

CHAPTER II

THE VOICE OF A GOD

Of all the civilisations whose records lie open to the student, that of Rome is surely one of the most wonderful. Nowhere, not even in old Mexico, was high culture so completely wedded to the lowest barbarism. Intellect Rome had in plenty; the noblest efforts of her genius are scarcely to be surpassed; her law is the foundation of the best of our codes of jurisprudence; art she borrowed but appreciated; her military system is still the wonder of the world; her great men remain great among a multitude of subsequent competitors. And yet how pitiless she was! What a tigress! Amid all the ruins of her cities we find none of a hospital, none, I believe, of an orphan school in an age that made many orphans. The pious aspirations and efforts of individuals seem never to have touched the conscience of the people. Rome incarnate had no conscience; she was a lustful, devouring beast, made more bestial by her intelligence and splendour.

King Agrippa in practice was a Roman. Rome was his model, her ideals were his ideals. Therefore he built amphitheatres in which men were butchered, to the exquisite delight of vast audiences. Therefore, also, without the excuse of any conscientious motive, however insufficient or unsatisfactory, he persecuted the weak because they were weak and their sufferings would give pleasure to the strong or to those who chanced to be the majority of the moment.

The season being hot it was arranged that the great games in honour of the safety of Cæsar, should open each day at dawn and come to an end an hour before noon. Therefore from midnight onwards crowds of spectators poured into the amphitheatre, which, although it would seat over twenty thousand, was not large enough to contain them all. An hour before the dawn the place was full, and already late comers were turned back from its gates. The only empty spaces were those reserved for the king, his royal guests, the rulers of the city, with other distinguished personages, and for the Christian company of old men, women and children destined to the lions, who, it was arranged, were to sit in full view of the audience until the time came for them to take their share in the spectacle.

When Rachel joined the other captives she found that a long rough table had been set beneath the arcades, and on it at intervals, pieces of bread and cups and vases containing wine of the country that had been purchased at a great price from the guards. Round this table the elders or the infirm among the company were seated on a bench, while the rest of the number, for whom there was not room, stood behind them. At its head was an old man, a bishop among the Christians, one of the five hundred who had seen the risen Lord and received baptism from the hands of the Beloved Disciple. For some years he had been spared by the persecutors of the infant Church on account of his age, dignity, and good repute, but now at last fate seemed to have overtaken him.

The service was held; the bread and wine, mixed with water, were consecrated with the same texts by which they are blessed to-day, only the prayers were extempore. When all had eaten from the platters and drunk from the rude cups, the bishop gave his blessing to the community. Then he addressed them. This, he told them, was an occasion of peculiar joy, a love-feast indeed, since all they who partook of it were about to lay down the burden of the flesh and, their labours and sorrows ended, to depart into bliss eternal. He called to their memory the supper of the Passover which had taken place within the lifetime of many of them, when the Author and Finisher of their faith had declared to the disciples that He would drink no more wine till He drank it new with them in His kingdom. Such a feast it was that lay spread before them this night. Let them be thankful for it. Let them not quail in the hour of trial. The fangs of the savage beasts, the shouts of the still more savage spectators, the agony of the quivering flesh, the last terror of their departing, what were these? Soon, very soon, they would be done; the spears of the soldiers would despatch the injured, and those among them whom it was ordained should escape, would be set free by the command of the representative of Cæsar, that they might prosecute the work till the hour came for them to pass on the torch of redemption to other hands. Let them rejoice, therefore, and be very thankful, and walk to the sacrifice as to a wedding feast. "Do you not rejoice, my brethren?" he asked. With one voice they answered, "We rejoice!" Yes, even the children answered thus.

Then they prayed again, and again with uplifted hands the old man

blessed them in the holy Triune Name.

