the world. Taking refuge in prayer, she waited for the necessary spiritual resources for her comfort to come from on High. Her humble neighbors were greatly impressed with the young "man," whose gentle face radiated a tender sympathy mixed with an unalterable sadness that lent a singular charm to his personality.

On a quiet night when nature's loving soul had become completely still, Celia retired after her usual evening with the kindly old man, who was like a devoted father to her. She felt a strange force leading her tormented and grieving mind into a state of sleepiness.

Shortly thereafter, without realizing her surprise and bewilderment, she found herself in front of Cyrus, who reached out his loving hands to her with an indescribable look of supplication and recognition.

"Celia," he began softly, while she concentrated in sweet emotion to hear him, "Do not renounce the cup of redemptive trials, when the purest truths gladden our hearts! After a little while in your company, here I am again, where I must gather new strength to resume the struggle! ... Do not be saddened by the painful circumstances of our separation along the dark paths of destiny. You are my anchor of redemption along every pathway! In the infinite range of his mercy, Jesus has allowed your soul – the star of my spirit – to descend from the sublime and radiant realms to be a light for my footpath in the world: the light of self-denial and moral martyrdom, which saves and regenerates forever!

“If God’s wise and just hands have brought me back to the invisible plane, let us rejoice in the Lord, because all sufferings are premises for lofty and immortal bliss! Do not give in to despair, Celia, because in the past, my spirit was almost completely soiled in the figure of a tyrant! While you were shining from on High like a star of love for my cruel heart, I was decreeing misery and murder! Abusing authority, power, knowledge, and the trust of others, I did not hesitate to destroy cherished hopes by wreaking crime, destruction and devastation on defenseless homes! I would have been almost a complete reprobate, were it not for your spirit of limitless renunciation and devotion! While step by step I descended the abominable ladder of crime in that distant and painful past, your loving and faithful heart prayed to the Lord of the universe for the possibility of a sacrifice!

“Without fearing the aggressive and fearful darkness that surrounded me, you descended to the prison of my impenitence! ... You spread the sublime aroma of your sanctifying selflessness around my misery, and I awakened to the pathways of regeneration and piety! You took me by the hands, as you would a hapless child, and taught me to raise them to Heaven to implore divine mercy and watch-care! For many centuries now your spirit has accompanied me with sanctified and supreme dedication! That is because twin souls prefer to arrive together in the sublime regions of Peace and Wisdom, and in your watchful love and compassion, you did not hesitate to extend your dedicated, loving hands, like a star that renounces the beauty of heaven to save a worm stuck in a swamp on a night of perennial darkness. And I awakened to the beauties of love and light, Celia; and still not content with having awakened me, you have continued to help me redeem my onerous debts ... Your loving and unblemished spirit did not hesitate to support me along the thorny, sad roads I had created with my terrible, demented ambition! You have been a reference point for my soul in all its efforts for peace and regeneration in the recovery of spiritual glories. With your support, I was able to bear witness to my faith in the circus of martyrdom, for the first time sealing my belief in universal fraternity and love! For you, I banish all my selfishness and pride and bear all my inner battles in the certainty of victory!

“Upon returning to the world, I was once again taken from your arms in obedience to the harsh trials I still must endure for quite some time! But Jesus, who blesses us from his throne of light and mercy, of forgiveness and infinite goodness, will allow me to be with you in your testimonies of faith and humility, destined for the spiritual exaltation of all the beloved beings that

gravitate within the orbit of our destinies! And if God blesses my hopes and my heartfelt prayers, I will return again to be close to you during your harsh struggles! ... Continue to hope and trust! ... In his indescribable magnanimity, the Lord allows us to return from the tomb to comfort those hearts connected to ours while they remain bound to the sufferings of the flesh ... Only there, in the dwellings of the Lord, where happiness and harmony mingle, can we rest in great and holy love, marching hand-in-hand toward supreme triumphs without the worries and bitter trials of the world!”

For some time Cyrus’s caressing voice spoke to her heart, offering her sensitive soul the holiest consolations and the sweetest hopes! At the height of her spiritual wonderment, the young Christian experienced the most poignant joys and she wished the glorious moment would last forever.

When her beloved’s words seemed to come to a gentle end in silent and profound vibrations, Celia asked him to be with her in all her earthly endeavors, and implored him for his help and watch-care in all the circumstances of life. She confided to him her most secret anguish and distressing expectations about her new situation; but Cyrus seemed to smile at her kindly, promising her undying love through all difficulties and reaffirming his trust in the support of the Lord, who would not forsake them ...

The next day she felt revived, her face showing the inner serenity of her spirit.

The old man noticed this change with joy, and as if he were in constant preparation for his journey to the tomb, he did not miss the opportunity to explain to the young woman the problems that awaited her in the solitary life of Alexandria. With utmost solicitude, he instructed her on all the details for starting her new life, providing her with the names of old friends in the faith and telling her about the community’s customs.

Dressed in her men’s clothes, Celia listened to his loving, benevolent words with an inner desire to prolong his flickering life forever so that she would never have to be separated from his kind and friendly heart; but contrary to her dearest hopes, the old man’s condition suddenly worsened. In vain was every effort made to restore his physical “tonus vital.” Assisted by the young woman, who was doing everything to see him recuperate, Marinus received the visit from the city’s praetor, who had yielded to insistent requests and had come to hear his final wishes.



Introducing the young woman as his son, the dying man ordered that, as soon as he died, all his meager savings were to be given to his son in anticipation of his departure for Africa.

“Marinus,” asked the praetor after making the necessary notes, “does this young man perhaps share in your superstitions?”

The kindly old man grasped the scope of the question and answered fearlessly:

“As for me, we need not guess my religious convictions. They have been known by everyone here ever since I moved into this house! I’m a Christian and I shall die with my faith intact! ... As for my son, he will be leaving for Alexandria in order to attend to our private interests, and he has his own free will to choose whatever religious ideas he pleases.”

The praetor looked with sympathy at the sad, downcast young man and concluded:

“Glad to hear it!”

After bidding farewell to the dying man, whose life seemed to be drawing to a quick close, the praetor left them both with the necessary freedom to exchange their final feelings.

Marinus then explained to his pupil that his skillful reply was intended to lead the Minturno praetor to satisfy his last wishes without reluctance within the appropriate legal dispositions available to them. He further advised her of all the measures his death would demand of her inexperience in such situations. Celia was extremely overwhelmed as she listened to his hoarse, broken recommendations, but as in all the painful circumstances of her life, she trusted in Jesus.

After several hours of excruciating agony, during which Helvidius’s daughter experienced moments of indescribable emotion, the benevolent Marinus left the world after a long life populated by terrible and dolorous nightmares. With a tear, his eyes closed forever when the day ended. In front of a few onlookers, Celia mercifully closed his eyelids in a loving gesture. Kneeling down as if she wanted to transform the evening’s breezes into messengers of her pleas to Heaven, she let her heart dissolve in tears of longing and begged Jesus to receive her benefactor into his kingdom of wonders and grant him a peaceful refuge, where his weary soul could forget the grievous torments of material existence.

Being an avowed Christian, the old man of Minturno received the simplest grave, which Celia, overcome by an almost complete loneliness, filled with the flowers of her affection.

Within a few days, the praetor gave her the small sum Marinus had left her, a little more than enough for the trip to far-off Africa. On a bright spring morning, in her sad and unalterable serenity, the young Christian woman said a long, anguished prayer at the humble graves of the little one and the old man, praying for their protection and assistance, and then took her place in a Neapolitan galley that occasionally accepted passengers heading to the East.

Her sad figure, dressed in men's clothes, attracted the attention of other travelers on the long cruise through the Mediterranean, but the young woman was deeply disenchanted with the world and remained almost completely silent.

The docking in Alexandria took place with no incidents. However, following her benefactor's advice and finding out from his acquaintances in the city that the monastery was a few miles away, she had to use a guide to take her to the place where she would seek refuge.

The isolated abbey was located about ten leagues from the city and it took them nearly an entire day to get there, despite the good horses harnessed to the cart.

Celia stood in front of the large and silent building at twilight, thrilled by the sight of the spacious compound amid the wild vegetation. She felt an exceptional mental repose in that imposing solitude that seemed to welcome all desolate hearts.

Pulling the cord connected to the entrance gate, she heard the sound of a heavy bell in the distance. The bell's strange noise seemed to wake a sleeping giant.

Within instants the old hinges creaked heavily and she found herself before a man whose countenance was sad and grave, and who was dressed in a dark gray tunic. He addressed the young woman, turned into a grief-stricken young man, with these words:

“Brother, why have you come to our retreat of meditation and prayer?”

“I have come from Minturno and I have a letter from my father for Mr. Auphidius Priscus.”

“Auphidius Priscus?” the doorkeeper asked in surprise.

“Isn’t he the one in charge here?”

“Do you mean father Epiphanius?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Listen,” continued the doorkeeper, obligingly, “are you by chance the son of Marinus, the brother who left here around two years ago in order to bring you to stay with us?”

“Yes. Quite some time ago my father arrived at the ports of Italy, where we were reunited; however, he was always ill and did not have the good fortune of accompanying me back here to the solitude of your prayers.”

“He died?” asked the doorkeeper, extremely surprised.

“Yes, he surrendered his soul to the Lord several days ago.”

“May God receive him into his holy kingdom!”

That said, he pondered for a moment, as if his mind were immersed in fervent prayer.

Then, he addressed the humble, sad young man with great tenderness:

“Now that I know where you come from and who you are, I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

“May the Master be praised,” replied Celia in her simple way.

“Please don’t mind that I received you cautiously at first ... We are going through a period of intense and bitter persecutions, and in their study of the Gospel, the Lord’s servants must first probe to see if wolves in sheep’s clothing are trying to get into the fold.”

“I understand ...”

“I don’t want to bother you with unreasonable questions, but do you intend to adopt the monastic life?”

“Yes,” answered the young woman timidly. “In doing so, not only will I be obeying an innate vocation but I will also be fulfilling one of my father’s greatest aspirations.” “Are you aware of the demands of this place?”

“Yes, my father told me about them before he died.”

The doorkeeper-brother looked all around him, and seeing that they were alone, he said in a quiet voice:

“If you bring a pure and sincere calling to this place, I do not think it will be hard for you to observe our strictest disciplines. That said, I must explain that, as director of this institution, father Epiphanius is the harshest and most arbitrary soul I have ever met in my life. This prayer retreat is the result of an effort he began with your worthy father over twenty years ago. At first, all went well, but in recent years, old Auphidius Priscus has begun to abuse his authority quite a bit, especially after Brother Marinus left for Italy. Ever since then, father Epiphanius has become despotic and almost cruel. Little by little, he is transforming this resting place of the Lord into a barracks of military discipline – he received his early education in the army.”

Cneius Lucius’s granddaughter listened to him in profound wonder.

From the doorkeeper’s words, her observant mind understood right away that the retreat of the sons of prayer was also filled with the most dolorous intrigues.

While she gathered her innermost thoughts, Brother Phillip continues:

“Just imagine, our superior has been changing the order of all the teachings, creating the most incredible religious extravagances. Contrary to the teachings of the Gospel, he makes us call him ‘father’ or ‘master,’ names that Jesus himself refused to accept during his divine mission. Besides inventing all sorts of work for the forty-two men that live here disenchanted with the world, he has been applying the lessons of Jesus in his own way. Even though we cannot disclose any of this outside these walls due to the Christian character of our community, it is regrettable to see the entire sanctuary filled with symbols that remind us of the material celebrations of the cruel gods. And we cannot say anything in a tone of criticism or censure because father Epiphanius rules over us like a king.”

The young woman had not yet had a chance to express her opinion due to the doorkeeper’s pauseless discourse, when they both heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. Philip grew silent as if he were already accustomed to situations like this. Changing his facial expression, he said in a muffled voice:

“It’s him!”

Celia, in her strange, simple clothes, could not hide her astonishment.

On the threshold of a wide door appeared the figure of an old septuagenarian, whose facial features revealed the deepest expression of conventionalism and proud severity. Dressed like a Roman priest from the great days of the polytheistic temples, and leaning on an ornate cane, he cast a penetrating look all around him as if just looking for a reason to be angry and displeased.

“Philip!” he exclaimed in an imperative voice.

“Master,” said the doorkeeper-brother with feigned humility, “I present you the son of Marinus, who could not accompany him here due to his sudden death in Minturno.”

Upon hearing that unexpected explanation, Epiphanius strode towards the completely unknown young man, pronouncing the Gospel greeting almost drily as if he were a lion in the guise of a lamb: “Peace in the name of the Lord!”

Celia replied, as her venerable friend had taught her before his death, handing the community’s superior her father’s letter.

After quickly scanning the parchment, Epiphanius said austere:

“It looks like Marinus died in all his profligate idealism.”

And as if he had pronounced those words only to himself, he addressed the young woman sternly:

“Do you really want to live here?”

“Yes, my father,” said the alleged boy shyly and respectfully. “To continue my father’s traditions has been my desire since childhood.”

That humble tone pleased Epiphanius and he spoke to her less aggressively:

“But did you know that our organization is made up of Christian converts who are able to cooperate in our efforts not only with their spiritual worthiness but also with their financial resources? Money is indispensable for our achievements, after all. Didn’t your father leave you any savings after they lowered him into his grave in Minturno?”

“My inheritance amounted only to the money I would need for the trip to Alexandria. However,” she added innocently, “my father told me a while ago that his small fortune had been employed here and he assured me that the place’s administration would welcome me in memory of his services.”

“Well,” retorted Epiphanius, showing his annoyance, “as far as riches are concerned, all those who repose in this retreat brought most of their worldly fortune here.”

“But Father,” Celia implored with sincere humility, “if there are those who rest here, there must also be those who work. I may not have any money, but I do have the strength to serve the institution somehow. Please don’t deny me the realization of my long-cherished ideal!”

The superior seemed moved as he responded with emphasis:

“Fine, then. I will do what I can for you.”

Sending Philip inside to fetch a large book of annotations, he began a detailed interrogation:

“Your name?”

“The same as my father’s.”

“Where were you born?”

“In Rome.”

“Where were you baptized?”

“In Minturno.”

After his detailed inquiry, Epiphanius, vested in his austere superiority, said to her curtly:

“Because of my regard for your vocation and the memory of an old friend, you will stay with us and work in the domestic services. However, I wish to make it clear that I insist that the Lord’s Gospel be strictly obeyed here according to my will, which is inspired from on High. After many years of experience, I realized that evangelical thinking would have to be organized according to human laws or it would not be able to survive for the mentality of the future. The Christians of Rome, like those of Palestine, suffer from an excessive freedom that has led them to instinctively spread all sorts of absurdities. But here, Christian discipline must be characterized by the total abdication of one’s own will.”

The young woman listened to him calmly, keeping her private impressions of what she was hearing to herself, while Epiphanius led her inside and introduced her to the other brothers.

Now “Brother Marinus,” Celia began to live her singular and unfamiliar new life.

The vast monastery, where more than forty wealthy Christians lived together after having become disillusioned with the pleasures of the world, was one of the second century points of departure for Catholicism and the priesthood organized on an economic basis, eliminating the development of Messianism.

She noticed that none of the simplicity of the catacombs prevailed there. Pagan symbolism seemed to invade every part of the monastery. These converted Romans had not done away with the prayer formulas to their former gods. Large and small crosses carved out of marble or wood and sculpted in various ways were hanging everywhere. There were prayer rooms containing images of Christ in ivory and silver-plated wax, resting inert between clusters of roses and violets. The structure of the outward polytheistic cult seemed revived, indestructible and inescapable. She noticed that, to preserve it, there were the same intrigues of the Flamine priests of Rome. It seemed to her that the Gospel served as a mere pretext to galvanize the dead beliefs.

Epiphanius’s formalistic spirit had sought to provide the establishment with all the essential conventions.

A bell announced the change of meditations, work hours, prayers, meals and time meant for resting the spirit.

