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Virgilia or, out of the Lion's Mouth

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VIRGILIA

or

OUT OF THE LION'S MOUTH

By

FELICIA BUTTZ CLARK

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I.

A CONFESSION OF FAITH.

The Circus in Rome was thronged with an enormous crowd of persons on a day in June, about two thousand years ago. One hundred thousand men and women sat on its tiers of white marble seats, under the open sky and witnessed a gladiatorial contest in the arena, beneath.

At the western end of the oval amphitheatre was the Emperor's box, flanked with tall Corinthian pillars, on which were hung the coat-of-arms of the Roman people. Here sat one of the most cruel emperors Rome has ever suffered under. His cloak was royal purple, and was thrown carelessly back, on this warm June afternoon, to disclose a white tunic, embroidered in scarlet.

Beside him were several ladies, elaborately gowned in the manner of the day, with hair dressed high, studded with jewels brought from Oriental lands, while their necks and arms were loaded with strings of pearls and emeralds, armlets of tawny gold in Etruscan designs, in which were set cameos of extraordinary delicacy and diamonds, only partially polished, as large as the half of a hen's egg.

To every class of Romans, the gladiatorial show was open. Senators and Patricians, artists and mechanics, poets and artisans, women of every rank, from the highest lady of the land to the humblest washerwoman who beat her clothes on the rounded stones of the River Tiber, were here to gloat over the hideous contest in the arena.

In the third row, about half way in the long side of the oval amphitheatre sat two women and a man. The women were unusually beautiful. They were mother and daughter. The man was plainly the father, a stalwart Roman, a lawyer, who had his office in the courts of the Forum, where business houses flanked the splendid temples of white marble, where the people worshipped their gods, Jupiter and Saturn, Diana and Cybele.

"See," said Claudia, pointing a finger on which blazed on enormous emerald, "the Vestals are giving the signal. Their thumbs are reversed. The Emperor, also, is signalling for a cessation of the fight. How proud Lycias, the gladiator, is to-day, for he won the victory. Well, we must go. Come, Virgilia."

The young girl arose, obediently, but her father noticed that her eyes were full of tears and that she shivered slightly in spite of the warm, scented June air.

As the three mingled with the thousands who were in a very leisurely manner wending their way down the steps to the ground, Aurelius Lucanus drew her frail hand through his arm and said, gently: "What hast thou, dearest? Art thou not well?"

"I am quite well, father dear," and as she spoke, she drew over her face a light, filmy veil, effectually shielding her from the too curious gaze of the laughing throng of merry-makers.

"Why, then, dost thou cry, my daughter?"

Virgilia glanced at her mother and noticing that she was out of hearing, whispered in his ear: "I hate it, father. Do not bring me again."

He looked at her with surprise, then, remembering that girls have strange fancies, he was silent, and guided her safely out into the blazing sunshine. The sun was still an hour above the horizon; the pine-trees on the Palatine Hills, where Caesar's palaces were, stood up like giant sentinels against a sky of limpid blue.

Aurelius Lucanus led the way through the Forum, where his wife, an ardent worshipper of the gods, stopped to lay a bunch of roses on the base of a large statue of Ceres, standing near the Temple and a building dedicated to the use of the Vestal Virgins.

The Chief Virgin was being carried to the entrance in her chair, borne by four bearers, while in front of her walked the two men who held high the symbols of her priestly office. Claudia fell upon her knees as the holy vestal went by, until her chair had been carried through the iron gates.

Virgilia watched her mother, with an anxious look on her young face.

"Why didst thou not also kneel before the holy one?" her mother said, in a stern tone. "Dost not know that in her hands she holds such power that even the emperor himself trembles before her and does her bidding, lest the gods send upon him disaster and ruin?"

Virgilia made no reply, but walked quietly by her mother's side through the Forum, beneath the great arches, up over the Capitoline Hill where Jupiter's Temple arose in grandeur, its ivory-tinted marbles beginning to turn a dull rose in the rays of the fast-lowering sun.

They descended on the other side and entered a labyrinth of narrow streets, winding in and out between rows of houses, most of them showing a plain, windowless front, the only decoration being over and around the door.

With a quick double-knock at one of these doors, the lawyer summoned a servant, who bowed deeply as the two ladies and his master entered.

Aurelius Lucanus lingered a moment, while his wife passed on into the atrium, but here, it was hot, so she went further, into a court, transformed into a beautiful garden. Around the fountain, which cooled the air, bloomed literally hundreds of calla lilies, masses of stately blossoms with snowy chalices and hearts of gold. Around the pillars twined the June roses, pink and yellow, and mixed with them were vines, of starry jessamine, shedding forth a faint, delicious odor, akin to that of orange-blossoms.

