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PERPETUA AND FELICITAS.

MARTYRED AT CARTHAGE, MARCH 7, A.D. 204.

IN THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER for last July was published a fac-simile of the original autograph of the well-known hymn, "Nearer my God to Thee," by Mrs Sarah Flower Adams, and on the accompanying pages was a reference to a "dramatic poem," which during the lifetime of the author was considered her chief work, entitled *Vivia Perpetua*.

I am requested by our Editor to give some account of the true history on which that touching poem was founded. For with some mixture of what must be legendary tradition, it is certainly true that a noble and beautiful Carthaginian lady, in the year A.D. 203, stood forward to testify among the wealthy merchants of Carthage to that new Gospel, the gospel for the poor; and amongst the conquering hosts of warlike Rome, to the glad tidings of the reign of peace on earth, the deliverance of the captive, and God's goodwill towards men; and was finally one of the earliest of that "noble army of martyrs" who confirmed their testimony by dying for their faith.

That we may realise the story more completely, I think it may be well to try and picture to ourselves the place, the scenery, the life of the time into which Perpetua was born; something of the ideas of the old world across which came this new life, with ideals altogether different in so many ways from those of the former ages.

Vivia Perpetua was born in Carthage towards the close of the second century. Carthage was no longer, at this date, the great commercial city of the Phœnicians, the flourishing offshoot from Tyre, the Tarshish of the Bible. It was, at the date of which I am writing,



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PERPETUA AND HER SLAVE FELICITAS.

a Roman colony, peopled for the most part by citizens from Rome and other parts of Italy, with some admixture of the conquered native race. We may take it for granted that Perpetua was of Roman parentage, and that her father was a man of good position in the city.

The Carthaginians had brought their religion with them when, in prehistoric times, they came out from amongst the tribes surrounding Judea, and, leaving the coast of Tyre, established themselves on the African coast, building Kartago, or "the new city," for themselves. What that religion was we have some idea from the many references to, and denunciations of it, in the Old Testament. Do we realise the horrors and cruelties of those barbarous rites which were so frequently presented to the sight of the Jews when we read such words as these, so often repeated: "Thou shalt not let thy sons and daughters pass through the fire to Moloch." Children, most often infants, were cast *alive* into the fire kindled before a black image of the god Baal, or Moloch, as an acceptable offering to the idol; and, while the priests danced before the image, drums were beat and cymbals clashed that none might hear the pitiful shrieks and wailings of the victims.

After the Romans had conquered Carthage, B.C. 164, and destroyed the city, the worship of Baal was abolished in the country; but it probably was carried on in remote places by the native population, for when, a century and a half later, the Romans rebuilt and themselves colonised the city on its former site, the old cruel practices in honour of Baal were transferred to the Roman god Saturn by the common people. The name was changed, that was all. For habits of cruelty, especially when practised under the guise of religion, are not easily done away with.

The wanton cruelty, the reckless disregard of human life, amongst all classes, but more especially towards the poor, were in the very essence of this Syrian religion, and fill us with the deepest horror. We are not surprised to learn how often it happened in the early days of Christianity that slaves were amongst the first converts to the new faith. "To the poor the gospel is preached"; "Are ye not of more value than many sparrows," were words to warm the hearts and thrill the impulses of the poor downtrodden outcasts of society.

Felicitas was most probably a slave in the household of the noble lady Perpetua, and was probably, though this is not actually on record, the means of bringing the gospel of glad tidings to the knowledge of her mistress.

I have said that the worship of the Baal of the Phœnicians was transferred, in a somewhat modified form, to the Roman god Saturn; in a similar manner many of the rites paid to the impure Astarte (the Ashtaroth of the Bible) were in Roman times paid to the name of Venus. The poet Virgil gives a touching picture of Dido, the mythical Carthaginian Queen, in his great poem the *Æneid*,* her grief, and her tragic end. *Æneas*, the hero, is the favourite of the goddess Venus, who does not approve of his love for Dido, and causes him to desert her. Dido, deserted and disappointed, destroys herself, and all her previous love turns to hate, and a frantic desire for revenge. She dies with a passionate curse on her lips upon her betrayer, his friends, his children, and his country, praying that there may—

"Rise an avenger of our Lybian blood,
With fire and sword to pursue the perjured
brood.
May our arms, our seas, our shores be
opposed to theirs,
And the same hate descend on all our
heirs."

* *The Æneid*, Dryden's Translation.