The sense of spontaneity of the Lord’s lessons on the shores of Tiberius, geared to the possibilities and needs of the believers, had disappeared. Epiphanius’s implacable conventionalism regulated every service.

What is most interesting is that in those remote monasteries of Africa and Asia, where Christians afraid of the inflexible persecutions in the city sought shelter, the famous hours of the Chapter, that is, the intimate gathering of all the members of the community, already existed for the feast of intrigues and individual points of view.

Celia found it strange that in a so-called Christian institution there would be aberrations like the Chapter, which had come directly from the Roman schools, where Flamine or Vestal priests pontificated. Nevertheless, she had to accept superior orders without revealing her disillusionment. Although disdaining such noxious expressions of outward worship, she would soon win everyone’s admiration and trust due to her upright conduct, which displayed

the loftiest acts of humility and understanding of the Gospel. With his mild manners and kind, friendly words, Brother Marinus became the focus of everyone's attention, edifying the purest affections in that singular living situation.

However, there was someone there who harbored the most venomous spite against such a pure life. That someone was Epiphanius, whose despotic and distinctive spirit had gotten used to ruling every heart with brutality and harshness. The fact that he could find nothing to criticize in his old friend's son enraged his tyrannical character. During the hours of the Chapter, he noticed that Brother Marinus's opinions always triumphed due to their obvious sublime comprehension of fraternity and love. Although surprised at his attitude, in her spiritual candor the young woman could not grasp her superior's rude gestures.

One day, during the time devoted to the intrigues and inquiries that preceded the institution of the strict and artificial auricular confession in Catholicism, Epiphanius gave a long lecture about the temptations of the world. He spoke about its abominable ways and the darkness that flooded the hearts of all sinners, including all things in life in his condemnation and religious fury.

After his fanatical speech, he requested, in the manner of the first Christian assemblies, that all the brothers comment on the lecture. While everyone approved of his concepts without restriction, Celia replied in her innocent sincerity:

“Master Epiphanius, your word is highly respected by all those who labor here, but I would beg your leave to consider the fact that Jesus did not desire the death of the sinner ... I believe it is indeed right for us to take refuge in this retreat until the wave of the bloody persecutions of the Lamb's followers passes; however, once the storm has abated, I believe it will be essential for us to return to the world and immerse ourselves in its pain-filled struggles, because without such fields of suffering and labor, we cannot give testimony to our faith and our understanding of Jesus' love.”

The spiritual director gave her a dark look, while the entire assembly seemed pleased with the comment.

“In the next Chapter meeting, then, we shall proceed with the same studies,” said Epiphanius in an almost rude tone, visibly annoyed by the



irrefutable argument presented in opposition to his despotic innovations in detriment of the Gospel teachings.

The next day, Brother Marinus was called to the office of his superior, who spoke to him in these terms:

“Marinus, our Brother Dioclecius has been purveyor of this place for more than ten years. He is now exhausted and ill, and I need to entrust this duty to someone whose sense of responsibility will relieve me of inquiries and special cares. Therefore, from tomorrow onward, you will have the task of going to the nearest market twice a week to see to the monastery’s meager provisions.”

The young woman welcomed his recommendation and thanked him for his trust in her. With such a provision, on Chapter days Epiphanius’s words would no longer be disturbed by her simple remarks, filled with the best explanations of the Gospel.

The market was three leagues away in a large village on the road to Alexandria. Thus, on her journey on foot, carrying two enormous baskets, Celia had to spend the night at the only inn to wait for the next morning, when the market displayed its products.

These weekly trips greatly fatigued her at first, but little by little she grew accustomed to the demands of her new obligation. Taking advantage of the solitude of the roads for her spiritual exercises, she not only reread old scrolls that contained the principles of the Gospel and the narratives of the Apostles, but also performed the most wholesome meditations, in which she let her heart take wing on endearing prayers to the Lord.

All the brothers at the monastery respected her. Through her acts and words, she concentrated everyone’s affections, surrounding her spirit with consideration and devoted love ...

Three years passed without a single day of discouragement or rebelliousness, indecision or anguish as she continued to consolidate her traits of irreproachable virtue.

In the closest village as well, where her market chores called her to fulfill her duty, everyone appreciated the kindly qualities of her soul, especially at the inn where she spent the night twice a week. The fact, however, is that the innkeeper, Menenius Tullius, had a daughter named Brunehilda, who had noticed Brother Marinus’s beautiful facial features and

was singularly impressed with them. She had adorned herself in vain to catch his attention because it was always focused on spiritual matters. Inwardly she was angered by his kindly disinterest – his behavior was always cordial and fraternal.

Several months passed without Brunehilda being able to unravel the mystery of that elusive soul, so full of beauty and gentle masculinity to her eyes. For his part, Brother Marinus, due to his lofty spiritual character, never grasped the degeneracy of the thoughts and intentions of the young woman, who so often heaped endearing kindnesses on him.

Disappointed in her unspeakable purposes, Brunehilda started a relationship with a Roman soldier, a friend of her father and family. He had just arrived from the Imperial Capital and was filled with daring and insinuating attitudes.

Soon, the innkeeper's daughter was heading toward the abyss of perdition, while the seducer of her restless, unpredictable soul willfully absented himself by returning to Rome after obtaining the consent of his superiors.

Abandoned to her harsh trial, Brunehilda tried to hide her anguished thoughts. With her soul seized with despair because of the strictness of her family's principles, she wanted to die in order to eliminate every trace of her error and disappear forever. But she did not have the courage to commit such an odious crime.

The day arrived, however, when she could no longer hide the truth from her father's eyes.

Upon going to bed on the eve of delivering the fruit of her affair, she finally had to tell Menenius what was happening. Overcome with wild grief, her father made his daughter confess everything so that he could get revenge. However, at the moment of revealing the name of the one that had disgraced her, Brunehilda felt the dread of the situation and said slanderously:

“Father, forgive me for the wrong that has dishonored your respectable and unpolluted name, but the one who led me to transgress so grievously the sacred family principles that you taught us was Brother Marinus with his cunning kindness.”

Menenius Tullius felt like a living wound had opened in his heart. He could never have imagined such a thing. To him, Brother Marinus represented

the most comforting hopes and he trusted his conduct as he would trust the best of friends.

Nevertheless, faced with the evidence, he exclaimed in a harsh voice:

“Very well, this indelible stain shall not remain in my house! Your immoral behavior will not dishonor my family’s name, because no one will know that you gave in to the foul purposes of that villain! I myself will take the child to Epiphanius so that his followers can realize the enormity of this crime! If necessary, I will not hesitate to wield the sword to defend the sacred circle of my family, but I would rather humiliate them and return the fruit of his cowardice to the seducer!”

Menenius Tullius concealed the immense grief of his heart and his home and left at dawn the next day for the monastery, taking with him a small basket whose singular contents was a poor little baby.

Called to the entrance hall by Brother Philip at the height of the day in response to the visitor’s insistence, the community’s superior listened to Menenius’s insults with a heart frozen with rancor. Having been told of Brunehilda’s confessions with regard to Marinus, master Epiphanius ordered him into his presence with the brutality of his abrasive gestures.

“Brother Marinus,” the superior harshly addressed Helvidius’s daughter, who listened to him distressed and astonished, “is this how you show your gratitude to this house? What about your lofty concepts of the Gospel? It seems they did not stop you from committing such a heinous crime. In welcoming you to this monastery and entrusting you with a mission to work in this retreat of the Lord, I placed the sacred trust of a father in you. But you have not hesitated to drag our name down into scandal and dishonor an institution that is extremely venerable to our souls!”

Noticing the poor child with the innkeeper, who did not return her greeting, the young woman asked when Epiphanius paused:

“What are you accusing me of?”

“Need you ask?” retorted Menenius Tullius, his face congested. “My poor daughter told me about your vile deed; how you did not hesitate to drag my honest home through the slime of your lust. You are mistaken if you think my house will welcome the sinful fruit of your unbridled passions, because this wretched child will remain here so that its rascal-of-a-father can decide its fate.”

Having said this and other insults to his daughter's supposed seducer, the innkeeper left. To Celia's and Epiphanius's astonishment, he left the poor child there completely abandoned.

The young woman understood at a glance that the spirit world was demanding a new witness to her faith. As she walked over, almost serenely, to take the little child in her arms, the community's superior warned her angrily:

"Brother Marinus, this house of God cannot tolerate your scandalous presence any longer. Explain yourself! Confess your sins so that my authority can take the necessary and opportune measures!"

For a few seconds, Celia immersed her pain-filled thoughts in indispensable meditation. Availing herself of the same intangible and crystal clear faith that had guided all the difficult sacrifices of her destiny, she said humbly:

"Father Epiphanius, anyone who would commit such an act is unworthy of the robe that must bring us closer to the Lamb of God! Therefore, I am ready to resign myself to any penalties your authority may impose on me!"

"Very well," replied the superior in his proud severity, "you must leave the monastery immediately and take that miserable child with you!"

By then, almost all the monks had gathered around them, observing the unraveling of the event. It was hard for them to believe in the guilt of Brother Marinus as he stood there humbly with the most consoling serenity in the calm light of his moist eyes.

Feeling that all the brothers were sympathetic to her cause, Helvidius's daughter knelt before Epiphanius and said with an unforgettable inflection in her voice:

"My father, please do not expel me from this community forever! ... I do not know the land around us! ...I'm ignorant and unwell! Do not forsake me! Consider the words of the Divine Master, who affirmed himself to be the recourse for all the sick and destitute of this world! If my soul is unworthy to remain in this retreat of Jesus, allow me to live in the abandoned shack at the bottom of the garden. I promise to work from morning to night tilling the soil to forget my wrongs ... Father Epiphanius, if you do not grant this grace to me, grant it for this forsaken little one, for whom I shall live with all the strength of my heart!" She wept copiously as she made her plea. In his mind, the proud Auphidius Priscus, who meant to apply the Gospel in his own way,

wanted to deny her request, but he quickly noticed that all the monks of the community were moved and filled with pity.

“I am not settling this matter alone,” he said in exasperation. “The other members of the monastery too must find your request strange and out of the question.” However, when the brothers, to whom the slandered young woman looked with pleading eyes, were consulted, there was a general consensus in favor of Celia. Epiphanius did not get the refusal he was looking for. Brother Marinus addressed his benefactors with a tender look of gratitude and left the sanctuary, courageously carrying the baby in his arms and retiring to the abandoned shack at the bottom of the monastery’s immense kitchen-garden.

This time Celia did not have to begin a pilgrimage along harsh roads, but only God could testify to her immeasurable sacrifices. With unprecedented hardship, she sought to adapt herself with the little one to her new life at the cost of the most strenuous work in her painful solitude, with some of the monastery brothers lending her a loving hand.

Remembering Cyrus, she surrounded the infant with all her care, hoping that Jesus would grant her the strength to fully bear all her trials.

By day she worked exhaustively in the cultivation of vegetables, taking advantage of the sunset for her meditations and studies, which seemed to be populated by loving beings and voices from the Invisible.

One day, a poor common woman was passing through the area on foot with her dying little son, searching the roads of Alexandria for assistance. It was afternoon. She knocked on Brother Marinus’s humble door and he helped lift her stricken soul by inviting her to the precious meditations of the Gospel. The humble creature then insistently requested him to lay his hands – as Jesus’ apostles had – on the sick child as a consequence of the feeling of trust and love Celia knew how to create with her words. Thus, surrendering herself to this act of faith for the first time, Celia was blessed with seeing the dying little boy regain his breath and health with a smile. The simple woman prostrated herself right there, giving thanks to God and mingling her tears with those of Brother Marinus, who also wept with emotion and gratitude.

From that day onward, the garden’s little hut never ceased to welcome the poor and afflicted of every social class, who went there to plead for Jesus’ blessings through that pure and simple soul, sanctified by the harshest sufferings.

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10 Minturno was later called Trajetta. – Emmanuel

## 5

# The Road of Expiation

While Celia is fulfilling her charitable mission in the light of the Gospel, let us return to Rome, where we find our former characters.

Ten years had passed in the infinite wake of Time since Helvidius Lucius and his family experienced the most peculiar twists of fate.

In spite of disguising their sorrows in the social circles they frequented, the Fabius Cornelius family's hearts had been troubled and anxious ever since that unfortunate day when Alba Lucinia's younger daughter had left forever due to the dolorous impositions of her unhappy fate. In private they sometimes wondered what might have happened to the daughter remembered by Rome only as a departed loved one. Helvidius's wife had harbored the saddest moral suffering ever since that fateful morning when she was told of what had happened to her daughter.

Alba Lucinia's facial features no longer displayed the open joviality and spontaneity of sentiment of happier days when her face seemed to be prolonging the graceful lines of her early youth forever. Inner torment had wrinkled it with an expression of repressed anguish. In her sad eyes, there seemed to be a ghost of mistrust that pursued her everywhere. Her first gray hairs, the result of her tormented soul, appeared on her forehead like a dolorous frame of her suffering, desolate virtue. She had never been able to forget her beloved daughter, who would emerge in the picture of her loving imagination, wandering and afflicted under the dreadful stigma of the domestic curse. Despite the friendly, loving words of her husband, who did everything on his part to maintain the inflexibility of his courageous and resolute stance, molded in accordance with the rigid principles of the Roman family, the poor woman seemed to suffer unendingly, as if a mysterious illness were treacherously leading her to the darkness of the tomb. The

festivities of the Court, the spectacles, the places of honor in the theaters or in public amusements meant nothing to her.

Although he did his best to hide his own woes, Helvidius Lucius tried in vain to lift his wife's spirits. As a father he often felt his heart tormented and afflicted, but he tried to escape his inner thoughts by seeking distraction in the whirlwind of political activities and social events. He habitually attended them driven by the need to escape his lonely ponderings, in which his fatherly heart sustained the bitterest dialogs with the prejudiced reasoning of the world. Thus, he suffered intensely amid indecision and longing, strength and regret.

Many changes had taken place in Rome since the sorrowful event that had immersed his family in heavy sorrow.

After many years of injustice and cruelty, having transferred his Court to Tibur, Aelius Hadrianus had departed for the Beyond, leaving the Empire in the benevolent hands of Antoninus, whose government was characterized by deeds of concord and peace in a better distribution of justice and tolerance. The new Emperor, however, had kept Fabius Cornelius as one of the best aides in his liberal and wise administration. The old censor was greatly pleased by this display of imperial trust, and it should be mentioned that, in his resolute and experienced old age, he was in a position of true influence over the senators themselves and other men of State, who were obliged to listen to his views and opinions.

There was one man in particular who had grown considerably in the old censor's confidence and had become his ideal agent in every endeavor. It was Silanus. Pleased at fulfilling the loving recommendation of his old friend from former times, Fabius Cornelius had made the former military man from Gaul an intelligent and cultured official, to whom the highest honors were rendered. Silanus somehow represented Fabius's vigor of days gone by, before the approach of old age, which now allowed his body few adventures. To the old censor, Cneius Lucius's protégé was almost like a son, in whose powerful virility he felt a prolonging of his own strength. They were always together in every undertaking to carry out Caesar's private orders and had developed the highest atmosphere of mutual affinity and trust.

Among our characters, there was one who had shut herself off in deep mystery. It was Claudia Sabina. Ever since Hadrian's death, she had been socially ostracized and had withdrawn once again into the anonymity of the



plebeians, from where she had risen to the highest levels of the Empire. She had kept the monetary wealth of her exploits and this allowed her to live where she pleased, with all the conveniences of the times. Having become discontented with the total withdrawal from her pretentious friendships from the good times of her social prestige, she had acquired a small estate on the outskirts of Rome in a modest suburb between Via Salaria and Via Nomentana, where she lived amid her pain-filled memories.

There was no lack of gossip about her new activities, and some of her old friends went as far as insisting that Lollius Urbicus's widow had begun taking part in the Christian practices in the catacombs, forgetting her wild and abhorrent past.