Here were chairs of rare woods inlaid with ivory, and couches, gracefully formed, covered with soft silks and cushions embroidered in gold.

Claudia sank down, as if she were weary, and a slave sprang forward to remove the white outer garment, worn upon the street to cover the costly silk one, and the jewels which she had worn in the amphitheatre.

Aurelius was conversing with the dark-skinned porter.

"Has Martius returned?" he asked.

"Yes, master. He came in about two hours after noon, but went out again almost immediately."

"Leaving no word?"

"No, master."

The porter stood watching his master as he walked away. There was a strange expression on his strongly marked face. He was pitted with small-pox, and over one eye was a deep scar. He had never forgotten how he got that scar, how he had fallen beneath a blow struck by that man's hand, the man who owned his body, but not his soul. In falling, he had struck his head against the corner of the marble pedestal supporting the statue of the god who ruled in this household, and had been carried away unconscious.

Ah, no, he had not forgotten!

Aurelius entered the court just in time to hear his wife saying To Virgilia in her severest tone: "Thou art exactly like thy step-brother, Martius, self-willed and foolish. Why else has he been exiled from Rome by thy father? He has worshipped strange gods, has followed after a man named Christus, a malefactor, a thief, crucified with thieves—"

"Mother!" exclaimed Virgilia, and there was that in her voice which stopped the stream of language, and made Claudia sit up straight and grasp the griffin-heads on the arms of her chair.

"Wilt tell me that thou, too, art mad over the dead Christus?" she shrieked. "Then art thou no daughter of mine! Thou shall go forth from here, homeless, an outcast. Join thyself with the beggarly band of men and women who hide in the dark places of the earth that they may work their spells—"

"Claudia, cease thy talking," exclaimed Aurelius, taking his daughter in his arms. "Canst thou not see that the child is fainting? She is ill. I saw it but now in the Circus. Hast thou no heart?"

"What, thou, too, Aurelius! Thou art but half a man, and worshipeth the gods only in form. Long have I suspected that Virgilia had been infected by this poisonous virus, this doctrine of a malefactor. Thy son taught it to her, thy son, Martius, who is, thanks to Jupiter, far away from here."

"Not so, dear mother," said a cheerful voice, "Martius has returned to his father's house, and to thee and Virgilia."

A tall youth, about nineteen years of age, full of manly vigor speaking in a rich voice, vibrant with feeling, sprang forward, knelt at Claudia's feet and kissed her hand, then he embraced his father and sister.

Claudia's expression relaxed. Had it not been for his absurd belief in the Jew, who seemed to have set the world mad, she could have loved this fine-looking young man, whose auburn curls fell over a white forehead, whose brown eyes gleamed with a mixture of earnestness and merriment. He was, indeed, a lovable youth.

"Hast thou come back cured, Martius? Then art thou indeed welcome."

"Cured of what, mother?"

"Of thy mistaken worship of Christus."

"No, mother," came the firm reply. Aurelius saw his son's face pale, saw him straighten up as though he expected a blow on those broad shoulders, saw his hand clench as if he were in pain. And Aurelius was sorrowful. He loved Martius for himself and for his mother, whom he resembled. The lawyer was also, only too well aware of the danger run by all those who called themselves followers of Christus. The worst had not yet come. There were only threats now against the members of this sect who were growing daily more numerous, and more menacing to the priests and the pagan religion. No one could tell what might happen by to-morrow, the storm would break suddenly.

He knew Claudia and her blind bigotry. She would not hesitate to sacrifice Martius if she thought that her soul's salvation depended on it; Claudia's soul was her chief thought. But would she sacrifice her own daughter, if her religion should prove to be the same as that of her brother?

The sister had slipped her hand into that of Martius. She stood beside him shoulder to shoulder. Virgilia was unusually tall. She had inherited the fine, cameo-like profile of her mother, but her hair was fair and very abundant. It was bound around her head in heavy braids and was not decorated by any jewel. Her white draperies had fallen from her arm, disclosing its pure whiteness and delicate outline.

Virgilia looked straight at her mother and spoke, breaking sharply the silence following the two words of Martius. The sun had now set. It was almost dark in the garden. The lilies gleamed ghostly white among their long green leaves. The odor of the jessamine was heavy on the evening air, overpowering in its sweetness. A servant entered and lighted torches in iron rings fastened on the fluted pillows. He lit, also, the wicks in huge bronze lamps placed here and there, and in a three-tapered silver lamp on a table by Claudia's side.

The soft radiance lit up the strange scene, the Roman matron, seated in her chair, jewels gleaming in her dark hair and on her bosom, her face set and stern. It shone upon the young Virgilia and Martius, standing before her, and upon the heavier figure of the lawyer, Aurelius Lucanus, just behind them.