This was the pagan spirit! What a contrast is here to the precepts of Christianity, which enjoin on its followers, "To love them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you."

It is supposed that the Roman city of Carthage was rebuilt on the same lines as the older Phœnician city, and presented a very similar aspect. A flight of sixty steps led up to the famous citadel called the Byrsa, where had formerly stood the temple of Moloch, but which in Roman times was crowned with a temple to *Æsculapius*, the god of medicine.

Let me try and call up a picture of the place before our minds.

As we stand under the open colonnade which surrounds the temple, the servants of the priests watch the flight of birds for propitious omens (a Roman religious practice), and visitors to the shrine wait here for the message of healing that shall be brought them from within. From this airy standpoint, this "high place," we can look down into the very heart of the city as on a map. We see the white towers of the lighthouse lights at the end of the harbour gleaming far out into the blue sea to the eastward. The harbours are again filled with ships as in the days when Carthage, and not Rome, was queen of the Mediterranean. The busy market-place, the Agora, resounds with the voices of buyers and sellers. It is the month of March, but the hot sun of Africa pours down his piercing rays—"Those sunbeams like swords."

Inland, on the north, the long line of aqueducts skirt the horizon; in the far distance, the river Bagrada* flows lazily along, refreshing the eye, and giving verdure to the many villas that surround the city, extending along the sea-shore almost as far as the catacombs; and the gardens are gay with roses, and oleanders pink and white, and crimson pomegranates, and fragrant with spice trees. At our feet lay the black and gloomy cypress groves, where the Tyrian gods of Carthage had been worshipped. In the city itself, every height is crowned with the temple of a pagan god—Diana, Juno, and Venus; Saturn, Apollo, and *Æsculapius*, hold the places formerly held by the more corrupt Astarte and the grim and terrible Moloch. Superstition abounds, and cruelty follows in its train. All the city lies spread out before us, and the amphitheatre looms in the distance.

But nearer is the Basilica, the great public hall, where the justice of the Roman law is administered. What is it to-day that fills its courts to overflowing? crowds press in on every side. Let us descend from our airy height that we may mingle with the crowd.

The Prefect is seated in his place, surrounded by his lictors, a little group of men and women of very various ranks stand before him, accused of an offence against the law. Hilarius, the Prefect, points to the statue of the reigning Emperor, Lucius Septimius Severus. A board was fixed at its base, which bore an imperial edict that said, "that every class of the state, freemen and slaves, soldiers and civilians, were hereby commanded to offer to the gods expiatory sacrifices, falling down with supplication before them;" and adding terrible threats of torture and death to those who refused.

An altar stands before the statue of the Emperor Severus, on which fire burns.

One of the accused steps forward; a lady, young, fair, noble of presence. She speaks a few words. What has she said that the crowd, one and all, shrink back aghast? She refuses to comply with the Prefect's demands to throw incense on the altar to the Emperor, the recognised sign of allegiance to the laws of the realm. What were the words she said? "I am a Christian!" No more! But the Christians will not offer sacrifice on any altar, either to gods or Emperor. They will pray to

God, the Heavenly Father, to grant unto the Emperor health and success in all good works, the love of his people, and the confidence of the senate; but they will neither bow down nor sacrifice to Emperor or any pagan god.

Their reasons are not understood. The custom is an absolutely universal one; and as they will not conform to it, they are accused of disloyalty towards the Emperor, and suspected of treasonable intentions against the government. They are ordered to be conveyed at once, one and all, straight to prison.

They were five in number; two women and three men—Vivia Perpetua, the daughter of a wealthy citizen of Carthage, beautiful, well educated, about twenty-two years of age, a young mother, apparently a widow; Felicitas and Revocatus, servants or slaves, probably in the household of Vivia and her father, and Saturninus.

The father of Vivia appealed to her in vain to make her deny her faith. He attempted to prevent the lictors from obeying the order to remove his daughter to prison, and was struck down by them, to her horror. She was conveyed away with the rest of the party to the common prison for slaves and malefactors.

"This was the inner prison, called the Robur, or Signum, a terrible place to be confined in, more especially in such a climate as Africa. It had no window, or outlet, except the door into an outer room, and when that was closed, light and air were absolutely shut out. This Signum was the place into which St. Paul and St. Silas were cast at Philippi, before it was known that they were Romans."

The miseries of such terrible prisons, in which the inmates were confined day and night, is often dwelt on by the martyrs and their biographers.

