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PONTIUS PILATE AT VIENNE.

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Vienne in Dauphiny, and province of France, the ancient capital or transalpine Gaul under the Romans, is situated on the river Rhone.—There, on the left bank of that beautiful stream, is seen a tomb of an ancient architecture, which according to tradition, is the tomb of Pontius Pilate—Pilate, under whose government Jesus Christ suffered. [Passus est sub Pontio Pilato] It was in Vienne also that the Wandering Jew revealed himself in 1777—a most remarkable occurrence, the spot that contained the ashes of the judge of the Righteous, was to be trodden upon by a descendant of his accusers.

The following chronicle was extracted from an old Latin manuscript found in a monastery near Vienne.

It was under the reign of Caligula, when C. Marcus was prætor at Vienne, that an old man, bent with age, yet of a tall stature, was seen to descend from his litter and enter a house of modest appearance near the temple of Mars. Over the door of this house was written in red letters, the name of F. Albinus. He was an old acquaintance of Pilate's. After mutual salutations, Albinus observed to him, that many years had elapsed since their separation.

'Yes,' replied Pilate, 'many years—years of misfortune and affliction. Accursed be the day on which I succeeded Valerius Gratus in the government of Judea! My name is ominous; it has been fatal to whosoever has borne it.—One of my ancestors imprinted an indelible mark of infamy on the front of imperial Rome, when the Romans passed under the Candine Forks in the Samnite war. Another perished by the hands of the Parthians in the war against Arminius. And I—miserable me!—'

'You miserable,' asked Albinus. 'What have you done to entail misery on you? True, the injustice of Caligula has exiled you to Vienne, but for what crime? I have examined your affair at the Tabularium. You are denounced by Vitellus, prefect of Syria, your enemy, for having chastised the rebellious Hebrews, who had slain the most noble of the Samaritans, and who afterwards withdrew themselves on Mount Garizim. You are also accused of acting thus out of hatred to the Jews.'

'No!' replied Pilate, 'No! by all the gods, Albinus, it is not the injustice of Cæsar that afflicts me.'

'What, then, is the cause of your affliction?' continued Albinus. 'Long have I known you—sensible, just, humane. I see it—you are the victim of Vitellus.'

'Say not so, Albinus. Say not that I am the victim of Vitellus. No; I am the victim of a Higher Power! The Romans regard me as an object of Cæsar's disgrace; the Jews, as the severe Proconsul; the Christians as the executioner of their God!'

'Of their god did you say, Pilate? Impious wretches! Adore a God born in a manger, and put to death on a cross.'

'Beware, Albinus, beware!' continued Pilate. 'If the Christ had been born under the purple, he would not have been adored. Listen. To your friendship I will submit the events of my life; you will afterwards judge whether I am worthy of your hospitality.'

'On my arrival at Jerusalem, I took possession of the pretorium, and ordered a splendid feast to be prepared, to which I invited the Tetrarch of Judea, with the High Priest and his officers! At the appointed hour, no guest appeared. This was an insult offered to my dignity. A few days afterwards the Tetrarch designed to pay a visit. His deportment was grave and deceitful. He pretended that his religion forbade him and his attendants to sit down at the table of the Gentiles, and to offer up libations with them. I thought it expedient to accept of his excuse; but from that moment I was convinced that the enemies of the conquered had declared themselves the enemies of the conquerors.'

At that time Jerusalem was of all conquered cities, the most difficult to govern. So turbulent were the people that I lived in momentary dread of an insurrection. To repress it, I had but a single centurion and a handful of soldiers. I requested a reinforcement from the Prefect of Syria, who informed me that he had scarcely troops sufficient to defend his own province.—Insatiate thirst of empire—to extend our conquests beyond the means of defending them.

Among the various rumors which came to my ears, there was one that attracted my attention. A young man, it was said had appeared in Galilee, preaching with a noble unction, a new law in the name of the God who had sent him. At first, I was apprehensive that his design was to stir up the people against the Romans; but soon were my fears dispelled. Jesus of Nazareth spoke rather as a friend of the Romans than of the Jews.

One day, in passing by the place of Siloe, where there was a great concourse of people, I observed, in the midst of the group, a young man leaning against a tree, who was calmly addressing the multitude. I was told, that it was Jesus. This I could easily have suspected, so great was the difference between him and those who were listening to him. He appeared to be about thirty years of age. His golden colored hair and beard gave to his appearance a celestial aspect. Never have I seen a sweeter or more serene countenance. What a contrast between him, and his hearers, with their black beards and tawny complexions. Unwilling to interrupt him by my presence, I continued my walk, but signified to my Secretary to join the group and listen.