In fact, Claudia Sabina had had her first contacts with the religion of the Crucified One, but her heart was too poisoned with hatred to identify with the postulates of love and humility. Ten years later, she still had not discovered the actual events derived from the scheme she had plotted on the pathway of her destiny. She had lived with the dreadful obsession of winning back the man she loved, even if she had had to resort to crime to accomplish it. But her plans had failed. Without the support of former times, when her husband's prestige had provided her with a multitude of adulators and servants, she had gotten nothing, not even a word from Hateria, who, supported by Helvidius, had withdrawn to her estate in Benevento, where she lived with her children with the utmost prudence needed for her safety.

Claudia Sabina had found some comfort for the remorse eating at her soul, but from her point of view she could never reconcile her inflexible hatred and pride with the exemplification of that crucified and humble Jesus, who had prescribed humility and love as the starting point of all earthly happiness.

In vain had she listened to the Christian preachers at the meetings she had attended in her eager curiosity. Theories of tolerance and penitence found no echo in her poisoned spirit. And feeling inwardly helpless with the painful memories of her criminal past, the former plebeian considered herself a fallen leaf at the mercy of the impetuous wind. From time to time, however, the dread of death and the unknown Beyond assailed her. Exhausted from the passions of the world, she longed for some kind of faith. But if on the one hand were the old gods that could not satisfy her reasoning, on the other was that holy and immaculate Jesus, who was inaccessible to her sad and hateful longings. At times bitter tears filled her dark eyes, and yet she knew very well

that they were not tears of purification, but of hopeless and profound despair. As she bore the heavy burden of dead dreams, Claudia Sabina was entering the twilight of life like a castaway tired of fighting the waves of a stormy sea without hope of a port in the desperation of her pride and perverse hatred.

The year 145 was moving along smoothly. Our friends were struggling with the same embittered memories, when, in the early morning hours of a superb spring day, someone knocked with unusual insistence at Helvidius's door.

It was Hateria. Looking uncommonly thin and haggard, she was taken inside and received by Alba Lucinia with sympathy and pleasure.

The old servant looked extremely troubled and upset, but she was able to expound her thoughts clearly. She asked her former mistress to call for her father and husband so that she could explain a serious matter.

Helvidius's wife thought that perhaps the woman wanted to talk in private about some material thing related to her interests in Benavento.

Because of her insistence, Alba Lucinia called the old censor, who had been living with them ever since Julia's death. She also asked her husband to attend this request of Hateria, whom they had held in singular regard and special esteem ever since Celia's tragedy.

To the amazement of all three, the servant asked for a private room so that she could address the issue freely.

Fabius and Helvidius thought she had lost her mind, but the lady of the house asked them to go with her so they could satisfy what they supposed to be a mere whim. Together in an elegant small room next to the tablinum, Hateria spoke nervously, her face very pale:

"I have come here to make a dolorous and terrible confession, and I do not know how I should expose my crimes of the past! ... I am a Christian now, and before Jesus I must explain myself to those who offered me such dedicated and sincere esteem in the past."

"So," Helvidius asked, believing her to be suffering from a mental disturbance, "you're a Christian now?"

"Yes, sir," she replied with shining, enigmatic eyes, as if having made a supreme resolution, "I am a Christian by the grace of the Lamb of God, who came into this world to redeem all sinners ... Until recently, I would rather

have died than reveal my dolorous secrets. I planned on going to my grave with the terrible mystery of my criminal past, but for the past year I have been listening to the sermons of a righteous man near Benevento who is preaching Jesus Christ's kingdom of heaven, persuading sinners to right their wrongs. Ever since the first time I heard the promise of the Lord's Gospel, I have felt my ungrateful heart under the weight of a great remorse. Furthermore, Jesus teaches that no one can come to him without carrying their own cross in order to follow him ... My cross is my sin ... I hesitated to come because I was afraid of the consequences of my revelation, but I need to come to grips with all the effects of my crime. That is the only way I feel I can have the peace of mind essential for the trials that will regenerate my soul! After my confession, you may kill me if you wish! Send me to the sacrifice! Order my death! ... That will relieve my maligned conscience somewhat! ... In Heaven, that beloved Jesus, who promised sacred aid to all those who cultivate the truth, will take my repentance into account and will console me in my grief, granting me the means to redeem myself through his mercy!"

And then, in front of the perplexity of the three of them, Hateria began to unfold the sinister story of her life. She told them about her first encounters with Claudia Sabina, their agreements, Lollius Urbicus's private life, the sinister plan to destroy Alba Lucinia in the eyes of her family and Roman society; Plotina's involvement and the epilogue of the tragic plan, which had ended with the sacrifice of Celia, whose memory choked her voice in a torrent of tears as she recalled her kindness, her candor, her sacrifice ... It was a long, dolorous narrative ... For more than two hours, she held the attention of Fabius Cornelius and his family, who listened, stupefied.

Hearing her and considering the details of her confession, Alba Lucinia felt the blood run cold in her veins, overcome with singular anguish. Helvidius, his chest tightening in suffocation, tried in vain to say something. Only the censor, in his terrible and prideful rigidity, stood firm, although revealing his inner horror in the desperate expression on his face.

"You miserable wretch!" shouted Fabius Cornelius with great effort. "Look how far you went with your vile and petty ambition! ... Criminal! Cursed witch! Did you not fear the weight of our hands?"

His voice, however, seemed stifled by the same emotion that had gripped his children.

“I shall avenge myself on everyone!” shouted the old censor in a strangled voice.

Hateria knelt at his feet and exclaimed:

“Do with me what you will! Now that I have confessed, death will be a sweet relief!” “Then you shall die, you vile creature,” said the censor, drawing his dagger, which shined in the sun’s light coming in through a tall and narrow window.

But when his right hand was about to strike, Alba Lucinia, as if driven by a mysterious force, held back her father’s arm and cried:

“Back, Father! Not another tragedy in our lives! ... What good is another crime?”

But as Fabius Cornelius drew back in astonishment, a deathly pallor covered the poor woman’s face and she fell to the carpet under the anguished gaze of her husband, who rushed to help her.

As Hateria helped the tribune place Lucinia on a long divan, the old censor gazed at her with profound contempt and said:

“Courage, Helvidius! ... I’ll call a doctor immediately. We shall leave this vile witch to her fate; but before this day is over, I will have that wretch who poisoned our lives eliminated for good!”

Helvidius Lucius wanted to speak but did not know whether to advise prudence to his impulsive father-in-law or to assist his wife, whose limbs were cold and stiff as a result of her moral trauma.

Aiding Alba Lucinia on the divan while Hateria went inside to get help, Helvidius Lucius watched his father-in-law stomp out.

Despite his intense efforts, the tribune was unable to coordinate his thoughts to resolve the terrible situation. Taken to her bed, Alba Lucinia seemed to be under the domination of a destructive and absolute force that would not let her recover her senses. The doctor administered potions and precious ointments to no avail. Medicinal rubbing concoctions were futile. Only in the convulsive movements of her nightmare did she show any evidence of bodily energy. Her eyelids remained closed and her breathing was labored, like a sick person on the verge of dying.

As Helvidius Lucius redoubled his assistance while trying to calm himself down, Fabius Cornelius went to his office. He called Silanus in

private and said to him sternly:

“I need your dedication and service today more than ever!”

“Just say the word!” exclaimed the official eagerly.

“I need a punitive effort to eliminate an old conspirator of the Empire. I have been watching her machinations for more than ten years; however, only now have I been able to confirm her political crimes. I have decided to entrust you with one more task of singular importance to my administration.”

“Certainly,” said the young man calmly. “Tell me what it is and I shall fulfill your orders with my usual zeal.”

“Take Lidius and Marcus with you, since you will need two completely trustworthy men.”

And in a discreet tone, he told his assistant the victim’s name, residence, social status and anything else that might facilitate the execution of his sinister order.

Lastly, he emphasized in a cavernous voice:

“I will send some soldiers to surround the estate to prevent any resistance from the servants; and after ordering that wretched woman’s veins to be sliced, you will tell her that the sentence has come from my authority in the name of the new powers of the Empire.

“I shall do as you say,” replied the emissary resolutely.

“Try to act with the utmost caution. As for me, I am needed back home. I’ll come here this afternoon to find out how it went.”

While Silanus rounded up the helpers for the undertaking, Fabius Cornelius returned home, where every medical measure had been unsuccessfully attempted to awaken Alba Lucinia from her strange torpor. Helvidius Lucius had put all the servants into action and was doing everything he could to awaken his wife. Like a madman, he would fall into despair in torrents of tears, and it was in vain that he appealed to the silent promises of the family gods. As Hateria sat meekly by her former mistress, the tribune exerted himself in unprecedented efforts as Fabius Cornelius paced to and fro in a nearby room, sometimes waiting for the ill woman to improve, sometimes counting the hours until he would know the result of his sinister commission.

That afternoon, surrounded by soldiers and the two trusted companions who would enter Claudia's residence, the censor's emissary arrived at the pleasant tree and flower-lined estate, where the former plebeian dedicated herself to her ponderings in the sorrow-filled autumn of her life.

Lollius Urbicus's widow had spent the day in bitter, anguishing reflections. As if a mysterious force were dominating her, she felt the saddest and most incomprehensible sensations. In vain had she strolled through the delightful gardens of the princely residence, where graceful and well-kept pathways were saturated with the pungent aromas of spring. Strange, indescribable sentiments suffocated her as if her soul were immersed in bitter omens. She tried to focus her thoughts on some sentimental reference point, but like a scorched desert, her heart was bereft of faith.

With her soul immersed in painful ruminations, she was greatly surprised to see a detachment of praetorians approaching.

Overcome with emotion, remembering what those small terror-filled expeditions represented in former times, she greeted the official who came looking for her in her quarters. He was accompanied by two broad-shouldered, strong men, with whom he exchanged significant glances.

"To what do I owe the honor of your visit?" she asked after sitting down, looking with intense curiosity at Silanus.

"Are you the widow of the former prefect Lollius Urbicus?"

"I am ..." Claudia replied with displeasure.

"Very well. I am Silanus Plautius and I am here on the orders of Censor Fabius Cornelius, who, after extensive proceedings, has issued the ultimate sentence against you. I hope you can die with dignity, given your role as a conspirator against the Empire!"

Claudia heard those words and felt the blood freeze in her heart. An alabaster pallor covered her face and her temples throbbed wildly. She reached out her hands toward a piece of furniture nearby and tried to ring a large bell, but Silanus stopped her and said calmly:

"Any resistance is useless! The house is surrounded. Send your final thoughts to the gods!"

Obedying the agreed-upon signal, Lidius and Marcus – two giants – advanced on Claudia Sabina, who could barely stand up, staggering ... While

the former immobilized her mercilessly, the latter slit her wrists with a sharp blade ...

Feeling the horror of the hopeless situation, Claudia surrendered to her executioners without resistance while turning her gaze on Silanus with an unforgettable look.

However, whether due to the terror of that unforgettable moment or some irresistible and profound emotion, the poor woman's blood did not flow from her open veins. It was as if a fiery emotion were shaking all her psychological forces, contradicting the common laws of organic energies.

Facing this unheard of and rarely seen occurrence in sentences of that nature and observing the anguished and insistent way the victim was looking at him, as if begging him to listen to her, the officer ordered Lidius to stop restraining her so that the condemned woman could say what she would and die in peace. Released from the restraint, Claudia Sabina said in a somber voice:

“Silanus Plautius, my blood refuses to flow before I confess all the events of my life to you! Send these two men away from these quarters and do not fear a defenseless, dying woman!”

Highly impressed, Cneius Lucius's adopted son ordered his men to withdraw to a nearby room, while Claudia, alone with him and with her veins dripping, threw herself at his feet and said sorrowfully:

“Silanus, forgive the miserable soul who gave you life! ... I am your disgraced and criminal mother and I do not want to die without asking you to avenge me! Fabius Cornelius is a monster. I hate him! My past is filled with thick darkness! ... But the one who has ordered you to slay your mother today has ordered many crimes!”

The poor young man looked at his victim, overcome with painful astonishment. His face turned white as snow, revealing his innermost emotions. If his eyes reflected distressing anxiety, however, his lips remained mute while Lollius Urbicus's widow kissed his feet in a flood of tears.

So, it was there that the mystery of his birth and life was to be found? A painful emotion gripped him and he broke into sobs that burst from his chest, overcome by anguish. Ever since the death of Cneius, he had been nurturing the desire to discover the mystery of his birth. He had often thought of raising a family, but had felt discouraged by the social prejudices that would affect

his children. From time to time, he had felt the desire to open the small medallion his venerable protector had given to him in the throes of death, and yet a terrible fear of the truth had always stopped him.

While the most painful thoughts clouded his mind, Claudia, on her knees, told him the dolorous story of her life detail by detail. Horrified by those truths spoken in a voice that was on the verge of the tomb, Silanus learned about her early love affairs; her meeting Helvidius Lucius in the adventurous tumult of worldly life; the doubt as to who his father really was; the decision to entrust him to Cneius, where she knew there would be the most loving devotion to Helvidius's name – a circumstance that would ensure a happy future to the foundling; the blows of fate after marrying a man of the State; and her arrangements with Fabius Cornelius in times past to carry out iniquitous sentences in the midst of the Roman empire. She omitted the awful tragedy of her life concerning Alba Lucinia, however. Sensing that her impending death only increased her hatred toward the censor, who had ordered it, and toward his family, Claudia Sabina yielded to her final perfidy and intimated that Lollius Urbicus's mysterious and unexpected death had been the work of Fabius Cornelius and his henchmen in his eagerness for blood and her ruin.

In her final moments, led by the darkness of her ferocious hate, she did not hesitate to build her last castle of slander and lies in order to drag the family she so much detested down into desolation.

Those terrible secrets rang in the official's ears like a cry of vengeance that demanded supreme satisfaction. However, in his mind, emotions alone were not enough to prove the truth. He needed something that would speak to his reason. As if Claudia Sabina were divining his thoughts, she went straight to his silent hesitations:

“Silanus, my son, didn't Cneius Lucius give you the small medallion that I had wrapped in your foundling clothes?”

“Yes,” said the young man, extremely disturbed. “I carry that memento with me.”

“You never opened it?”

“Never ...” Fabius's emissary rummaged through a bag he always carried with him and took out a small medallion. The condemned woman gazed at it anxiously.



“Inside it, my son,” she said, “I wrote these words one day: My little son, I am entrusting you to the kindness of others with the blessing of the gods. – Claudia Sabina.”

Silanus Plautius opened the medallion nervously and checked all the words one by one.

A violent emotion shook him to his core. The marble whiteness of his face increased and his troubled, sad look took on a glassy expression of dread and astonishment. His tears dried as if a new sentiment were emerging in his soul. Feeling her final moments had come, Claudia Sabina eagerly watched the sudden transformation.

As if overcome by the most radical of all metamorphoses, the young man leaned over the victim and cried out in horror:

“Mother ... my mother!”

A mixture of indefinable and profound sentiment blended in his words, escaping from his chest in a cry of repressed affection after so many years of doubt and anguish.

Upon receiving that supreme and sweet expression of affection in her final moments, the condemned woman continued in her fading voice:

“My son, forgive me for my vile and dark past! ... The gods are punishing me by making me perish at the hands of the one I gave life to! My son, my son, in spite of everything, I love the hands that have brought me death!”

Cneius Lucius’s ward leaned over the bloodstained carpet. In a supreme act that reflected his anguish and his forgiveness of his mother’s abandonment in order to consider only the painful destiny that had led him to matricide, he took the nearly lifeless head of the condemned woman in his hands. Her eyes now seemed to rejoice in the enigmatic and criminal thoughts of her soul.

Then, a very interesting phenomenon occurred. As if her last wish had been completely satisfied, Claudia Sabina’s spirit body started to disengage from her earthly one. With her psychic will satisfied, her blood began to flow in intense red gushes from her slashed wrists.