"In the acts of St. Pionius and others of Smyrna we read that the jailors shut them up in the inner part of the prison, so that, bereaved of all comfort and light, they were forced to sustain extreme torment from the darkness and stench of the prison. And in like manner other martyrs of Africa, about the time of St. Cyprian's martyrdom (viz. A.D. 258), say: "We were not frightened at the foul darkness of the place; for soon that musky prison was radiant with the brightness of the Spirit. What days, what nights we passed there, no words can describe. The torments of that prison no statement can equal!"*

On the eve of her martyrdom, Vivia Perpetua wrote down an account of her sufferings and her visions, hoping, doubtless, by the bright example of her own enthusiastic courage, to strengthen others who might be similarly tried to keep steadfast in the faith.

I quote from this valuable and pathetic document.† She says "After a few days we were taken into the dungeon, and I was very much afraid because I had never felt such darkness.

"I was shocked at the horror and darkness of the place, for till then I knew not what such sort of places were. We suffered much that day. O terrible day! O the fierce heat caused by the crowd, and the ill-treatment we received from the soldiery! I was, moreover, tortured with concern that I had not my infant.

"There were present there Tertius and Pomponius the blessed deacons, who ministered to us, and had arranged, by means of a gratuity, that we might be refreshed by being sent out for a few hours into a pleasanter part of the prison." Her infant child was brought to her that she might suckle it; for, continues the journal, the poor baby "was enfeebled with hunger. In my anxiety for it

* From *Callista*, by Cardinal Newman.

† "The Acts of St. Perpetua and St. Felicitas," preserved and completed by an Eye-Witness of the Martyrdom.

* Now called the Majerba.

I addressed my mother, and comforted my brother" (who was also a Christian, but had not been amongst the party then arrested). "I commended to their care my son. I was languishing because I had seen them languishing on my account. Such solicitude I suffered for many days, and I obtained leave for my infant to remain in the dungeon with me; and forthwith I grew strong, and was relieved from distress and anxiety about my infant, and the dangeon became to me as it were a palace, so that I preferred being there to anywhere else."

Then, while still in prison, Perpetua prays for a vision, that it may be made known to her whether this terrible trial "shall result in a passion or an escape." In answer to her prayer, this was the vision that was granted to her. She says: "I saw a golden ladder of marvellous height, reaching up even to heaven, and very narrow, so that persons could only ascend it one by one; and on the sides of the ladder was fixed every kind of iron weapon. There were there swords, lances, hooks, daggers; so that if any one went up carelessly, or not looking upwards, he would be torn to pieces, and his flesh would cleave to the iron weapons. And under the ladder itself was couching a dragon of wonderful size, who lay in wait for those who ascended, and frightened them from the ascent.

"And Satorus went up first, who had subsequently delivered himself up freely on our account, not having been present at the time that we were taken prisoners. And he attained the top of the ladder, and turning towards me, he said: 'Perpetua, I await you; but be careful that the dragon do not tear you.' And I said, 'In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he shall not hurt me.' And from under the ladder itself, as if in fear of me, he slowly lifted up his head; and as I trod upon the first step I trod upon his head. And I went up, and I saw an immense extent of garden, and in the midst of the garden a white-haired man sitting, in the dress of a shepherd, of large stature, tending sheep; * and standing around were many thousand white-robed ones. And he raised his head, and looked upon me, and said to me, 'Thou art welcome, daughter.' And he called me, and from the cheese, as he was milking, he gave me as it were a little cake, and I received it with folded hands; and I ate it, and all who stood round said Amen. And at the sound of their voices I was awakened, still tasting a sweetness which I cannot describe. And I immediately related this to my brother, and we understood that it was to be a passion, and we ceased henceforth to have any hope in this world."

Then occurs what must have been to the young widow the sorest trial of all. Immediately on the report being spread that the Christians would be had up for final trial and sentence, her aged father came from the city to see her in prison, worn out with anxiety, and determined to make a last effort to induce his beloved daughter to recant, and to avoid a shameful and terrible death. I continue to quote her own recorded words: "He came

to me that he might cast me down, saying, 'Have pity, my daughter, on my grey hairs. Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called a father by you. If with these hands I have brought you up to this flower of your age, if I have preferred you to all your brothers, do not deliver me up to the scorn of men. Have regard to your brothers, have regard to your mother and your aunt, have regard to your little son, who will not be able to live after you. Lay aside your courage, and do not bring us all to destruction; for none of us will speak in freedom if you should suffer anything.'