My Secretary's name was Manlius. He was the grandson of the chief of the conspirators, who encamped in Etruria, waiting for Catalina. Manlius was an ancient inhabitant of Judea, and well acquainted with the Hebrew language.—He was devoted to me, and was worthy of my confidence.

On returning to the Pretorium, I found Manlius, who related to me the words that Jesus had pronounced at Siloe. Never have I heard in the Portico, or read in the works of the philosophers, any thing that can be compared to the maxims of Jesus. One of the rebellious Jews, so numerous in Jerusalem, having asked him if it was lawful to give tribute to Cæsar or not, Jesus replied: 'Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's and unto God the things that are God's.'

It was on account of the wisdom of his sayings that I granted so much liberty to the Nazarene; for it was in my power to have had him arrested and exiled to Pontus; but this would have been contrary to that justice which has always characterised the Romans. This man was neither seditious nor rebellious. I extended to him my protection, unknown perhaps to himself. He was at liberty to act, to speak, to assemble and address the people, to choose disciples unrestrained by any pretorian mandate.

Should it ever happen—may the gods avert the omen!—should it ever happen, I say, that the religion of our forefathers be supplanted by the religion of Jesus, it will be to his noble toleration that Rome shall owe her premature obsequies—whilst I miserable wretch—I shall have been the instrument of what the Christians call Providence; and we—Destiny.

But this unlimited freedom granted to Jesus, revolted the Jews—not the poor, but the rich and powerful. It is true, Jesus was severe on the latter; and this was a political reason, in my opinion, not to control the liberty of the Nazarene. 'Scribes and Pharisees!' would he say to them; 'you are a race of vipers!'—you resemble painted sepulchres! At other times he would laugh at the proud alms of the Publican, telling him that the mite of the widow was more precious in the sight of God.

New complaints were daily made at the Pretorium against the insolence of Jesus. I was even informed that some misfortune would befall him—that it would not be the first time that Jerusalem had stoned those calling themselves prophets—and that, if the Pretorium refused justice, an appeal would be made to Cæsar.

This I had prevented, by informing Cæsar of all that happened. My conduct was approved of by the Senate, and I was promised a reinforcement of troops after the termination of the Parthian war.

Being too weak to suppress a sedition, I resolved, upon adopting a measure that promised to re-establish tranquility in the City, without subjecting the Pretorium to humiliating concessions. I wrote to Jesus, requesting an interview with him at the Pretorium. He came.

Oh, Albinus! now that my blood runs cold in my veins, and that my body is bent down under the load of years, it is not surprising that Pilate should sometimes tremble; but then I was young—in my veins flowed the Spanish mixed with the Roman blood, as incapable of fear as it was of base emotions.

When the Nazarene made his appearance, I was walking my basiliek, and my feet seemed fastened with an iron hand to a marble pavement. He was calm, the Nazarene—calm as innocence. When he came up to me, he stopped, and, by a simple gesture seemed to say to me: here I am.

For some time I contemplated, with admiration and with awe, this extraordinary type of a man—a type unknown to our numerous sculptors, who have given form and figures to all the gods and all the heroes.

'Jesus,' said I to him at last—and my tongue faltered—Jesus of Nazareth, I have granted you, for the last three years, ample freedom of speech; nor do I regret it. Your words are those of a sage. I know not whether you have read Socrates or Plato; but this I know, that there is in your discourse a majestic simplicity that elevates you far above those great philosophers. The Emperor is informed of it and I, his humble representative in this country, am glad to have allowed that liberty of which you are so worthy. However, I must not conceal from you that your discourses have raised up against you powerful and inveterate enemies. Neither is this surprising. Socrates had his enemies, and fell a victim to their hatred. Yours are doubly incensed against you, on account of your sayings: against me on account of the liberty extended towards you. They even accuse me indirectly of being leagued with you, for the purpose of depriving the Hebrews of the little civil power which Rome has left to them. My request—I do not say my orders—is that, you be more circumspect for the future, and more tender in rousing the pride of your enemies, lest they raise up against you the stupid populace, and compel me to employ the instruments of justice.

The Nazarene calmly replied.

'Prince of the earth, your words proceed not from true wisdom. Say to the torrent to stop in the midst of the mountain because it will uproot the trees of the valley; the torrent will answer you, that it obeys the laws of the Creator. God alone knows whither flow the waters of the torrent. Verily, I say unto you, before the rose of Sharon blossoms, the blood of the just will be spilt.'

'Your blood shall not be spilt,' replied I, with emotion. 'You are more precious in my estimation on account of your wisdom, than all those turbulent and proud Pharisees, who abuse

the freedom granted them by the Romans, conspire against Cæsar, and construe our bounty into fear. Insolent wretches! They are not aware that the wolf of the Tiber sometimes clothes himself with the skin of the sheep. I will protect you against them. My Pretorium is open to you as a place of refuge—it is a sacred asylum.'