Feeling herself in the arms of the official, who was looking at her in utter bewilderment, she said again in a broken voice:

“And so ... my son ... I feel ... that you ... have forgiven me! Avenge me! ... Fabius Cornelius ... must die.”

In the throes of death, she could not continue, but her eyes were sending the most peculiar messages to Silanus, which the young man interpreted as supreme appeals for revenge and retribution.

After a waxy pallor covered her twisted face in a mask of anguished terror, the censor’s messenger opened the doors, revealing his traumatized face to his companions. His fixed and dreadful gaze looked like that of a madman. Inwardly, the strongest mental disturbances ravaged his desolate soul. He felt like the lowest and most wretched of creatures. With a single word of command, they took the road back to the urban center, while Claudia’s dedicated servants tearfully shrouded her body.

Lidius and Marcus, as well as his other praetorian friends, tried to call his attention to this or that detail of the operation, but Silanus Plautius maintained a strict and somber silence.

In addition to the idea that Fabius Cornelius had known about his painful past and yet had not hesitated to make him his mother’s killer, Claudia Sabina’s slanderous fabrications about the censor and his past behavior in her final hour triggered an indescribable mental uproar in him. The thought that he would consider himself as being a matricide for the rest of his days drove him mad, filling him with horrible plans for revenge. Overwhelmed by lower sentiments, he stroked the dagger he had in his armor, reveling in the moment he would feel vindicated for all the outrages he had experienced in his life.

It was dusk when he entered the imposing building where Fabius Cornelius was waiting for him in a magnificent, well-lit office.

The old censor welcomed him with visible interest. Seeking to speak with him in private, he took him to a corner of the room and asked eagerly:

“So, what news do you bring me? Everything went well?”

Silanus looked at him violently disturbed, his eyes bulging.

“What’s the matter?” the censor insisted, extremely concerned. “Are you ill? What happened?”

Fabius Cornelius could not continue. Without saying a word, like a madman out of control, the officer swiftly drew his dagger and buried it in the chest of the censor, who fell down heavily crying out for help.

Silanus Plautius looked at his victim in a demented state, completely bereft of any rational thought ... Indifferent to what he had done, he watched the blood of the old politician spurt from the wound between his neck and shoulder blade, while the wounded man, in the throes of death, fixed his terrified eyes on him ... Immediately thereafter, several guards surrounded Cneius Lucius's former ward to strip him of his life as well. The officer tried to resist the praetorians and other friends of the murdered censor, but in minutes he was reduced to shreds by sword blows, with which he paid for his criminal affront to the State.

The news spread swiftly throughout the city.

Assisted by his most devoted friends, Helvidius Lucius had to rely on all his strength to continue to function under such harsh blows.

Given his wife's delicate condition, he arranged for the bloody remains to be removed to another part of the house with special care. He did not want the sinister and grievous scene to aggravate Alba Lucinia's illness in case she suddenly awakened from her prolonged unconsciousness.

A courier was dispatched quickly to Capua, calling Caius Fabricius and his wife to come to Rome immediately.

In the midst of the most painful sufferings, unable to communicate the weight that oppressed his heart to any of his friends due to the difficult family circumstances involved, Cneius's son shed tears of immense sorrow beside his wife, who lay between life and death. Marcia, meanwhile, took charge of all the social protocols in his home, receiving those who came to pay their respects to the remains of the two deceased.

Alba Lucinia had finally awakened from her loss of consciousness, but her eyes held an expression of estrangement from the world. She uttered unintelligible words that Helvidius Lucius would have given his life to understand. It was clear, however, that her mind was no longer capable of any lucid thoughts. Moreover, her recurrent bouts of unconsciousness continued, as if her brain cells were breaking down slowly, one by one, under the pressure of an unstoppable force.

Abiding by the imperatives of the situation, the tribune issued orders for the funerals of his father-in-law and adoptive brother to be held as quickly as possible. Helvidius and her husband arrived from Campania in less than a week. Even though they had missed the funeral ceremonies, they entered the paternal home in time to kneel at the bed of Alba Lucinia who, the night

before, had fallen into the throes of death ... The presence of his children was somewhat consoling to the tribune, but it seemed to his lacerated soul that there was not enough consolation in the whole world for his humiliated, wounded heart.

Touched in his most sensitive inner core, he watched his wife slowly die, as if an invisible executioner had plunged a sharp dagger into her heart. In the face of death, all his powers ceased, as well as all his loving care and devotion. Submerged in a sea of tears, Helvidius Lucius held his spouse's cold hands in his own and did not leave the room, even to heed the call of his recently-arrived children. Sensing that death would soon carry away his beloved wife, he stayed by her bedside, overcome by the most desperate thoughts.

From time to time, he would emerge from the depths of his reflections, and as if convinced the dying woman could hear him, he would speak to her in despair:

“Lucinia, are you also abandoning me? Wake up; brighten up my loneliness again! If I have ever offended you, forgive me. I did nothing but love you deeply! ... Please. Listen to me. I will defeat death to keep you in my arms! I will fight against them all! With you I'll have the strength to live and correct my past wrongs; but what can I do alone and abandoned if you leave? Gods of heaven! Were the ruin of my home and the wreckage of my domestic happiness not enough to redeem myself in your eyes? Have compassion on my wretched soul! What have I done to pay such a heavy price?”

And gazing at the sky as if glimpsing the divine powers that preside over human destinies, he pointed to his dying wife and said again in a muffled, painful voice:

“Good gods, spare her life!”

Nevertheless, as if his pleas had died without an answer before a sphinx, Alba Lucinia departed the world with a silent tear at dawn as the crimson light of the sun painted the early clouds of the Roman sky in the gentle break of day.

Upon seeing her breathe her last sigh, Helvidius Lucius plunged into indescribable sorrow. His eyes, now dry and strange, bore an expression of rebelliousness against all the deities. He saw them as having been insensitive to his suffering and desperate pleas. The tribune's residence had been covered

with black crepe while, like a sentinel that had been petrified in despair, his grieving profile stood next to a magnificent urn containing his spouse's remains.

Stern and impassive, he responded to his friends' affectionate concerns with bitter monosyllables while Caius, Helvidia and the kind Marcia did the honors of the house.

After a week of tributes from Roman society, a funeral was held for the unfortunate woman, who had fallen like a wounded bird in her deep maternal love, while her husband, experiencing the most distressing loneliness, felt forsaken and wounded forever.

Tormented and silent, Hateria had remained in the house until the funeral carriages accompanied Alba Lucinia to the depths of the tomb. Painfully aware of the tragedies her revelation had unleashed on that once-happy home, she felt shame piercing her heart. Often, during the terrible hours of her former mistress's agony, she had looked pleadingly at the tribune to see if he had forgiven her in order to calm her heavy conscience. Helvidius Lucius seemed not to see her, indifferent to her presence and her life ...

With unsettling remorse, Hateria left as the sorrowful night fell on the tribune's house after the funeral. She felt like a loathsome worm, such was the anguish of her sad thoughts.

It was cold. The dark of the night was dense, as impenetrable as the anguish that chilled her heart ... To stay there after the burial, however, was no longer possible due to the bitter emotions throbbing in her soul.

The old servant headed for Trastevere, where she had some old friends. Interestingly, her route through the narrow streets followed a path similar to young Celia's when she had been driven from her parents' home ... After walking for a long time, she stopped near Fabricius Bridge, afraid to go any farther. It was nearly midnight and the vicinity of Tiber Island was deserted. She wanted to turn back, pressed by an inexplicable force that made her sense an imminent danger. Two masked men approached, their dark forms moving quickly amid the heavy night darkness. She tried to scream, but it was too late. One of them attacked her quickly, brutally immobilizing her.

"Lucanus," the stranger said in a muffled voice, covering her face with a thick towel, "hurry up and see if she's got anything on her! We need to be quick about it!"

“Damn,” said his disappointed companion, “just a worthless old woman!”

“Don’t be discouraged!” continued the other, “I have a hunch this is good prey. Come on! These old bags usually have cash hidden on them if they’re cunning and greedy!”

The bandit who had his hands free put them to Hateria’s chest and could feel her heart beating rapidly. That was, in fact, where Hateria kept her savings in a sturdy pouch. Finding the little treasure, both villains smiled in satisfaction. Obeying a signal from his companion, Lucanus hit the gagged victim’s head hard with a small iron rod, concluding in a low voice once he saw that he had knocked her out:

“It’s always better like this! Tomorrow she won’t be able to tell the neighbors about our deed and have the authorities come to bother us.”

They dragged the stunned victim away and threw her without pity into the deep waters of the silently rolling river. This is how Hateria lived her final moments, as if to expiate the vile crimes of her guilty past.

Now that we have witnessed the final ordeal of Claudia Sabina’s former accomplice, let us follow Helvidius Lucius in his dark night of deep suffering. Only on the day after his wife’s funeral was the tribune able to gather his children in his private study to confide to them the sad revelations that had unleashed the terrible events that had destroyed his happiness forever.

Upon concluding his account of the tragedy, Caius Fabricius told his wife and father-in-law about his encounter with Celia ten years earlier on his way to Campania to tend to urgent interests. He had never mentioned this before, feeling that the general consensus was that they would remember the young woman only as a departed loved one. He had never forgotten that sad picture of his sister-in-law abandoned in the loneliness of the night on the Terracine mountain and had reproached himself many times for remaining indifferent and deaf to her appeals.

Helvidia and her father listened to him, overcome with grief and astonishment.

Only then, taking into account his daughter’s complete sacrifice, as well as her moral torments to protect the family from the blows of misfortune and slander, was Cneius Lucius’s son able to awaken the remnants of his sensibility and willpower to continue to live. His son-in-law’s encounter

suggested that Celia might be alive somewhere. He thought of his wife and concluded that if Alba Lucinia were still on the earth, she would feel immense joy in embracing her scorned daughter again. Surely, from heaven, his dear companion would guide his search and bless his efforts. And some day, when the will of the gods allowed it, his wife's soul would lead his tormented heart to his daughter so that he could die kissing her hands.

Immersed in those anguishing thoughts, with a sad serenity leading him, Helvidius Lucius was able to weep in a way that relieved his inner anguish. As Helvidia lovingly wiped them away, his tears were like the beneficial rains that cleanse the sky after a raging storm.

Then, as if new hope were encouraging him, the tribune, to relieve his conscience, concentrated all his sufferings on finding the daughter he had banished from his home, wherever she might be. He wished to die and be reunited with his beloved wife, but he also wanted to be able to assure her that Celia had reappeared, and that on his knees he had begged forgiveness from the daughter whom he had been unable to understand. To this end, he went to Campania with his children on their return to Capua. After a few days of rest, he dismissed all his servants in order to pursue the necessary investigations alone, and left for Lazio, despite Helvidia's pleas to at least accept his son-in-law's company.

Sad and alone, the old tribune wandered in vain through all the cities near Terracina, remaining for a long time at the Tiberius grotto, calling to mind his son-in-law's painful recollections. Despite all his efforts, he traveled all over Italy to no avail. Thus, a year after Lucinia's death, he returned to Rome dejected and desolate as never before.

Profoundly forlorn, he was like a tree singularly isolated in the broad expanse of life. As long as he had had his close companions at his side, he had been strengthened to withstand the violent storms that descended on him, but with them gone, he was now unable to resist even the lightest winds rising from the dark valleys of pain and destiny.

Retreating to his office, he received only visits from his closest friends, whose words would not bring any reminders of his unhappy past to his tormented soul.

One day, however, a slave came to announce the visit of an old childhood friend, Rufius Propertius, whose sad story he well knew. In spite of

his own sorrows, Helvidius had come to know Rufius's woes and misfortunes.

Helvidius Lucius eagerly invited him in as a brother in pain and inner torment.

After they exchanged first impressions, Rufius Propercius explained:

"Dear Helvidius, after such a long separation, you are surprised at my moral fortitude in the face of the painful catastrophes of life. I must explain the reason for my resignation and serenity to you. It is because I have abandoned our meaningless beliefs to follow Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God!"

"Really?" asked the tribune, interested.

"Yes, really. I now understand life and the sufferings of this world better. Only in the treasures of the Christian teachings have I found the strength I need to understand pain and destiny. Only Jesus, with his lesson of compassion and mercy, can save us from the abyss of our deep sorrows for a better life that doesn't include earth's grievous errors and disillusionment."

And while Helvidius Lucius listened, amazed to find a close friend so firm in his ardent, pure faith among the devastations of the times, Propercius added:

"Since you feel equally wounded by destiny, why not go with me to a Christian meeting? It is quite possible that you'll find the peace you desire and the courage you need to triumph over all the torments of life."

As he listened to the kindly invitation of his childhood friend, the tribune instinctively remembered his daughter and her convictions. Yes, it had been Christianity that had given her such strength for suffering and sacrifice. Moreover, he remembered the figures of Nestorius and Cyrus, who had gone to their deaths without a whimper, without a complaint.

As if yielding to a sudden resolution, he replied decisively:

"I accept. Where is the meeting?"

"In a humble house near Porta Appia."

"All right, I'll go."

Rufius said goodbye, promising to pick him up that night. Helvidius spent the rest of the day in deep and serious thought.



At the agreed-on time, they headed to the place where the humble assemblies met, and where, for the first time, Helvidius Lucius heard the Gospel and the simple comments of the Christians. At first he found that Jesus, who forgave and loved everyone with the same tenderness and devotion, as being strange. However, over the course of numerous meetings, he understood the Gospel better, and even though he could not fully grasp the lessons, he admired the simple and loving prophet who blessed the poor and afflicted of the world, promising them a kingdom of light and love beyond earth's unrewarding toils.

His effort to acquire faith was following the usual course, when one day, a famous preacher appeared in that group of simple and kind people. He was a young, intelligent and cultured man named Saul Antonius, who had turned his life into a sacred ministry of evangelization.

His ardent, vibrant words on the Acts of the Apostles regarding events soon after the departure of the Lamb for the regions of light impressed the tribune deeply. For the first time, he was listening to an intellectual – a sage, almost – extol the virtues of Christ's followers and make extraordinary comparisons between the Gospel and the theories of that time, which he had been accustomed to regarding as unsurpassable knowledge.

After his inspired and brilliant lecture, Helvidius approached the speaker and said with sincerity:

“My friend, I offer you my sincere hope that your wise words will continue to enlighten the paths of earth. I would like to ask you a question that rose in my heart some time ago.”

And while the preacher welcomed his words with deep kindness, he continued:

“I do not doubt the acts of Jesus' Apostles, but I find it strange that, for a long time now, there have been no other dedicated institutions on earth like those of the former followers of Christ to relieve our pain and enlighten our hearts in our suffering!”

“My brother,” said the speaker unperturbed, “before resorting to intermediaries, we must prepare our hearts to feel directly the inspiration of the Lamb. So, your question is very justified. I should explain, however, that the apostolic callings have not all died out. They flourish everywhere under the blessings of God, who has never tired of sending us the messengers of his infinite mercy.”

And after a slight pause, as if to convey an accurate account of his innermost reminiscences, Saul Antonius said with conviction:

“Some years ago, I was a sworn enemy of Christianity and its divine principles; however, the contribution of a true disciple of Jesus was enough to open my eyes and make me search for the true path ... Even today, he continues there, humble and gentle as a flower from heaven among the weeds of the earth ... His name is Brother Marinus. He lives on the outskirts of Alexandria and is a divine and constant blessing from Jesus to all. A personification of goodness and perfect evangelical love, I saw him heal lepers and paralytics, and restore hope and faith to the saddest and most-hardened! Multitudes of the afflicted and helpless flock to his ramshackle hut, and the venerable apostle of the Lamb revives and consoles them with profound lessons of love and humility! After wandering through the darkest pathways, I had the good fortune to find his loving and benevolent words, which awakened me to Jesus from the blackness of my destiny!”