Scarcely had this service, as solemn as it was simple, been brought to an end when the head jailer, whose blasphemous jocosity since his reproof by Anna was replaced by a mien of sullen venom, came forward and commanded the whole band to march to the amphitheatre. Accordingly, two by two, the bishop leading the way with the sainted woman Anna, they walked to the gates. Here a guard of soldiers was waiting to receive them, and under their escort they threaded the narrow, darkling streets till they came to that door of the amphitheatre which was used by those who were to take part in the games. Now, at a word from the bishop, they began to chant a solemn hymn, and singing thus, were thrust along the passages to the place prepared for them. This was not, as they expected, a prison at the back of the amphitheatre, but, as has been said, a spot between the enclosing wall and the podium, raised a little above the level of the arena. Here, on the eastern side of the building, they were to sit till their turn came to be driven by the guards through a little wicket-gate into the arena, where the starving beasts of prey would be loosed upon them.

It was now the hour before sunrise, and the moon having set, the vast theatre was plunged in gloom, relieved only here and there by stray torches and cressets of fire burning upon either side of the gorgeous, but as yet unoccupied, throne of Agrippa. This gloom seemed to oppress the audience with which the place was crowded; at any rate none of them shouted or sang, or even spoke loudly. They addressed each other

in muffled tones, with the result that the air seemed to be full of mysterious whisperings. Had this poor band of condemned Christians entered the theatre in daylight, they would have been greeted with ironical cries and tauntings of "Dogs' meat!" and with requests that they should work a miracle and let the people see them rise again from the bellies of the lions. But now, as their solemn song broke upon the silence, it was answered only by one great murmur, which seemed to shape itself to the words, "the Christians! The doomed Christians!"

By the light of a single torch the band took their places. Then once more they sang, and in that chastening hour the audience listened with attention, almost with respect. Their chant finished, the bishop stood up, and, moved thereto by some inspiration, began to address the mighty throng, whom he could not see, and who could not see him. Strangely enough they hearkened to him, perhaps because his speech served to while away the weary time of waiting.

"Men and brethren," he began, in his thin, piercing notes, "princes, lords, peoples, Romans, Jews, Syrians, Greeks, citizens of Idumæa, of Egypt, and of all nations here gathered, hearken to the words of an old man destined and glad to die. Listen, if it be your pleasure, to the story of One whom some of you saw crucified under Pontius Pilate, since to know the truth of that matter can at least do you no hurt."

"Be silent!" cried a voice, that of the renegade jailer, "and cease preaching your accursed faith!"

"Let him alone," answered other voices. "We will hear this story of his. We say--let him alone."

Thus encouraged the old man spoke on with an eloquence so simple and yet so touching, with a wisdom so deep, that for full fifteen minutes none cared even to interrupt him. Then a far-away listener cried:

"Why must these people die who are better than we?"

"Friend," answered the bishop, in ringing tones, which in that heavy silence seemed to search out even the recesses of the great and crowded place, "we must die because it is the will of King Agrippa, to whom God has given power to destroy us. Mourn not for us because we perish cruelly, since this is the day of our true birth, but mourn for King Agrippa, at whose hands our blood will be required, and mourn, mourn for yourselves, O people. The death that is near to us perchance is nearer still to some of you; and how will you awaken who perish in your sins? What if the sword of God should empty yonder throne? What if the voice of God should call on him who fills it to make answer of his deeds? Soon or late, O people, it will call on him and you to pass hence, some naturally in your age, others by the sharp and dreadful roads of sword, pestilence or famine. Already those woes which He whom you crucified foretold, knock at your door, and within a few short years not one of you who crowd this place in thousands will draw the breath of life. Nothing will remain of you on earth save the fruit of those deeds which

you have done--these and your bones, no more. Repent you, therefore, repent while there is time; for I, whom you have doomed, I am bidden to declare that judgment is at hand. Yes, even now, although you see him not, the Angel of the Lord hangs over you and writes your names within his book. Now while there is time I would pray for you and for your king. Farewell."

As he spoke those words "the Angel of the Lord hangs over you," so great was the preacher's power, and in that weary darkness so sharply had he touched the imagination of his strange audience, that with a sound like to the stir of rustling trees, thousands of faces were turned upwards, as though in search of that dread messenger.