Jesus carelessly shook his head, and said, with a graceful and divine smile:

'When the day shall have come, there will be no asylum for the Son of Man, neither on earth nor under the earth. The asylum of the Just is there, (pointing to the heavens.) That which is written in the books of the prophets must be accomplished.'

'Young man,' answered I mildly, 'you oblige me to convert my request into an order. The safety of the province which has been confided to my care, requires it. You must observe more moderation in your discourses. Do not infringe my orders; you know them. May happiness attend you. Farewell.'

'Prince of the earth,' replied Jesus, 'I come not to bring war into the world, but peace, love, and charity. I was born the same day on which Cæsar Augustus gave peace to the Roman world. Persecution proceeds not from me. I expect it from others, and will meet it in obedience to the will of my Father, who has shown me the way. Restrain, therefore, your worldly prudence. It is not in your power to arrest the victim at the foot of the tabernacle of expiation.'

So saying, he disappeared like a bright shadow behind the curtains of the basiliek.

Herod the Tetrarch, who then reigned in Judea and who died devoured by vermin, was a weak and wicked man, chosen by the chiefs of the law to be the instrument of their hatred.—To him the enemies of Jesus, addressed themselves to wreak their vengeance on the Nazarene. Had Herod consulted his own inclination, he would have ordered Jesus immediately to be put to death, but though proud of his regal dignity, yet he was afraid of committing an act that might diminish his influence with Cæsar.

Herod called on me one day at the Pretorium, and on rising to take leave, after some insignificant conversation, he asked me what was my opinion concerning the Nazarene.

I replied that Jesus appeared to me to be one of those grave philosophers that great nations sometimes produce; that his doctrine was by no means dangerous; and that the intention of Rome was, to leave him that freedom of speech which was justified by his actions. Herod smiled maliciously, and saluting me with ironical respect, he departed.

The great feast of the Jews was approaching; and their intention was to avail themselves of the popular exaltation, which always manifests itself at the solemnities of the passover. The city was overflowing with a tumultuous populace, clamoring for the death of the Nazarene.

My emissaries informed me that the treasure of the Temple had been employed in bribing the people. The danger was pressing. A Roman centurion had been insulted.

I wrote to the prefect of Syria, requesting a hundred foot soldiers and the same number of cavalry. He declined. I saw myself alone with a handful of veterans in the midst of a rebellious city—too weak to suppress disorder, and having no other choice left than to tolerate it.

They had seized upon Jesus; and the seditious rabble, although they knew they had nothing to fear from the Pretorium, believing, on the faith of their leaders, that winked at their sedition, continued vociferating, 'Crucify him!'

Three powerful parties at that time had combined together against Jesus. First, the Herodians and Sadducees, whose seditious conduct appeared to have proceeded from a double motive; they hated the Nazarene, and were impatient of the Roman yoke. They could never forgive me for having entered their holy city with banners that bore the image of the Roman Emperor; and although, in this instance, I had committed a fatal error, yet the sacrilege did not appear less heinous in their eye. Another grievance also rankled in their bosoms. I had proposed to employ a part of the treasure of the Temple in erecting edifices of public utility.—My proposal was scrowled at. The Pharisees were the avowed enemies of Jesus. They cared not for the Governor; but they bore with bitterness the severe reprimands which the Nazarene had, during three years, been continually throwing out against them wherever he went. Too weak and too pusillanimous to act by themselves, they had eagerly embraced the quarrel of the Herodians and Sadducees. Besides these three parties, I had to contend against the reckless and profligate populace, always ready to join in a sedition, and to profit by the disorder and confusion that results therefrom.

Jesus was dragged before the Council of the Priests and condemned to death. It was then that the High Priest, Caiaphas, performed a derisory act of submission. He sent his prisoner to me to pronounce his condemnation and secure his execution. I answered him that, as Jesus was a Galilean, the affair came within Herod's jurisdiction, and ordered Jesus to be sent thither. The wily Tetrarch professed humility, and protesting his deference to the lieutenant of Cæsar, he committed the fate of the man to my hands.

Soon my palace assumed the aspect of a besieged citadel; every moment increased the number of the seditious. Jerusalem was inundated with crowds from the mountains of Nazareth, the towns of Galilee, the plains of Esdrelon.—All Judea appeared to be pouring into that devoted city.