Feeling his deep sincerity, Helvidius Lucius asked eagerly:

“And does this extraordinary man welcome anyone without distinction?”

“Everyone deserves his attention and love.”

“Well then, my friend,” replied the tribune in his deep disconsolation, “in spite of my financial position and the public respect I enjoy in Rome, my heart is more distressed and ailing than ever ... The lessons of the Gospel have, to some extent, sustained my broken spirit. However, I feel the need of a spiritual remedy which, by soothing my inner pain, will lead me to a better understanding of the divine examples of the Lamb ... Your remarks are timely, because I will go to Alexandria to seek consolation from this apostle. In any event, a trip to Egypt in the current circumstances of my life would do my heart a lot of good.”

The next day, Cneius Lucius’s son took the first steps to arrange for the journey as quickly as possible.

Even before the galley left Ostia, he began to concentrate his hopes on this Brother Marinus, whose well-known virtues were venerated in all the Christian communities, and who was seen as an emissary of Jesus destined to sustain the divine traditions of the apostolic times in the world.

## 6

# In Celia's Kitchen-Garden

On the outskirts of Alexandria, Helvidius's daughter had earned an outstanding and well-deserved reputation for her love and kindness.

After having moved to that region of poor and humble people, she had transformed all her fondest memories, as well as her innermost sorrows, into hymns of pure charity that reached Heaven amid blessings from all sorts of unfortunate sufferers.

As if her suffering and longings had molded her angelic features, her peaceful countenance showed an indefinable trace of celestial vision. A life of asceticism, abnegation and renunciation had given her a new appearance that revealed in her serene and sparkling eyes the indescribable purity of those who are about to reach the radiant clarity of another life.

She had been unwell for quite some time now, and yet she had not abandoned her apostolic work among the suffering. In the afternoons she would read the Gospel outdoors to whomever sought her spiritual help. It seemed that a divine power would come over her as she was explaining the teachings of Jesus and his divine followers. Her voice was usually weak but it would take on a different tone, as if her vocal cords were vibrating to the influx of divine inspiration.

She still lived in the same hut at the bottom of the kitchen-garden, whose hard work never lacked her attention and affection. All the brothers of the monastery, except Epiphanius, sought her company, accepting her evangelical explanations and helping her in her efforts.

Having become a loving brother of the unfortunate, the young Roman woman kept the same inward disposition as always, filled with faith and hope in the Lord of kindness and wisdom.

Brunehilda's little foundling had eased her loneliness for a few years with his love and smiles, but he had died, leaving her more sorrowful and shattered than ever. Celia was deeply affected by this event and prayed fervently, until one night, as she surrendered to the solitude of her prayers and meditations, she saw the figure of Cneius Lucius at her side, looking at her with infinite tenderness.

"Dearest daughter, do not grieve over this new separation from your beloved! Continue in your faith and fulfill the divine mission that the Lord was pleased to entrust to your sensitive and generous soul! After smoothing your earthly path for a few years, Cyrus's spirit has once more returned to the Beyond to gather new strength! Do not be discouraged by the longing that pierces your most tender heart, because our souls sow love on earth to see it bloom in Heaven, where the unhappy troubles of the world cannot reach! ... Moreover, Cyrus has need of these trials. They will temper his will and sentiment for the glorious deeds of his spiritual future!"

At this point, the loving spirit paused as if intentionally in order to observe the effect of his words.

Dissolved in tears, the young woman spoke mentally, as if she were conversing with her grandfather in the sanctuary of her heart:

"I do not doubt the fact that all our sorrows are sent to us by Jesus so we can learn the way of divine redemption, but what is the reason for Cyrus's shortened lives on earth? If he comes here to live in the human environment because he still needs earthly experiences, then why does death keep cutting short our hopes?"

"Indeed," the spirit replied lovingly, "it is because of the law of trials that governs our destinies."

"But didn't Cyrus die for the divine Master in martyrdom and sacrifice many years ago?"

"My child, among the martyrs of Christianity there are those who depart the world on a sacrosanct mission and those who die for the most painful redemption ... Cyrus is among the latter ... In a previous century he was a cruel despot who exterminated hopes and poisoned hearts ... Next, while immersed in the expiatory struggle, he renounced his sanctifying sufferings and headed down the ignominious path of suicide. Therefore, it is just that he now learns to appreciate the benefits of struggle and life through the difficulty of regaining them for his eagerly desired spiritual redemption. His past

failures will give worth to his future of noble achievements and efforts. When faced with pain and work in the near future, his heart will love all the particulars of the redemptive struggle. In intense and painful toil he will find the sacred resources he needs for his ascent to God, and will recognize the worth of effort, renunciation and sacrifice!”

Comforted by her spirit mentor’s explanation, she soon saw another, noble and sad spirit looking at her in a mixture of joy and sorrow.

Taken aback by the vision, she heard her grandfather’s loving explanation:

“Do not be surprised or dismayed! Your mother is now on the spirit plane and has come here with me to offer you her kind and thankful heart!”

Dolorous emotions stirred in her at this unexpected revelation. Her tears became more abundant and grief-stricken. She doubted what she was seeing as she recalled the past with its bleak adversities and darkness. But angel or shade, the spirit of Alba Lucinia, as if submerged in an impenetrable veil of grief, approached and kissed her hands.

Celia wanted that sad, beneficent spirit to say something, but her mother’s shade remained silent and sorrowful. Even so, on her right hand where the shade had kissed it, she felt a persistent, indefinable sensation, as if Alba Lucinia had also left an ardent, doleful tear with her kiss.

After this unexpected surprise, the young Roman woman saw both spirits disappear from her sight.

That night she meditated on the past even more than before, surrendering her worries and sorrows to Jesus, asking the Lord to fortify her spirit so that she could understand and fully comply with the holy designs of his divine will.

The day after her heartrending reflections concerning her painful past, a large crowd sought her fraternal services. It consisted of desolate elderly people searching for a comforting, friendly word; women from the neighboring villages, who brought their sick children to her; and a number of people from Alexandria in search of spiritual solace amid the disappointments of life.

As the environs of the monastery filled with carriages, her frail, melancholy figure reached out in unprecedented efforts to comfort and enlighten everyone.

Occasionally a fit of coughing would intervene, arousing pity from the others. However, transforming her weakness into unflagging spiritual energy, she seemed not to feel the devastation of her body so that she could continue to keep the light of her mission of charity and love alive.

In the afternoons she would invariably proceed with the Gospel readings, listened to by numerous visitors and common folk.

It was there, in the glimmerings of dusk, that her eyes caught sight of an elegant, noble carriage, from whose interior emerged Helvidius Lucius. Her daughter's heart recognized him immediately. Upon finding the small outdoor gathering, the old tribune tried to accommodate himself as best he could, while Brother Marinus's face showed the signs of the intense emotion vibrating in her soul ... Meanwhile, he continued speaking, filled with great tenderness in his detailed comments on one of the Lord's parables. The brother of the unfortunate and ill spoke of the preaching at Tiberias; it was as if Celia had actually known Jesus of Nazareth, such was the loyalty and loving tone of her words.

Absorbed in the contemplation of this wonderful scene, Cneius Lucius's son gazed upon the famous missionary, filled with strange surprise! That voice, that profile that resembled a precious marble sculpture chiseled by life's tears and sufferings: did they not remind him of his daughter? If this Brother Marinus were dressed in women's clothing – the tribune reasoned astutely – he would be the perfect image of the daughter he had been searching for everywhere without consolation or hope. In such musings, he followed her words, filled with benevolent surprise.

No one had yet spoken of the Gospel to him with that clarity and simplicity, with that anointing of love and resolution that instinctively penetrated his heart and offered him gentle consolation. He had made the trip from Ostia to Alexandria, despondent and ill. His physical condition had come to the attention of some Roman friends, who had insisted on his immediate return to the metropolis. Profound fatigue showed in his sad eyes, arising from an inalterable sadness and a painful disillusionment with life. But as he listened to that remarkable apostle full of grace and gentleness, he experienced a great inner relief. The evening breeze lightly caressed his face, with the final reflection of the sun dissolving in the distant clouds. Next to him was the crowd of poor, sick, unfortunate people praying fervently, as if expecting all the bliss of heaven for their sad days.

A few steps away was the slender, graceful figure of the brother of the unfortunate and afflicted, speaking to his heart with wonderful tenderness.

It seemed to Helvidius Lucius that he had been transported to a mysterious country filled with apostolic figures, and among those anonymous believers he felt an unspeakable well-being.

Ever since the grievous discarnation of his spouse, his mind had been shrouded in a veil of atrocious anguish. Under the weight of his distressing sufferings, he had never again enjoyed inner serenity. However, Brother Marinus's teachings, his thoughts and prayers, gave him an inexplicable hope. He believed that that brief moment was enough for him to be able to rebuild his confidence in a spiritual future full of divine realities. Unable to explain the cause of his emotion, he began to weep silently, as if only in that moment had he actually given his heart to the immense beauty of Christianity.

Once the interpretations and prayers of the day were over, the deeply moved crowd withdrew. Celia did not know what attitude to take under such circumstances and stayed where she was. In her heart, however, she thanked God for the sublime grace of seeing her father's spirit touched by the divine light, and she beseeched the Lord for her filial heart to receive the necessary inspiration from his venerable messengers.

Nearly motionless, immersed in her conjectures at that momentous hour of her destiny, she was awakened by the voice of Helvidius Lucius, who had approached her saying:

“Brother Marinus, I am a sinner, disenchanted with the world. I have come here attracted by your sacrosanct virtues. I have come from far away, and it took just one moment of contact with your words and teachings to comfort me a little, to experience more faith and hope. I wish to speak with you ... But it will be nighttime soon and I'm afraid it might not be a good time for you.”

The painful humility of those words gave the young Christian a perfect idea for all the torments that had befallen her father's heart.

Helvidius Lucius no longer presented the erect, strong bearing that used to characterize him as a true citizen of the Empire and of his time. The former calm expression of his lips now showed an indefinable grief and anguish. His hair was completely white, as if a relentless, brutal winter had dusted it with everlasting snow. His eyes – those eyes that had so often revealed a proud, impulsive energy – were now melancholy, gazing all around with sincere

humility or towards heaven with a pleading expression, as if he had been immersed in the most distressing prayers for a long time.

Celia knew that a distressing and unyielding storm must have crushed her father's soul in order for that metamorphosis to have occurred.

"My friend," she said softly with moist eyes, "I pray to God that your first impressions may continue, and I offer you my humble shack in his name! If you'd like, stay with me, because I would have great joy in your kind presence!"

Helvidius Lucius accepted her courteous offer as he wiped away a tear.

He was greatly surprised when he saw the hut where the brother of the unfortunate lived in resignation.

In a few moments Brother Marinus arranged a humble, clean bed for him and had him lie down. With holy joy in her soul, the young woman bustled about and very soon brought the surprised tribune a hearty broth and a glass of pure milk. Then, with unspeakable happiness she prepared some homemade remedies for him.

Night had completely fallen with its procession of darkness, when Brother Marinus sat down in front of her guest, who was charmed and moved by so much evidence of loving devotion.

They spoke of Jesus and the Gospel, harmoniously blending their opinions and concepts about the Lamb of God and the exemplification of his life. Occasionally, the tribune looked at Brother Marinus with the keenest interest, under the impression he knew him from somewhere.

Finally, amid the profound well-being he felt resurging in him, Helvidius Lucius considered:

"I came to Christianity like a castaway after the harshest defeats in the world! I feel that the divine Master had sent all the gentle appeals of his mercy to my soul, but I remained deaf and blind in the midst of my deplorable follies. It took a disaster to fall upon my home and destiny in a way that, in the din of the destructive storm, I was able to break down the walls that separated me from a clear understanding of the new, flourishing ideals for the minds and hearts of the world.

"I have never told anyone about those painful episodes of my life, but I feel that as an apostle of Jesus and a follower of the Master in the



exemplification of goodness, you may be able to understand my life and help me to reason evangelically so I can fulfill my duties in these final days of my activities on earth.

“Everywhere else, I have experienced some doubt or another that brought me despair; here, however, without knowing why, I feel an unknown serenity. I believe I should trust you as I trust myself! ... For a long time I have felt the need for direct comfort, and only to you can I reveal my wounds, in the hope of some loving, fraternal aid!”

“If it would do you good, my friend,” the young woman intervened, discreetly wiping away a tear, “you can trust my heart, which will pray to the Lord for your spiritual peace in all the sufferings of life.”

And while Brother Marinus caressed his prematurely white hair, tormented by painful memories, Helvidius Lucius, unable to explain the reason for his trust, began the account of the dolorous story of his life. Occasionally his voice became muffled by some memory or episode. At each pause his listener, deeply moved, responded with some remark or another, betraying her own reminiscences. The tribune was surprised by this but attributed it to the faculty of divination this apostle of love and pure charity possessed.

After long hours of confidences, during which they both wept silently, Helvidius concluded:

“There you have it, Brother Marinus: my sad and anguished story. I feel deep remorse for all the tragedies I remember, but the one that distresses me the most is remembering that I was an unjust, cruel father. With a little more calm and a little less pride I would have arrived at the truth and chased away those sinister demons that weighed on my home and destiny! ... When I recall those events, even today I still feel transported back to that terrible moment when I drove my beloved daughter out of my heart. Ever since I found out she was innocent, I’ve been looking for her anxiously, everywhere. But it seems that God, in punishing my condemnable acts, has handed me over to supreme moral martyrdom so that I can grasp the extent of my wrong. This is why, Brother, I feel I am a criminal before the divine justice, without consolation, without hope. I have the impression that to remedy my great crime I will have to walk like the Wandering Jew in the legend, with no rest and no light in my mind. Because of my sincere, sad explanation, you now understand that I am a sinner, disillusioned with all the world’s remedies. Thus, I decided to appeal

to your goodness so that you could provide me with a little relief. You, who have enlightened so many souls, have pity on me, for I am a hopeless castaway!”

Tears choked his voice.

Celia listened to him with tears in her eyes as well, and felt touched to the very fibers of her gentle, loving daughter’s heart.

She wanted to reveal herself to her father, to kiss his wrinkled hands and tell him of her joy in finding him again on the same path that led her to Jesus ... She wanted to say that she had always loved him and had forgotten the past of sorrowful tears so that they could both lift themselves up to the Lord in the same vibration of faith. But a mysterious, irrepressible force paralyzed her impulse.

And so she murmured tenderly:

“My friend, do not give in to such discouragement and dismay! Jesus is the personification of all mercy and he will surely comfort your heart! Let’s believe and hope in his infinite goodness! ...”

“But,” interrupted Helvidius Lucius in his painful honesty, “I feel that I’m a sinner without mercy and without hope!”

“Who in this world would not feel that way, my friend?” said Celia, full of kindness. “After all, doesn’t the lesson of the ‘first stone’ apply to everyone? In this sea of darkness we live in, who can say ‘I’ve never sinned’? God is the supreme judge and in his inexhaustible mercy, he would never collect on a debt from his children if it didn’t exist! If your daughter suffered, there was a law of trial in it that was fulfilled according to divine wisdom!”

“Still,” the tribune moaned in a bitter voice, “she was good and humble, loving and fair! Moreover, I feel that I was pitiless, for which I am now experiencing the harshest accusations of my conscience!”

And as if he wanted to convey the exact image of his reminiscences to his listener, Cneius Lucius’s son said as he wiped away his tears:

“If you had seen her, Brother, on that fateful and heartrending day, you would certainly agree that my poor Celia was like an innocent sheep heading to sacrifice. I’ll never forget her look of grief as she left the fold of her home, separated from the sanctuary of the family she had always honored with her young woman’s soul through the noblest acts of work and resignation! When

I recall that, I see myself as a tyrant who, after indulging in all sorts of crimes, roams the world begging for the justice of men in order to find the desired relief for his conscience!" Hearing his words, the young woman wept copiously, giving way to her own reminiscences, beset with pain and sorrow.