"Look, look!" screamed a hundred voices, while dim arms pointed to some noiseless thing that floated high above them against the background of the sky, which grew grey with the coming dawn. It appeared and disappeared, appeared again, then seemed to pass downward in the direction of Agrippa's throne, and vanished.

"It is that magician's angel," cried one, and the multitudes groaned.

"Fool," said another, "it was but a bird."

"Then for Agrippa's sake," shrilled a new voice, "the gods send that it was not an owl."

Thereat some laughed, but the most were silent. They knew the story of King Agrippa and the owl, and how it had been foretold that this spirit in the form of a bird would appear to him again in the hour of his death, as it had appeared to him in the hour of his triumph.[*]

[*] See Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," Book XVII., Chap. VI., Sec. 7; and Book XIX., Chap. VIII., Sec. 2.

Just then from the palace to the north arose a sound of the blare of trumpets. Now a herald, speaking on the summit of the great eastern tower, called out that it was dawn above the mountains, and that King Agrippa came with all his company, whereon the preaching of the old Christian and his tale of a watching Vengeance were instantly forgotten. Presently the glad, fierce notes of the trumpets drew nearer, and in the grey of the daybreak, through the great bronze gates of the Triumphal Way that were thrown open to greet him, advanced Agrippa, wonderfully attired and preceded by his legionaries. At his right walked Vibius Marsus, the Roman President of Syria, and on his left Antiochus, King of Commagena, while after him followed other kings, princes, and great men of his own and foreign lands.

Agrippa mounted his golden throne while the multitude roared a welcome, and his company were seated around and behind him according to their degree.

Once more the trumpets sounded, and the gladiators of different arms,

headed by the equites who fought on horseback, numbering in all more than five hundred men, were formed up in the arena for the preliminary march past--the salutation of those about to die to their emperor and lord. Now, that they also might take their part in the spectacle, the band of Christian martyrs were thrust through the door in the podium, and to make them seem as many as possible in number, marshalled two by two.

Then the march past began. Troop by troop, arrayed in their shining armour and armed, each of them, with his own familiar weapon, the gladiators halted in front of Agrippa's throne, giving to him the accustomed salutation of "Hail, King, we who are about to die, salute thee," to be rewarded with a royal smile and the shouts of the approving audience. Last of all came the Christians, a motley, wretched-looking group, made up of old men, terrified children clinging to their mothers, and ill-clad, dishevelled women. At the pitiful sight, that very mob which a few short minutes before had hung upon the words of the bishop, their leader, now, as they watched them hobbling round the arena in the clear, low light of the dawning, burst into peals of laughter and called out that each of them should be made to lead his lion. Quite heedless of these scoffs and taunts, they trudged on through the white sand that soon would be so red, until they came opposite to the throne.

"Salute!" roared the audience.

The bishop held up his hand and all were silent. Then, in the thin voice

with which they had become familiar, he said:

"King, we who are about to die--forgive thee. May God do likewise."

Now the multitude ceased laughing, and with an impatient gesture, Agrippa motioned to the martyrs to pass on. This they did humbly; but Anna, being old, lame and weary, could not walk so fast as her companions. Alone she reached the saluting-place after all had left it, and halted there.

"Forward!" cried the officers. But she did not move nor did she speak. Only leaning on her staff she looked steadily up at the face of the king Agrippa. Some impulse seemed to draw his eyes to hers. They met, and it was noted that he turned pale. Then straightening herself with difficulty upon her tottering feet, Anna raised her staff and pointed with it to the golden canopy above the head of Herod. All stared upward, but saw nothing, for the canopy was still in the shadow of the velarium which covered all the outer edge of the cavea, leaving the centre open to the sky. It would appear, however, that Agrippa did see something, for he who had risen to declare the games open, suddenly sank back upon his throne, and remained thus lost in thought. Then Anna limped forward to join her company, who once more were driven through the little gate in the wall of the arena.

For a second time, with an effort, Agrippa lifted himself from his throne. As he rose the first level rays of sunrise struck full upon him.