I had taken to wife a girl from among the Gauls, who pretended to see into the future. Weeping, and throwing herself at my feet, 'Beware,' said she to me, 'beware, and touch not that man, for he is holy. Last night, I saw him in a vision. He was walking on the water—he was flying on the wings of the wind. He spoke to the tempest, to the palm trees, to the fishes of the lake—all were obedient to him. Behold! the torrent of Mount Cedron flows with blood—the statues of Cæsar are soiled with the filth of the gemoniæ—the columns of the Pretorium have given way, and the sun is veiled in mourning like a vestal in the tomb! O, Pilate, evil awaits thee. It thou wilt not listen to the words of thy wife, dread the curses of a Roman Senate—dread the frowns of Cæsar!'

By this time my marble stairs groaned under the weight of the multitude. The Nazarene was brought back to me. I proceeded to the Hall of Justice, followed by my guards, and asked the people in a severe tone, what they demanded? 'The death of the Nazarene,' was their reply. For what crime? 'He has blasphemed; he has prophesied the ruin of the Temple; he calls himself the Son of God—the Messiah—the King of the Jews.' Roman justice, said I, punisheth not such offences with death. 'Crucify him, crucify him!' shouted fourth the restless rabble.

The vociferations of the infuriate multitude shook the palace to its foundation. One man alone appeared calm in the midst of the tumult. He was like unto the Statue of Innocence placed in the temples of the Eumindes. It was the Nazarene.

After many fruitless attempts to protect him from the fury of his merciless persecutors, I had the baseness to adopt a measure which, at the moment, appeared to me to be the only one that could save his life, I ordered him to be scourged, then, calling for a tower, I washed my hands in presence of the clamorous multitude, thereby signifying to them my disapprobation of the deed.

But in vain. It was his life that these wretches thirsted after. Often, in our civil commotions, have I witnessed the furious animosity of the multitude; but nothing could ever be compared to what I beheld in the present instance. It might have been truly said that, on this occasion, all the phantoms of the infernal regions had assembled together at Jerusalem.—The crowd appeared not to walk; they were borne off and whirled as a vortex, rolling along like living waves, from the portal of the pretorium even unto Mount Zion, with howlings, screams, shrieks, and vociferations, such as were never heard either in the seditions of Panonia, or in the tumults of the Forum.

By degrees the day darkened like a winter twilight, such as had been seen at the death of the great Julius Cæsar. It was likewise towards the ides of March. I, the condemned Governor of a rebellious province, was leaning against a column of my basiliek, contemplating athwart the dreary gloom, this Theory of Tartarus dragging to execution the innocent Nazarene. All around me was a desert. Jerusalem had vomited forth her indwellers through the funeral gate that leads to the Germonia. An air of desolation and sadness enveloped me.—My guard had joined the cavalry, and the Centurion, to display a shadow of power, was endeavoring to maintain order. I was left alone, and my breaking heart admonished me, that what was passing at that moment appertained rather to the history of the gods than to that of man. Loud clamors were heard proceeding from Golgotha, which borne on the winds appeared to announce an agony such as never had been heard by mortal ear. Dark clouds lowered over the pinnacle of the Temple, and their large ruptures settled over the city and covered it as with a veil. So dreadful were the signs that were manifested, both in the heavens and on the earth, that Dionysius the Areopagite, is reported to have exclaimed: 'Either the Author of Nature is suffering, or the universe is falling apart.'

Towards the first hour of the night, I threw my mantle around me, and went down into the city towards the gate of Golgotha. The sacrifice had been consummated. The crowd were returning home; still agitated, it is true, but gloomy, sad, taciturn, desperate. What they had witnessed had struck them with terror and remorse. I also saw my little Roman cohort pass by mournfully, the standard bearer having veiled his eagle in token of grief, and I overheard some of the soldiers murmuring strange words which I did not comprehend. Others were recounting prodigies almost similar to those which had so often smote the Romans with dismay by the will of the gods. Sometimes groups of men and women would halt; then, looking back towards Mount Calvary, would remain motionless, in the expectation of witnessing some new prodigy.

I returned to the Pretorium, sad and pensive. On ascending the stair, the steps of which were still stained with the blood of the Nazarene, I perceived an old man in a suppliant posture, and behind him several women in tears. He threw himself at my feet, and wept bitterly. It is painful to see an old man weep. 'Father,' said I to him mildly, 'who are you, and what is your request?'

'I am Joseph, of Arimathea,' replied he, and I am come to beg of you, on my knees, the permission to bury Jesus of Nazareth.'

'Your prayer is granted,' said I to him; and, at the same time, ordered Manlius to take some soldiers with him, to superintend the interment, least it might be profaned. A few days afterwards the sepulchre was found empty. The disciples of Jesus published all over the country that he had risen from the dead, as he had foretold.