"Yes, Brother," continued the tribune in anguish, "I know you weep for others' misfortunes and I sense that my own trials have touched your heart. But tell me! What should I do to find my beloved daughter again? Do you think she, too, has gone to Heaven under the lash of human suffering? What can I do to kiss her hands once more before I die?"

These painful questions were met with only silence from the young woman, who continued to weep, deeply moved. Soon, however, as if overcome by a sudden resolution, she said:

"My friend, first of all we need to trust in Jesus completely and see the sacred determination of his infinite wisdom and goodness in all our suffering! However, let's not waste our time feeling sorry for ourselves because of the past. God blesses those who work, and the Master promised divine support to all those who toil in the world with perseverance and good will! ... If you haven't found your loving daughter yet, it is necessary to expand your blood ties so that they join with the eternal and luminous bonds of the spiritual family. God will watch over you if you will replace your love for your missing daughter and seek to extend your heart to all the unfortunate. There are thousands of living beings who beg for alms of love from their neighbors! They lift their naked arms in vain to those who happily pass by, focused on their flowery pathways of mundane hopes.

"I know Rome and its whirlwind of sorrowful miseries. Right next to the noble residences of Carina, the stately buildings on Palatium and in the aristocratic neighborhoods are the lepers of Subura, the blind of Velabro, the orphans on Via Nomentana, the destitute families of Trastevere and the dark misery of Esquilinus! Reach out your arms to the daughters of unknown parents or to homes deprived of good fortune! Let us embrace the poor and share our bread to alleviate the hunger of others! Let us work for the poor and unfortunate, because material charity, which is so easy to practice, will lead us to the knowledge of the moral charity that will transform us into true disciples of the Lamb. Let us spread our love! All the apostles of the Lord are unanimous in declaring that goodness covers the multitude of our sins! Every time we detach ourselves from the riches of this world, we acquire treasures from heaven that are inaccessible to the selfishness and ambition that devour

the best resources in this world. Turn the surplus of your financial resources into bread for the unfortunate. Clothe the naked; protect little orphans! All the good we do for the helpless is the currency of light that the Lord accumulates for our souls. One day we will meet in our true spiritual homeland, where the springtimes of love are endless. There, no one will ask us about what we were in the world, but we will be asked about the tears we wiped away and the good or bad actions we committed during our stay.”

And gazing outward as if glimpsing celestial landscapes, she continued:

“Yes, there is a realm of light where the Lord awaits our hearts! Let us act to deserve his divine graces. Those who practice the good are God’s workers on the infinite path of life. There, we will no longer weep in a dark night as happens on earth. A perennial day will bathe the brows of all who loved and suffered on the thorny roads of the world. Sacred harmonies will vibrate in the chosen spirits who reach those endearing dwelling places ... Oh! What wouldn’t we do to reach those gardens of delight, where we will rest in the divine realizations of the Lamb of God? But to enter those wonders, we first have the work of inner development, of enlightening our consciousness with the exemplification of the divine Master!”

A sublime light shone in Brother Marinus’s gaze, as if his mortal eyes were resting on that beautiful and brilliant land of light described by his evangelical promises. Peaceful tears fell from his serene eyes, sealing the truth of his words.

Helvidius Lucius was weeping too, deeply touched, feeling that the young woman’s sacred emotions were spreading to his heart in a divine connection.

“Brother Marinus,” he said with difficulty, “I envision the luminous reality of your ideals and I will work tirelessly to obtain peace for my conscience and to be able to meditate on death with the beauty of your concepts. I shall do the good from now on under all aspects and with every means within my reach, and I hope that Jesus will have mercy on me.”

“Surely the divine Master will help us,” said the young woman, stroking his white hair.

Night was falling, and leaving her father’s heart bathed in consoling hopes, Celia retired to a humble cubicle, where she broke down in tears and begged Cneius Lucius to enlighten her in her difficulty because her filial love had taken possession of the most sensitive fibers of her being.

Smiling graciously and peaceably, the spirit of the old man responded to her pleas and spoke of his immense gratitude to God at seeing his son surrounded in Christian light. But he warned her that to disclose her identity would be unprofitable and untimely under such circumstances, expounding the sensitivity of the situation and what would occur in the future.

Celia felt strengthened and encouraged as she prepared the morning meal, which the tribune ate with new zest and a great attitude for facing life again.

Aware of his former preference for rural environments, Brother Marinus took him to visit the extensive kitchen-garden where, at the cost of his enormous effort, Epiphanius's monastery enjoyed truly invaluable, wholesome produce.

On the large tracts of land grew carefully cultivated, tall fruit trees next to large vegetable beds and there was a well-cared-for area where the domestic animals were kept. Under the leafy branches rested tame goats along with sheep with soft white wool. Further on grazed peaceable donkeys, and from time to time flocks of doves passed over in happy flight. A babbling brook meandered through the garden, and Helvidius Lucius observed careful cleanliness everywhere, inviting people to the simple and benevolent bucolic life.

Every so often they would meet some humble old man or a healthful child whom Brother Marinus would greet with a gesture of tenderness and kindness.

Deeply impressed by this, Helvidius said:

“This wonderful garden reminds me of a biblical painting! I'm breathing the balmy air among these trees as if these fields were speaking intimately to my soul! Tell me, how do you do all this? How much do you pay the dedicated workers that must be helping you?”

“I pay them nothing, my good friend. I've been cultivating this kitchen-garden for many years to supply the monastery, for which I've been a simple gardener. I have no salaried workers. My assistants are longtime residents of the neighborhood who graciously help me out when they have some free time. The others are children from the modest school I founded over five years ago to meet the needs of disadvantaged children from the nearby villages!”

“But what is the secret around here that makes the earth so bountiful and lush?” exclaimed Helvidius, taking deep breaths.

“I don’t know,” said the Brother of the poor with simplicity, “we just love the land a lot! So that we can receive their gifts and flowers, we never cut our fruit trees down. The lambs give us their precious wool and the goats and donkeys their nutritious milk, but we do not ever allow them to be killed. The orange and olive trees are our best friends. Sometimes, on our days of rest, we say our prayers in their shade. We are a large family here and our bonds of love extend to nature.”

As she provided explanations that Helvidius accepted attentively, she told of events and described episodes from her own observations and experience, impressing every word with the love and simplicity of her soul.

“One day,” she said with a childlike smile, “we noticed that the older goats liked to chase the meek little lambs. The school children remembered that Jesus obtained everything through the gentleness of teaching; thus, they decided to help me raise the sheep and goats and we built a single pen for them ... While the baby sheep and goats were still small, the children would take them to our outdoor prayers and classes. The children always believed that Jesus’ lessons would move even the animals, and I let them nurture this enchanting and sweet conviction. The end result was that the goats stopped being aggressive. Ever since then, the paddock has been harmonious. As they grew up together and ate the same grass, always in the same company, both flocks eliminated their instinctive aversion toward each other! ... As I watch such lessons, I wonder how happy the human community will be when everyone understands and practices the Gospel!”

The tribune listened with tears in his eyes to her little story in its radiant simplicity. Looking at Brother Marinus, Helvidius Lucius remarked with a new light in his eyes:

“Brother Marinus, now I understand the exuberance of this land and the wonder of its landscape. All these achievements are a miracle of the devotion you have been consecrating to this beneficent earth! You have loved much, and this is crucial. For many years I too was a country man, but until now I have exploited the land solely for commercial interests. Now I understand that I must also love the land, should I ever return to farming someday. Today I understand that everything in the world is love and everything requires love.”

The young woman listened to her father's reflections, elated in her hopes.

Helvidius Lucius stayed there for three days, enlightening himself in that inalterable peace. Hours of gentle tranquility, in which all earthly sorrows subsided in his saddened heart as if by magic.

Sometimes Celia felt an impulse to tell him of her daughter's love, and yet a strange force seemed to hamper her will, enabling her to understand that any revelation would still be premature.

At the end of his stay, feeling more energized and comforted, the tribune said his farewells:

"Brother Marinus, I am leaving with my heart touched by new dispositions and energies to face the struggle and sad expiations that await me! Pray to God for me and ask Jesus to give me the opportunity and strength to put your advice into practice. I am returning to Rome with the wish of doing the good singing in my soul. I shall follow your suggestions at every step, and with that in mind, it is quite possible that the Lord will satisfy my righteous paternal hopes. As soon as I can, I will come back to see you again! I will never forget the good you have done to me!"

She took his right hand and kissed it with tears in her eyes, while the tribune acknowledged that humble gesture, deeply moved.

Anxiously, her eyes followed the carriage taking him back to Alexandria until it disappeared in the distance in a cloud of dust.

Then, she closed herself in her cubicle and opened a small wooden box she had brought from Minturno, in which she kept the tunic she had worn when she left home on the heartbreaking day of her exile. Among the few items was the pearl her father had brought her from Phocis, the only jewelry she had kept after being completely plundered by Hateria's criminal ambition. Amid her tears she turned over in her hands the old, simple things from her cherished memories.

Lifting her thoughts to God, she prayed that she would not lack the energy needed for the complete fulfillment of her mission.

As for Helvidius Lucius, on his return he felt as if he had been bathed in a stream of new thoughts. In his eyes, Brother Marinus was a perfect symbol of the apostolic days, when Jesus' followers did the work in this world in his name.

Upon landing in Naples, he went to Capua, where he was welcomed by his children with exceptional displays of love. Caius and his wife were delighted with his physical and spiritual improvement, and they wondered why he had returned from Egypt with so many ideas involving charity and beneficence.

After telling them about Brother Marinus and the fascination he had exerted on his spirit, Helvidius Lucius said emphatically:

“Children, I sense that I won’t live much longer and I want to die according to the doctrine I’ve embraced in my heart. I shall return to Rome now and will seek to prepare for my spiritual future in harmony with my new ideas. I hope you will not oppose my final wishes. I shall divide our assets and a third of them will be given to you at the appropriate time. The rest I’ll distribute according to my new beliefs. I’m counting on your help in this matter.”

At heart, Caius and Helvidia attributed their father’s sudden transformation to the sorcery of the Christians who, in their view, had taken advantage of the state of weakness and despondency rising from his many moral afflictions. Nonetheless, with her characteristic benevolence, Fabricius’s wife said:

“Father, I’ll not argue with your beliefs, because, above any religious controversy, what is important is our love and your well-being! Do as you think best. Financially, you don’t need to concern yourself about our future. Caius is a good worker and I have no big plans. Moreover, the gods will always watch over us as they have done so far. Thus, you can always act trusting in our affection and acceptance of your decisions.”

Helvidius Lucius embraced his daughter, rejoicing in her understanding, while Caius showed his agreement with a smile.

Upon his return to the Rome of his days of triumph and youth, the proud patrician was radically transformed. His first act of true conversion to Jesus was to free all the slaves in his home and provide generously for their future.

Faced with the dangers of the political situation, he made no mystery of his religious convictions and exalted the virtues of Christianity in the highest aristocratic circles.

His friends, however, listened to him with pity. To those of his social circles, Helvidius Lucius was suffering from the most obvious mental



disturbance as a result of the painful tragedy that had filled his home with perpetual, grievous mourning. Renouncing all the privileges accorded to his rank, however, the tribune seemed inaccessible to the opinions of others, and to the horror of all his acquaintances, he gave away most of his wealth to charity, benefitting orphans and widows. His humble companions from Porta Appia rejoiced in the evangelical fervor to which he now gave full testimony by assisting them in their efforts and defending them publicly. He no longer indulged in the leisure of social life, and sometimes in the morning he could be seen on Esquilinus or in Subura, in Trastevere or Velabro, seeking information about this or that destitute family. But that was not all. He visited Hateria's descendants with the purpose of forgiving her, but he found no information because none of them knew about the old woman's tragic end, which had occurred in the same secret way she used for the practice of evil. However, the tribune took advantage of his stay in Benevento to teach the members of her family – who considered themselves under his tutelage – the methods followed by Brother Marinus in the loving treatment of the land. Next, he went to Caius Fabricius's estate, where he voluntarily assumed the direction of many rural services, utilizing those processes that he would never forget. He was like a loving father to those who willingly received his new and interesting ideas.

However, to the alarm of his children and friends, after so much beneficial work, the old tribune fell ill.

He had been sickly and suffering for a month, when one day, melancholy and trembling, he drew his daughter to him and said to her with great tenderness: "Helvidia, I feel that my days are numbered and I want to see Brother Marinus once more before I die.

She tried to make him understand how uncomfortable the trip would be, but the tribune insisted so much that she finally gave in, on the condition that he would be accompanied by his son-in-law. Helvidius Lucius refused, however, saying that he did not want to interrupt their domestic routine. So, in case anything might happen along the way, it was decided that he would go in the company of two trusted servants.

Feeling better with the comforting prospect of returning to Alexandria and seeing again the places that had offered so much comfort to his wounded soul, the tribune made himself ready, despite the fears of his daughter, who kissed his hands tenderly with a foreboding heart as he was about to leave.

Helvidius Lucius held her in his arms with an indescribable look, and then gazed sadly at the rural landscape, as if wanting to keep engraved on his retina the precious image he was beholding for the last time.

Caius and his wife could not hide their loving tears.

With the spirit of resolution that characterized him, Cneius Lucius's son did not heed his children's fears and concerns. He left calmly, accompanied by Caius Fabricius's two servants at his side.

However, before the vessel anchored at Alexandria, he began to feel a resurgence of his ailment. At night he was assailed by an inflexible shortness of breath, and during the day he was seized by profound weakness.

It had been more than a year since he had last seen Brother Marinus, one more year of ceaseless toil in the service of evangelical charity. And Helvidius Lucius, who had been captivated by the loving heart of the brother of the unfortunate and humble, did not want to die without showing him that he had made good use of his sublime lessons. He could not explain the infinite sympathy the monk had awakened in him. He only knew that he loved him with a deep fatherly affection. And so, rejoicing for having applied his teachings with dedication and fearlessness, he eagerly looked forward to the moment of seeing him again and telling him of all his deeds, which, although delayed, had calmed his heart extraordinarily.

From Alexandria to the monastery, he traveled in a special litter with every possible comfort. Still, he arrived at his destination greatly weakened.

As for Brother Marinus, he was living the final days of his apostolate. His eyes had become more sunken, and there was a sorrowful, resigned expression on his face that showed his absolute certainty of his approaching end.

Their reunion was a moving, touching scene. Celia had also been waiting anxiously for her father, believing that soon she would be departing to meet the loved ones that had preceded her to the darkness of the tomb. She had stopped preaching months ago because any physical exertion would trigger a fit of coughing. However, the evangelical studies continued uninterrupted. The monastery brothers took it upon themselves to pursue this sacred task, and the elderly and children took up the work in the garden, where the trees were covered with flowers once again. It was in vain that Epiphanius, by then moved by the acts of sacrifice and humility of that generous soul, tried to install her in a comfortable sun-bathed room inside the monastery to alleviate

her suffering. She preferred her simple hut in the garden, remaining in the isolation of her meditations and prayers. She was convinced that her father would return and wanted to reveal herself to him before she died.

It was almost dark when the patrician knocked on her door, tormented by a singular affliction.

She welcomed him with great joy, and despite her weakness, she immediately provided the two servants with simple accommodations nearby. She quickly went back inside, where Helvidius waited for her in distress, his illness suddenly greatly aggravated.

The young woman offered him all the resources of her home remedies, but they proved useless. The tribune's shortness of breath continued to increase dramatically while his heart raced uncontrollably ...

It was already late at night when Helvidius Lucius had his daughter sit by his side, whispering with difficulty:

“Brother Marinus ... do not take any more care of my body ... I get the feeling that I am living my last moments ... My secret desire was to die here, listening to your prayers, you who taught me to love Jesus ... with more tenderness.”

Celia began to weep sorrowfully as she realized the painful reality.

“Are you crying? ... You will always be the brother ... of the forsaken and unfortunate ... Don't forget me in your prayers.”