He was a tall and noble-looking man, and his dress was glorious. To the thousands who gazed upon him from the shadow, set in that point of burning light he seemed to be clothed in a garment of glittering silver. Silver was his crown, silver his vest, silver the wide robe that flowed from his shoulders to the ground.

"In the name of Cæsar, to the glory of Cæsar, I declare these games open!" he cried.

Then, as though moved by a sudden impulse, all the multitude rose shouting: "The voice of a god! The voice of a god! The voice of the god Agrippa!"

Nor did Agrippa say them nay; the glory of such worship thundered at him from twenty thousand throats made him drunken. There for a while he stood, the new-born sunlight playing upon his splendid form, while the multitude roared his name, proclaiming it divine. His nostrils spread to inhale this incense of adoration, his eyes flashed and slowly he waved his arms, as though in benediction of his worshippers. Perchance there rose before his mind a vision of the wondrous event whereby he, the scorned and penniless outcast, had been lifted to this giddy pinnacle of power. Perchance for a moment he believed that he was indeed divine, that nothing less than the blood and right of godhead could thus have exalted him. At least he stood there, denying naught, while the people adored him as Jehovah is adored of the Jews and Christ is adored of the Christians.

Then of a sudden smote the Angel of the Lord. Of a sudden intolerable pain seized upon his vitals, and Herod remembered that he was but mortal flesh, and knew that death was near.

"Alas!" he cried, "I am no god, but a man, and even now the common fate of man is on me."

As he spoke a great white owl slid from the roof of the canopy above him and vanished through the unroofed centre of the cavea.

"Look! look! my people!" he cried again, "the spirit that brought me good fortune leaves me now, and I die, my people, I die!" Then, sinking upon his throne, he who a moment gone had received the worship of a god, writhed there in agony and wept. Yes, Herod wept.

Attendants ran to him and lifted him in their arms.

"Take me hence to die," he moaned. Now a herald cried:

"The king is smitten with a sore sickness, and the games are closed. To your homes, O people."

For a while the multitude sat silent, for they were fear-stricken. Then a murmur rose among them that spread and swelled till it became a roar.

"The Christians! The Christians! They prophesied the evil. They have bewitched the king. They are wizards. Kill them, kill them, kill them!"

Instantly, like waves pouring in from every side, hundreds and thousands of men began to flow towards that place where the martyrs sat. The walls and palisades were high. Sweeping aside the guards, they surged against them like water against a rock; but climb they could not. Those in front began to scream, those behind pressed on. Some fell and were trodden underfoot, others clambered upon their bodies, in turn to fall and be trodden underfoot.

"Our death is upon us!" cried one of the Nazarenes.

"Nay, life remains to us," answered Nehushta. "Follow me, all of you, for I know the road," and, seizing Rachel about the middle, she began to drag her towards a little door. It was unlocked and guarded by one man only, the apostate jailer Rufus.

"Stand back!" he cried, lifting his spear.

Nehushta made no answer, only drawing a dagger from her robe, she fell upon the ground, then of a sudden rose again beneath his guard. The knife flashed and went home to the hilt. Down fell the man screaming for help and mercy, and there, in the narrow way, his spirit was stamped out of him. Beyond lay the broad passage of the vomitorium. They gained it, and in an instant were mixed with the thousands who sought to escape the

panic. Some perished, some were swept onwards, among them Nehushta and Rachel. Thrice they nearly fell, but the fierce strength of the Libyan saved her mistress, till at length they found themselves on the broad terrace facing the seashore.

"Whither now?" gasped Rachel.

"Where shall I lead you?" answered Nehushta. "Do not stay. Be swift."

"But the others?" said Rachel, glancing back at the fighting, trampling, yelling mob.

"God guard them! We cannot."

"Leave me," moaned her mistress. "Save yourself, Nou; I am spent," and she sank down to her knees.

"But I am still strong," muttered Nehushta, and lifting the swooning woman in her sinewy arms, she fled on towards the port, crying, "Way, way for my lady, the noble Roman, who has swooned!"

And the multitude made way.