"These things said my father in his affection, kissing my hands, and throwing himself at my feet; and with tears he called me, not daughter, but lady.

"And I grieved over the grey hairs of my father, that he alone of all my family would not rejoice over my passion. And I comforted him, saying, 'On that scaffold (or platform) whatever God wills shall happen. For know that we are not placed in our own power, but in that of God.' And he departed from me in sorrow."

The final sentence was not long delayed. The Christian prisoners were summoned to the hall of justice. The rumour spread quickly, and an immense crowd collected. Curiosity, suspicion, and fear were the prevalent feelings in the crowd towards the Christians: curiosity, as to the appearance of a new sect who denied all the received ideas; suspicion, for that their refusal to offer the usual sacrifice to the Emperor indicated to the popular mind that they must be plotting against the state; and fear, because "it was currently reported," says a Roman lawyer, a contemporary, who afterwards embraced Christianity, "that the Christians were sorcerers and witches, that they worshipped monsters, devoured infants, and, besides other abominations, polluted the sacred rites (of the pagans)."

Perpetua's journal continues: "We mounted the platform. The rest were interrogated and confessed. Then they came to me, and my father immediately appeared with my boy, and withdrew me from the step, and said in a supplicating tone, 'Have pity on your babe.'"

Even the Roman Præfect, Hilarianus, who sat in the seat of judgment to deal life or death to the accused, was touched, for he appealed to Perpetua, and said, "'Spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the Emperor.' And I replied, 'I will not do so. I am a Christian!'"

"The procurator then delivered judgment on all of us, and condemned us to the wild beasts, and we went back cheerfully to the dungeon.

"While they were yet in prison, God called Secundalus, one of the devoted band, by an earlier exit from the world, not without favour, so as to give a respite to the beasts." And Satorus, the leader, had a lovely vision which, being related, comforted them all in their time of trial and waiting. The martyrdom is described by the Eye-Witness above-mentioned, in the following words:—

"The day of their victory shone forth, and they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheatre, as if to an assembly, joyous, and of brilliant countenances; if perchance

shrinking, it was with joy and not with fear. Perpetua followed with placid look and with step and gait as a Matron of Christ, beloved of God; casting down the lustre of her eyes from the gaze of all."

Felicitas, the slave, who was but newly a mother, and was still faint and weak, was supported and upheld by Perpetua, and they went together singing psalms and strengthening each other. They were led out into the arena and wounded by the furious animals, but not at first killed.

The Witness tells how that Perpetua fell into a sort of ecstasy, and began to ask "when they should be led out to the wild beasts." And when she heard what had already happened, she did not believe it, until she had perceived certain signs of injury in her body and in her dress. Then, causing her brother and others to approach, she addressed them, saying, "Stand fast in the faith and love one another, all of you, and be not offended at my sufferings."

The final scene I prefer to give in the words of the poem by Mrs. Adams, before referred to, where it is faithfully and beautifully described:—

"All's over! or begun: for if she fell
On earth, or rose an angel to the skies,
I scarce can tell, for wonder at the sight.
Life seemed to gather in her as she moved
Towards her death; while with her arms—
such strength
Most strange in one so delicate—she still
Held up Felicitas; who, sinking fast,
No sooner reached the spot where all was
ready,
Than down she dropp'd, dead, at Perpetua's
feet!
The lady straight unclasped her drapery
rich,
And laid it o'er the slave, as tenderly
As though it were her child. And then
she rose,
And like a marble pillar there she stood
As firm upon the earth. No signal came,
Till she herself did gently bow her head,
And cross her hands upon her breast, in
token
Of readiness for the sword. And when
the swordsman,
For youth, or shame to pierce such
willingness,
Or awe, more like, of such presence, lost
All mastery of his hands to guide his
weapon,
Herself did turn the point against her
throat,
Her hand placed thus, as rest unto his aim:
A word to encourage him—and it was
finished!"

Satorus was killed by a savage leopard. The Witness concludes thus:—"O most brave and blessed martyrs! O, truly called and chosen unto the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! whom whoever magnifies and adores, assuredly ought to read these examples for the edification of the church, so that new virtues also may testify that one and the same Holy Spirit is always operating even now, and God the Father Omnipotent and His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, whose is the glory and infinite power for ever and ever. Amen."

E. F. BRIDELL-FOX.

* "This was an ordinary mode of picturing our Lord in the oratories, and on the sacred vessels of those days."