And giving his daughter a sad and unforgettable look, he continued with a broken voice in the throngs of death:

“I wanted to come back to tell you that I sought to put your sublime lessons into practice. I know that I used to be mean and prideful ... I was a sinner, Brother; I was living far away from the light and ... the truth. But ... ever since I came here, I have tried to proceed in the way you taught me ... I distributed most of my wealth to the poor and those down on their luck ... I tried to protect the unfortunate families of Trastevere; I searched for the orphans and widows on Esquilinus ... I proclaimed my new belief to all my friends, who derided me ... I donated a home to fellow believers near Porta Appia ... I searched out all my enemies and asked them to forgive me in order to put my tormented mind to rest ... Staying many months at my children's estate, I taught Christianity to the slaves and told them about your kitchen-garden, where the land receives the highest cooperation of love ... Afterwards,

I saw that everyone was working the way you taught me ... In every coin I gave to the poor, I would see you blessing my gesture and my understanding ... I do not have the courage to address Jesus ... I feel weak and small before his greatness ... And so I thought of you, since you have knowledge of the sorrowful story of my life ... You could ask the Divine Master for me because your prayers are surely heard in heaven.”

He paused in the midst of his painful account, while the young woman remained silent, praying through her tears.

Sitting up with difficulty, however, the patrician took her right hand, and looking at her insightfully, he continued in his broken voice to reveal his last hopes and desires: “Brother Marinus, I did it all with the same fatherly hope of finding my daughter on the material plane ... Seeking out the poor and unfortunate, I often believed I would find her and restore her to my heart ... Since I have become a follower of the Lord, I firmly believe in the afterlife ... I believe that, beyond the grave, I will find all the loved ones who preceded me to the tomb, and I wanted to take to my spouse the certainty of having corrected the errors of my painful past ... My wife was always wise and thoughtful, and I wanted to bring her the news ... that I had corrected my impulses of other times, when I did not feel Jesus in my heart.”

And as if he wanted to show her his final disenchantment, the dying man concluded after a pause:

“However ... Brother Marinus ... the Lord did not consider me worthy of that joy. So, I shall wait for his imminent judgment with the same remorse and the same regret.” Before that act of supreme humility and hope in the Lord Jesus, Brother Marinus stood up, and looking at him with tears in her shining eyes, she said:

“Your daughter is here, waiting for your coming! ... You will see that Jesus has heard our prayers!”

Helvidius gave her a penetrating look, filled with sorrow and disbelief, while the copious perspiration of his agony ran down his discolored face.

“Wait!” said the young woman with a tender gesture.

And going quickly back inside, she removed her monk’s robe and put on the old tunic she had worn when she left her home in that critical moment of her dolorous destiny. Then, she put on the pearl from Phocis that her father had given her the day before that painful event. After arranging her hair the

way she used to wear it, she entered the room anxiously, where the dying man noticed her metamorphosis in wild astonishment.

“Father! Father ...” she murmured, hugging him tenderly, as if in that moment she was able to realize all the hopes of her life.

Helvidius Lucius, however, caught by inexpressible surprise and shock, his forehead covered with cold sweat, did not have the strength to express his inner joy.

In his supreme jubilation he wanted to embrace his beloved daughter, kiss her hands and ask her forgiveness. He wanted to have a voice to speak of the rejoicing that had overcome over his father’s heart. He wanted to ask her questions and express his unspeakable suffering to her. His intense happiness, however, had torn away his final ability to speak. Only his insightful and lucid eyes reflected the state of his soul, telling of its indescribable emotion. Silent tears began to roll down his gaunt cheeks while Celia kissed him, whispering tenderly:

“Father, Jesus has heard our prayers from his kingdom of mercy! Here I am. I am your daughter! ... I have never stopped loving you!”

And since she wanted to identify herself in every way to her father’s eyes during his final moments, she added:

“Don’t you recognize me? Look at this tunic! It’s the same one I was wearing when I left the house on that sorrowful day ... See this pearl? It’s the one you gave me on the day before our harsh and grievous trial began ... Praise the Lord who has reunited us here in this hour of pain and truth. Forgive me if I was forced to wear different clothing to face my new life! I needed it to defend myself from temptation and to escape from the lust of dissolute men! ... Ever since I left home, I have used my time to honor your name ... What else do you wish me to say to you to show my affection and love?”

Helvidius Lucius, however, felt that a mysterious force was tearing him from his body. An unfamiliar sensation had come over him, enveloping him in a glacial atmosphere.

He tried to speak, but his vocal cords were rigid. His tongue was paralyzed in his swollen mouth. However, attesting to the deep feelings that resonated in his heart, he shed copious tears, enveloping his beloved daughter in a loving, indescribable look.

He made a final gesture, wishing to bring Celia's hands to his lips, but it was she who, guessing his intention, took his cold, inert hands and kissed them for a long time. She then kissed his forehead, overcome with immense tenderness.

Immediately thereafter, she knelt down and prayed aloud for the Lord to receive her father's benevolent spirit into his kingdom of love and infinite goodness!

With tears of love and gratitude to the Almighty, she closed his eyes in their final sleep, observing that the tribune's face was now haloed in peace and serenity.

She remained kneeling for a few moments and saw that the room had filled with several discarnate entities, among them the figures of her mother and grandfather, standing there serene and radiant, extending their generous arms.

She believed that all the tribune's friends were there in that final moment to escort his regenerated soul to the luminous firmament of the Lamb of God.

At the first light of dawn, she took the necessary steps and requested the presence of the deceased man's servants, who came quickly to the call.

Dressed in her monk's robe once again, Celia walked to the monastery, reported the matter to the highest authority and asked for assistance. Everyone, including Epiphanius, helped Brother Marinus take care of the situation.

Caius Fabricius's servants explained, however, that their masters in Capua were certain that the traveler would not be able to withstand the difficulties of this more than arduous journey, and had told them beforehand who to contact in Alexandria so that the remains could be returned to Campania if the tribune should pass away.

And so, early in the morning a group of four men, including the two servants that had accompanied him, transported Helvidius Lucius's body to the next town.

Leaning on the door of her hut in the company of the monastery brothers, Celia watched the funeral litter until it disappeared in the distance amid clouds of dust.

When the group disappeared in the bends of the road, Celia felt lonelier and more abandoned than ever. The revival of her father's love under such circumstances had brought her anguished sorrow. Never had the sadness of the world taken such strong possession of her soul. She sought refuge in prayer, and yet she felt that the heaviest shadows had invaded her being. Her heart was not in despair, nor had a sense of misfortune caused her to complain and lament. But a singular longing for her dead loved ones now filled her heart like a mysterious filter of indifference to the world. She started focusing her thought on Jesus, but soon drops of blood began to flow from her mouth in a continuous stream.

Some of the loving brothers came to her aid while Epiphanius, his heart deeply touched, ordered her to be taken carefully to the monastery.

Their medical resources and supreme dedication, however, were of no use. Her coughing continued frighteningly, without any hope.

In his old age full of fervor and regret, the superior did everything to restore health to the young monk, whose virtues had become a symbol of love and work. Two days passed in endless anguish.

During those agonizing hours, Epiphanius ordered that visitors would be welcome. For the first time, the doors of the monastery were opened to the common folk, and overflowing with sincere tears, the elderly from the surrounding neighborhoods came to see Brother Marinus.

One by one, they approached the young woman, kissing her trembling, emaciated hands. "Brother Marinus," said one of them, "You mustn't die! ... If you leave now, who will teach our daughters the righteous way?"

"Who will teach the Gospel to our grandchildren?" cried another, disguising her tears.

But with a steady, serene look, the young woman, said kindly:

"No one dies, brothers and sisters! Didn't Jesus promise eternal life?"

For each one she had a look of tenderness and the endearing light of her smile.

That same night her condition worsened terribly.

Realizing that the end was approaching, old Epiphanius asked her something about her last wishes, and looking serenely at the superior, she said:

“My father, I pray that you may forgive me if I have ever offended you by my acts or words! ... Pray for me, that God will have mercy on my soul ... and if I may ask you something ... I’d like to see the children from the school before I die.”

Epiphanius lifted his hands to his face to hide his tears, and before dawn, three brothers left for the nearby villages to collect the little ones to satisfy the dying Celia’s last wishes.

That afternoon, all the children from the school respectfully came into the room.

Brother Marinus was reclining on some pillows and gave them a nice, compassionate smile, although his chest was painfully gasping for breath.

In a final gesture, he called them to him, asking each one about their studies, their work, the school ...The children, barely noticing the sorrowful moment, felt at ease while Celia smiled at them.

“Brother Marinus,” said a serious little fellow, “all of us back home have asked God for you to get better!”

“Thank you, my son,” said the dying woman, making every effort to hide her suffering. Next, an amusing little girl in a raggedy dress, mumbled softly:

“Brother Marinus, father Epiphanius didn’t let me plant a rose bush near the goat pen and scolded me harshly.”

“Never mind, dear ... Father Epiphanius is right ... the pen is no place for flowers. Plant the rose bush close to the window. It will get more sun there ... And give father Epiphanius the first one.”

“Brother,” said another little one with disheveled hair, “tonight the sheep gave us two new lambs.”

“Take care of them, my son!” said the young woman with difficulty.

“Brother,” exclaimed another boy, “I begged Jesus to give you back your health!” “My son,” said the dying woman, “we should not ask the Lord for this or that, but to understand his will, which is sovereign and just.”

But because of the restlessness of the children surrounding her, she said, wishing to concentrate her last energies on prayer:

“Little children ... sing ... for me.”



There was a little tumult among the children as they decided which hymn to sing.

A little girl then reminded them that the sun was preparing to set on the horizon, and she suggested to her friends that at that time Brother Marinus always preferred the “Evening Hymn,” which he had taught everyone with fraternal love.

And so, with everyone holding hands, they encircled the bed where the ill woman was offering God her final thoughts, while, in tears, all the brothers of the community watched the moving and sorrowful scene from a distance.

A few moments later, they lifted the crystalline notes of the simple song to heaven:

*Praised be Jesus!*

*In the dew-filled dawn*

*That brings us the day and work,*

*With which we learn.*

*Praised be the Lord!*

*For the light of the quiet hours*

*That lulls our souls,*

*At the moment of sunset ...*

*The field lies in prayer,*

*The beautiful sky twinkles,*

*And our serene belief*

*Rests in your love;*

*It's the time of your blessing,*

*In the light of nature,*

*That takes us to the beauty*

*Of the consoling realm.*

*It is in this divine hour  
That your great and august love  
Gives peace of mind to the righteous,  
Relief and comfort for pain!  
Beloved Master, bless  
Our simple prayer,  
Spread light to the tempest  
Of the sinning heart!*

*Come to us! From blissful heaven,  
Support our hope.  
We thirst for calm,  
Love, life and light!  
In an evening of peace,  
We feel you are our shelter,  
We want to live with you,  
Come to us, my Jesus ...*

Celia listened to the final chords of the children's hymn. It seemed to her that the humble room was filled with inimitable artists. They were all graceful youths and laughing children holding celestial flutes and harps, divine lutes and drums.

She wanted to look at the children of her humble school and talk to them once more of her unending joy, but at the same time, she felt herself surrounded by loving beings who, smiling, reached out their arms to her. There were her parents, her venerable grandfather, Nestorius, Hateria, Lesius Munacius and the enchanting figure of Cyrus, as if wrapped in a tunic of translucent snow ... At a gesture from the loving spirit of Cneius Lucius, Cyrus moved toward her with outstretched arms. It was the gesture of love that her heart had awaited for a lifetime! ... She wanted to talk about her joy

and gratitude to the Lord of the Worlds, but she felt exhausted, as if finishing a strenuous struggle.

Caressing her forehead with his hands under the loving music, Cyrus said to her with tears in his eyes:

“Listen, Celia! This is one of the sublime songs of love, which is dedicated to you on the earth!”

She did not see the anxious children covering her motionless, white hands with their tears and embracing her pallid body ... All together, very moved, the brothers of the monastery drew nearer to the body, while on the invisible plane a group of friendly and loving spirits led that blessed martyr's soul on a wave of light and fragrance to the firmament of the Infinite.

## 7

# In the Spirit Realms

As they paid their final homage to Brother Marinus, the monks at the monastery learned the painful truth. Only then did they discover that the slandered brother of the poor and of the helpless children was a Christian virgin, who had exemplified among them the highest evangelical virtues.

Given this unexpected fact and after the shock of their astonishment had passed, all the monks, including Epiphanius, humbly prostrated themselves, bathed in tears of remorse and repentance.

In vain did they try to find out the young martyr's origin and background in order to preserve an undying remembrance of her and her acts so that they could later account for her holy example.

Filled with grief, the community's elderly superior demanded the presence of Menenius Tullius and his daughter for them to explain their perfidious slander. When Brunehilda saw the body of the Christian virgin and recalled her humility, she lost her mind forever.

The figure of Celia was never forgotten by her religious Brothers, the believers, the wretched or the afflicted. She became a symbol of love and compassion and in the surroundings of Alexandria her memory was a focus for the wishes and prayers of fervent, sincere souls.

But as we follow our main characters' lives beyond the grave before they are called to take up their redemptive struggles once again in collective efforts within the sacred institutions of the family, we find them in differing groups according to their state of consciousness.

With the exception of Celia, who was called to a higher realm, where she was given the task of watching over the evolution of her loved ones, the others remained in spheres closer to earth in regions of work and struggle,

each one seeking to store up new energies for subsequent efforts on the material plane.

Of the group as a whole, Claudia Sabina, Lollius Urbicus, Fabius Cornelius and Silanus Plautius remained in the lower, darker regions due the dolorous state of their consciences.

In higher spheres Helvidius Lucius and the rest of his family, including Cyrus, rested from their struggles, making a collective effort to establish the spiritual foundations that would assure their future success.

A few of the characters, such as Nestorius and Polycarp, made long excursions through the dark regions of the planet, cooperating with the messengers of Jesus, who preached the Good News to the despondent and suffering. They carried out the most constructive evangelical training for future struggles in the earthly environments, where they would continue the blessed endeavor of redeeming their guilty pasts later on.

The endearing life on the spirit plane constituted a gentle comfort for everyone.

There, the great bearers of the divine orders continually taught the truths of the Master, filling all hearts with peace and hope.

Gathered into family groups beyond the heavy vibrations of the physical world, kindred souls are able to appreciate the supreme value of truth and peace under the sublime bonds of love and wisdom.

In the blissful environment of such spheres – whose enchanting details we are unable to describe to human readers – we find Cneius Lucius's group in the regions of repose where all our characters are together, soothed by the soft caress of many affections from bygone centuries.

A loving hope lay in every heart, a benevolent purpose in every soul.

With a view to the future, noble plans came one after the other.

In the group where serenity was stamped on the spirit of every member, they were waiting for Julia Spinter who, accompanied by Nestorius, had descended to the lower zones of the earth to try to use her love to awaken the benumbed sentiments of her husband, who still maintained the same attitude of hatred and revenge.

“It's pointless,” Cneius Lucius said kindly to his children and friends, “it's pointless for us to hold on to revengeful purposes after our earthly

struggles, because in such cases, reincarnation solves every problem! On my last trip to Rome, I had the occasion to see Emperor Aelius Hadrianus in the miserable body of a little slave boy. Ever since then, I have thought a great deal about our duties and the need to accept the divine will with the greatest love.”

“Yes,” said Lesius Munacius, who was present, “in my evangelical tours through the lower zones, I have met with former nobles of our time, who are begging God for a new opportunity on earth without choosing the conditions of their future learning.”

“The knowledge we acquire in the spirit world,” ventured Helvidius Lucius “seems to fill our hearts with deep appreciation for suffering. In light of the divine magnificence, and in recognition of our insignificance here, we feel ourselves capable of every task of redemption. To our eyes here and now, the greatest achievements on earth turn out to be only small and humble acts.”

“Great is the mercy of Jesus,” said Cneius, “who has granted us the legacy of life eternal.”