Then Virgilia spoke, and her voice was as clear as the sun-down bell which had just rung out its warning from Caesar's Hill.

"I, too, am a Christian."

With a sharp outcry, Claudia, dragging her white draperies on the ground, disappeared in her small room, opening by a long window from the gallery bordering on the garden. She was seen no more that night. Silently, the lawyer and his son and daughter ate their evening meal, reclining on the triclinium in the long room tinted in Pompeian red, a frieze three feet in width ran around the walls. Small, chubby cherubs, or cupids doing the work of men, weaving draperies, preparing food, chopping meat, plucking grapes and carrying them away in miniature wheelbarrows, were faithfully portrayed in rich colors. Some of these frescoes, tints as vivid as when they were laid on by the artists of twenty centuries ago, remain to this day on the walls of ancient Roman dwellings, and enable us to know how people lived in those far-off times.

A servant, assisted by the porter, Alyrus, brought the food in on huge trays, roast kid and vegetables, green salad fresh from the market in the Forum Boarium, dressed with oil from the groves of Lucca and vinegar made of sour red wine. Then came a delicious pudding, made from honey brought from Hymetus in Greece to add luxury to the food of the already too luxurious Romans, and fruit strawberries, dipped in fine sugar and sprinkled with lemon.

Virgilia ate little; the main portions of the food she sent away untouched. The salad and fruit were more to her liking. She was very pale. The scene in the Circus, followed by the sudden confession of her faith, had taxed her strength. This, her anxiety for her mother and the unusual heat of the evening caused her to feel faint, so that she excused herself and went away, climbing a narrow staircase to the flat, tiled roof. Here were many plants, blossoming vines and the gurgling of cool water, as it passed through the mouth of a hideous gorgan mask and fell into a basin where soft green mosses clung and ferns waved their feathery fronds.

Seating herself on a granite bench, supported by two carved lions, Virgilia fell into deep thought. It was the everlasting problem, old as human life. Ought she to obey her mother, or God? To do the former, meant to stifle her conscience and destroy her inner life. Worship the gods she could not since this new, this pure love for the meek and lovely Jesus had entered into her very being.

She clasped and unclasped her slender white hands in her agitation. What should she do? If God would only show her where duty lay.

Glorified in the silvery whiteness of the moonlight, arose the splendid palaces of the Caesars. Virgilia could see them plainly if she lifted her eyes, for they stood high, on the Palatine Hill. There was revelry yonder. The notes of flutes and harps came faintly to her ears. Below, wound the Tiber, back and forth, like the coils of a huge, glistening serpent. Many boating parties were enjoying the river and its coolness, while the moon rode high in the heavens and shone upon the sheeny garments and fair faces of the women.

Up the river, from the port of Ostia, came a big merchant vessel bringing from Constantinople and Egypt, carpets and costly stuffs, richly wrought in gold, filmy tissue and rare embroideries for Roman ladies and papyrus volumes for the learned Senators.

Far out on the Campagna, Virgilia knew that the Christians were gathering to-night, coming from all parts of the city. Some were freedmen and others were slaves; among the figures gliding out on the cobble-stoned Appian Way were members of Caesar's household, and one or two tall Praetorian guards. The religion of Christ had found converts among all classes. Rome was full of Christians,

many of whom feared to openly confess their faith, though later, they dared to do so, even in the face of a cruel death.

Virgilia was so intent on her thoughts that she did not observe the cat-like approach of her mother's personal slave, the daughter of Alyrus, the porter. She and her father had been brought to Rome as prisoners of war after a victorious conquest by the Romans in North Africa. They were by descent, Moors, having dark skins but very regular, even classical features. Sahira, the slave, walked like a queen and was so proud that she would not mingle with the other servants. Her father, Alyrus, chief of hundreds in the desert-land of his own country, was but a door-keeper in the house of Aurelius Lucanus, and he was, very bitter in spirit.

"Your mother has need of you," said Sahira, in her velvet voice. "I think that the Lady Claudia is very ill."

"I will come at once."

The Lady Claudia was indeed very ill and continued so for several weeks. The summer waxed and waned. The cool winds of September blew strongly from the West and the calla lilies and jessamine had long since withered in the garden before Claudia was able once again to sit in the chair under the late tea-rose vines and listen to the rippling water of the fountain.

The old, proud Claudia seemed to have disappeared and in her place was a feeble woman, with trembling hands, whose glance followed every move her daughter made, who seemed to be happy only when Virgilia was near. She ignored the ministrations of the slave Sahira, whose heart warmed to only one person except her father, and that was her beautiful mistress. Sahira cast angry looks at Virgilia's fair head, bending over her embroidery while she talked cheerfully to her mother. The slave went away and cried, for she was of a deep, passionate nature, loving few and ready to lay down her life for those whom she adored.