While the conversation went on animatedly with the participation of Alba Lucinia and her former servant, Nestorius and Julia Spinter returned from their journey of love and fraternity.

The old matron’s face displayed concern, conveying to her companions her tears and her sorrow.

“So, Mother,” said Lucinia, embracing her while using the friendly and loving speech of earth, “did you accomplish anything?”

“So far, dear daughter,” replied Julia, wiping her tears, “all my efforts have been futile. Unfortunately, Fabius isn’t working on his inner self to acquire the supreme understanding of the great laws of life. Imprisoned in his sad thoughts, he doesn’t yield to my pleas at all!”

“Nevertheless,” explained Nestorius to his friends as they listened to his words with interest, “Polycarp and those who are to accompany him in the struggle are already preparing themselves for the next collective reincarnation, and our own should not be long in coming. The only obstacle that seems to be hampering our progress is the lack of a perfect understanding of Jesus’ unforgettable teaching about forgiving seventy times seven times.”

“Would it be enough for us to forgive in order for the Lord to allow us to return to the sanctifying endeavor?” asked Cneius Lucius intentionally.

“Yes,” explained Nestorius in his faith. “Heartfelt forgiveness is a great victory for the soul.”

At this moment, Cneius Lucius was preparing his children, who looked at each other somewhat sadly due to the difficulty they were having forgetting the behavior of Lollius Urbicus and Claudia Sabina.

“As for me,” said Julia Spinter resignedly, “I have nothing to forgive others for. Ever since my discarnation, I have prayed insistently to Jesus to enable me to forget all manifestations of pride and selfishness.”

“Good for you, my sister,” remarked Cneius with a serene smile. “A female heart is inaccessible to feelings of hatred and revenge.”

And since he perceived that all the others had silently recalled Claudia’s conduct in light of this generalization, he said kindly:

“A woman who hates is a sorry exception on the path of life, because God has entrusted his holiest ministry to female souls in the bosom of the infinite creation!”

Everyone understood his benevolent thoughts and was praising his fraternal ideas, when Hateria stated:

“I have prayed to the Lord of the Worlds to make me worthy to live near Cneius Lucius in my next round of struggle.”

“Well, daughter,” replied the old man with a smile, “I’m well aware of the fact that I’m worth nothing, but it will give me great joy to be useful to you at some point ... I would only advise you in the future to fear money as the worst enemy of our peace of mind.”

Everyone smiled at this mention and the lively conversation continued.

Our characters spent some more time reinvigorating their hearts with ideas of love and goodness, fraternity and light, as they awaited their new struggles.

One day, however, a messenger came from on High to invite Cneius Lucius’s group to appear before the tutelary spirits that presided over their destinies so they could freely choose their future trials.

After examining their work plans involving the free cooperation of all those who possessed the requisite spiritual growth that was essential for the act of resolution and choice in the sphere of individual responsibility, Cneius Lucius’s group waited for higher orders to return to earth.

From time to time, our characters would express small concerns such as:

“One of the situations I most fear,” said Helvidius Lucius, “is living with Lollius Urbicus, because I’m afraid he’ll relapse into the lower tendencies of his personality.”

“We’ll defeat him with our dedication and love,” explained Alba Lucinia. “I have prayed to Jesus to grant us the strength to do so, and I will be constantly at your side so that we can transform his sentiments into fraternity and spiritual love.”

“Yes, my children,” pondered the experienced and kindly Cneius Lucius, “we need to love ever so much! With sincere resignation we can reach the kingdom of light promised by the Savior. Among those who will be under our responsibility in the future, there is one soul worthy of our deepest compassion!”

And since Helvidius and Lucinia fell silent, already having guessed his thoughts, the old man continued:

“I’m referring to Claudia Sabina, whose heart is still like an arid desert. The last visits I made to her in the region of the shades shrouded me in a veil of sorrow! ... Terrible remorse has made her inner world a chaos of anguishing perturbation! I have spoken to her of God and his endless mercy in vain, because in the darkness of her thoughts, she cannot see our comforting warnings.”

Alba Lucinia and Helvidius were deeply moved as they listened to him, but they refrained from commenting on the dolorous issue.

Hateria had been eagerly taking in his words. Finally she spoke, revealing the bitter fears that filled her mind:

“My kind protector, I have been informed that my road of struggles will run parallel to Claudia Sabina’s due to my unforgivable wrongs; however, I’m asking you for your support, despite the new energy that rejoices my soul. Claudia is authoritarian and insinuating, and if she now feels humiliated and deranged because of her suffering on the invisible plane, I really believe that when she is back on the earth again, she will try to resume her prideful and tyrannical behavior.”

“Daughter,” considered the old man with a slight smile, “Jesus will watch over us and give us the strength we need to carry out our most sacred duties.”



Julia Spinter had been following everyone's concerns with loving interest, and said, finally:

"I would give anything to cultivate peace and lasting harmony among us in the coming future. I will correct my wrongs of the past and try to understand the essence of Christianity, to whose eternal light I shall lead Fabius's heart with the support of the Lamb of God, who shall hear my sincere pleas."

Thus, the life of Cneius Lucius's venerable group went on with promising expectations for the future. Each one lifted his or her heart to great heights, seeking to learn the teachings of Jesus more and better in order to remember his sublime clarity amid the dense shadows of earth.

Similar groups, such as Polycarp's and Lesius Munacius's, had already returned to the world's toils when our characters were called by a higher order to descend to the purifying torments and struggles of the terrestrial environment.

Filled with reverence and hope, they accommodated themselves in the presence of the executors of divine justice. At their side stood nearly a hundred fellow spirits, including slaves, servants and friends from the past.

In the spiritual sanctuary of wonderful beauty – impossible to describe in poor human language – the caressing vibration of a collective prayer could be heard, flowing from every heart filled with fear and hope.

"Brothers and sisters," began a divine mentor who was responsible for guiding that friendly conclave, "you will soon be back on the earth, where you will be called to practice the divine teachings you have acquired on the spirit plane! ... Let us be thankful for the mercy of the Lord, who gives us precious opportunities to work for our redemption in our ceaseless march toward love and wisdom. Those who depart love the redemptive struggle as one should love a divine dawn! Here, in the light of the infinite goodness of the Lamb of God, the soul newly-arrived from the world can rest from its deep sorrows. Afflicted hearts are refreshed in the inexhaustible fount of evangelical consolation; but above our heads is a realm of eternal love and unforgettable peace, to which we must gain entrance with the highest virtues of our conscience! Here, you have acquired the most advanced knowledge in matters of wisdom and love. You have felt the breeze of sublime consolations, as only a spirit free from material sorrows and distresses can feel. You have seen the beauty and happiness that await redeemed souls in the

Infinite. However, you must return to the flesh in order to test the value of your learning! It is on the earth – that painful and blessed school of the soul – that the vast field of our accomplishments unfolds. The errors of the past must be corrected there, amid its anguished and dense shadows! ... As the wrongs of remote eras are redeemed on its surface, one must apply on its gloomy pathways the teachings received from on High, arising from Jesus' mercy that never deserts us. The best learning is on the earth, whereas the just and lofty assessment is to be found here. There, the sowing; here, the harvest. Return again to your earthly pathways and correct your dolorous pasts! ... Embrace your enemies of yesterday in order to approach your benefactors of the future! Close the gates of praise in the world and turn a deaf ear to ambition! Build the kingdom of Jesus within, because one day death will take you again from human anguish and deceit for a profitable evaluation. Jesus' example is the model for every heart. Do not complain about exact guidance, because everywhere in the world, as in all religious ideas and philosophical doctrines, there is a watchman of God enlightening individuals' consciences! The world has its sorrowful tears and bloodless struggles. On its paths of torturous thorns are gathered all the ghosts of suffering and temptation, and you will be compelled to affirm your intrinsic qualities. But love the struggle as if its benefits came from an indispensable and precious spiritual bread! ... After all the achievements the terrestrial plane can provide you, you will then be promoted to worlds of regeneration and peace, where you will prepare your hearts and minds for the realms of supreme light and bliss!"

The wise and inspired words of the mentor from on High were heard with singular attention.

After a pause, he clarified, however:

"Now, beloved brothers and sisters, you will encounter here your adversaries of yesterday, for reconciliation and for future work. You have chosen and outlined the map of your trials, for you already possess the notion of responsibility and you have the mental education needed to collaborate in this effort of your guides! ... Our unfortunate brothers and sisters, however, do not yet possess such evolutionary conditions and will be compelled to accept the decisions of the guardians who accompany them on their trajectory in the warp and woof of human destiny ... And those goodly spirits have decided that they will live among you, that they will learn from your acts, that they will be involved in your future endeavors! The executors of such lofty resolutions have brought them all here in order to process the final decision

with your concourse in this assembly of divine teachings. Thus, you have the right to choose your future companions from among them, remembering that in such instances our hearts can give the best proof that we have understood the Gospel's 'love one another', upon which rests the foundation of our supreme evolution towards the divine planes!"

Our characters exchanged eager looks.

Just then, some spirits entered the sanctuary. Behind the noble figures of some charitable and friendly spirits came Claudia Sabina, Fabius Cornelius, Silanus Plautius and Lollius Urbicus. They were followed a little farther behind by numerous servants from the past, accomplices in the same wrongs and the same illusions, namely Pausanias, Plotina, Quintus Bibulus, Poponius Gratus, Lidius, Marcus and others, as the sanctuary started to fill with their singular vibrations, saturated with unspeakable sorrow.

Most of them expressed bitter and dolorous surprise.

Almost all of them were downcast and sad, and from time to time tormented sobs could be heard.

Watching the painful concern of his children and feeling that both of them were in the grip of agonizing indecision, Cneius Lucius asked the Lord to inspire him as to the best way to sacrifice himself for his beloved children, reconciling his love with their own needs for the future.

Suddenly the kindly old man stood up with conviction and serenity and went to the disconsolate Claudia Sabina, who had not dared to lift her tear-drenched eyes, and said to her with infinite tenderness:

"Since Jesus Christ in his mercy has offered me the choice of those who will live with me, I will consider you, my sister, from now on as my daughter, to whom I shall consecrate a lasting and divine love!"

And embracing her, he concluded:

"In the future you will live in my home in order to transform your hatred and revenge into sublime and sacrosanct fraternity! ... You will eat from our bread; you will share my joys and sorrows, and you will be the sister of my children!"

Claudia Sabina sobbed, touched by the love of that devoted and benevolent soul.

Hateria stood up, approached Cneius Lucius and kissed his hands, which at that moment were luminous and translucent.

Julia Spinter, meanwhile, aided her disconsolate husband, embracing Silanus Plautius and promising him her devoted and friendly assistance in the course of their planetary struggles.

It was then that Helvidius Lucius and Alba Lucinia arose, and turning to Lollius Urbicus, who had knelt down as if overwhelmed by relentless torment, stretched out their fraternal arms and promised him their love and devotion.

As they continued this endeavor of solidarity and devotion, they all called to themselves some former servant or another, as well as other partakers in their past deeds in order to involve them in their future endeavors.

Once this blessed task was concluded, the mentor of the meeting asked serenely:

“Are all of you sure you have forgiven sufficiently?”

There was an anguished silence ... Inwardly our characters were still experiencing some difficulties in forgetting the past. Helvidius Lucius had not forgotten Lollius Urbicus’s persecutions; Alba Lucinia had not forgotten what Sabina had done, and Fabius Cornelius, in spite of his suffering, did not feel capable of forgiving Silanus’s crime.

There was overall indecision, but a soft and merciful light began to fall on every heart from on High. Without a single exception, all the members of Cneius Lucius’s group began to weep, overcome with indefinable emotion.

They all saw above them the sublime figure of Celia beckoning to them filled with tenderness and love.

Moved by a sweet mystery, they embraced a sincere, pure forgiveness, feeling mutually touched by a profound compassion.

As if the elements of the environment were susceptible to the innermost state of those present, a soft sweet light began to shine all round as most of our characters wept tenderly.

Revealing a gentle smile, the mentor concluded:

“Thanks to the mercy of the Almighty, I feel that you will all return to the terrestrial plane with a new disposition that will edify your hearts and

consciences in the most beautiful expressions of spirituality! May the blessings of the Lord fill your future paths with light and peace! ... Be joyful! All the secrets of happiness are in the love and work of a redeemed conscience! ... Forget the dark, painful past and immerse yourselves heroically and humbly in the redemptive struggle ... I feel that you are all united by the same vibration of compassion and I pray to God that you understand, in all circumstances, that we are brothers and sisters through the same weaknesses and the same wrongs on the pathway to supreme redemption in the struggles of the Infinite!”

In the presence of the loving and wise words of the divine messenger who supervised them, our friends felt comforted by a new light that filled them with the most beautiful understanding of true life.

The vision of Celia had disappeared, but as if her great soul were watching the moving scene through the luminous curtains of the Unlimited, all could hear a wonderful hymn sung by hundreds of children’s voices coming through caressing vibrations from the higher realms, spreading courage and love, consolation and hope to every heart ... The harmonious stanzas passed through the sanctuary and rose to Heaven in melodious notes, ascending to the throne of Jesus like divine incense! It was an affirmation of faith and encouragement that brought forth the most compassionate tears from the souls of the listeners.

Immediately thereafter, amid the loving prayers of friends and spirit benefactors that would remain on the invisible plane, all the members of Cneius Lucius’s group left the sanctuary and came together in a fraternal caravan heading to the lower spheres surrounding planet earth.

At that moment, they all had an honest desire to consolidate their inner peace before recommencing the struggle again.

It was then that Claudia Sabina spontaneously approached Alba Lucinia and declared with in anguished voice:

“I dare not call you sister, for I was once the ruthless tormentor of your sensitive and kind heart! ... But being who you are, for the kind feelings that you harbor in your soul, forgive me once more. I was the tormentor and you were the victim; yet you can clearly see my dolorous ruin. Please, grant me your forgiveness so that I can feel the light of my new day!”

Cneius Lucius watched his daughter-in-law with obvious concern, as if imploring her clemency.

Alba Lucinia understood the gravity of the moment, and overcoming the hesitation that troubled her mind, she said:

“You are forgiven ... God will help me forget the past so that there will be real fraternity between us in our future struggles!”

Julia Spinter gazed at Alba Lucinia, displaying the joy in her heart for the kind gesture, while Cneius Lucius enveloped her in an endearing look of happiness and deep gratitude.

As most of our characters were sharing ideas about the future, the atmosphere of planet earth appeared in the far-off distance, wrapped in a whirl of thick shadows.

Someone spoke with a soulful, imposing voice from amid the caravan:

“Our millennial school!”

Determined in their faith, with eyes lifted on High imploring divine mercy, and guided by the enlightening forces of the good that enveloped them, they entered the planet’s atmosphere, enabled for an increasingly higher and nobler understanding of the effective value of toil and struggle.

Only Nestorius remained in prayer once they entered the earthly fluids, his eyes filled with tears in the emotion of that moment full of apprehensions and hopes. “O Lord,” said the former slave, evoking sorrowful memories, “again on earth, the blessed school of our souls, we count on your merciful benevolence so that we may fulfill all our obligations on the path of repentance and reparation. Help us in our struggle! Only centuries of hard work and pain can cancel the centuries of selfishness, pride and ambition that led us to iniquity! ... Forgive us, Jesus! Deign to bless our sincere and humble aspirations! ... Teach us to love the planet with its stormy landscapes so we can find the light of our spiritual regeneration on the earthly pathways to your kingdom of indestructible peace!”

Amid the tears of his supplications, Nestorius was the last to immerse himself in the vastness of the planetary fluids.

From on High, a gentle, compassionate light emanated. The entire caravan felt the divine breath of a new hope, and they submerged themselves in the earth’s environment filled with redemptive valor. Comforted in meditation and prayer, all hearts knew that the light of Divine Providence would follow their experiences, in suffering and in work, like a divine blessing.

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