Alyrus, her father, found her crying one night in her tiny room in the section of the house assigned to the servants. He succeeded in finding out the thing that caused her sorrow. When he went away there was a resolution formed in his soul which boded ill to Virgilia. He would bide his time — and then —

The young Christian wondered often whether her mother had forgotten that scene on the day she was taken so ill, had forgotten that she, as well as Martius, was one of the despised sect. Up to the present, Virgilia had never refused to twine the garlands to be laid on the altars of the household gods or at the feet of the special god which Claudia worshipped in her own room. She had not refused because she felt that it would agitate her mother too much, and the man who came from the School of Esculapsius on the Island in the Tiber where the Temple was, had warned them against exciting the invalid. It might cause her death, he said.

Virgilia knew, however, that the time must come soon when, if she was loyal to her faith, she must refuse to offer outward homage to the pagan gods.

In spite of her belief in Christ and her desire to serve him, her heart grew cold within her and her limbs trembled at the thought of that dread time, for she was very delicate and her mother's will was strong. How could she defy her mother? It was an awful crime in pagan Rome to refuse to offer libations and flowers before the shrines of the family gods, a crime punishable by death.

Had she strength to stand firm?

II.

THE "LITTLE FISH."

In the meantime, Martius was still under the roof of his father's house. It looked now as if he would be allowed to stay there, for his step-mother's illness and the quiet condition of her mind during her convalescence, gave rise to the hope that when completely recovered, she would be no longer so intolerant and would permit the religious differences to be forgotten.

Aurelius Lucanus was a broad-minded man. In his business as a lawyer and pleader of cases in the Law Courts of the Forum, he had come into personal contact with several of the Christians, finding them to be men and women of the strictest rectitude and following stern moral codes, such as were notably unobserved by the Roman of that day.

One of his clients was a widow, Octavia, wife of Aureus Cantus, the Senator, a woman of rare mental gifts and a personality which was at once gracious and commanding. She had two children, a boy and girl, a little older than Martius and Virgilia, and the lawyer, while saying nothing, had noticed that his son was not averse to lingering in the office when the sweet Hermione came with her mother to consult him on some subjects dealing with her husband's will and the large property interests now coming under the widow's control.

Octavia did not live in the handsome house formerly occupied when her husband was living on the same street where Aurelius Lucanus dwelt, preferring to leave it in charge of her freedman and his wife, who had served her family for many years. She occupied a villa about two miles from the city gates, where there were immense vineyards, festooned between mulberry trees. The vines were now hung with great purple clusters of grapes, promises of luscious fruits a little later, when the time of the Vendemmia should come in

October. Then, there would be feasting and merriment among the servants, but no dancing or drinking, as was the custom on other grape plantations, so numerous on the broad Campagna around Rome.

Before Martius had been sent away from home, by his step-mother's orders, in the main hope that the poison of Christian belief would be drawn from his mind, he had been a student in his father's office, going with him daily at nine o'clock and returning at two for the family dinner. Now, he resumed his studies for the legal profession, and once more walked proudly by his father's side through the crowded passageways of the city and the broad, handsome streets of the Forum. Martius was a little taller than his father.

Aurelius Lucanus was, like many another pagan, no great believer in the gods, although, partly from regard to prevailing sentiment, partly because of his business relations, he outwardly gave attention to the formal customs of the day.

This morning, as father and son entered the Forum, passing by the great statue of Jupiter standing in front of the temple dedicated to his worship, Aurelius bowed profoundly, and muttered a prayer, but Martius, his proud young head held high, passed by, without making his obeisance.

The two were followed, as usual, by a servant, who happened this morning to be Alyrus, the Moor. He closely observed Martius and a faint smile or sneer added to the ugliness of his disfigured face. Alyrus had a fine face, so far as form and feature went, but his expression was full of cunning and revenge. In his ears he wore two huge gold rings, chased in cabalistic characters of strange design. They were the emblem of his chieftain power in that land bordering on the desert, from which he had been so rudely carried away. It was not strange that Alyrus, a barbarian, should bear in his heart a bitter hatred for the Romans and all that belonged to them. A slave, he was, and Sahira, too, but they loathed their bonds. It did not occur to Alyrus to be grateful that when they were placed on a platform down yonder at the lower end of the Forum, to be sold to the highest bidder, Aurelius Lucanus, who had bought him first, being moved by pity, had also purchased Sahira, his daughter, paying for her many sesterces of gold, because she was very beautiful and