

The Life of St. Philomena, Virgin and Martyr

Adapted from the *Life of St. Philomena*
by Apostate William Thomas Walsh¹

¹ Even though William Thomas Walsh is an apostate, what he teaches about St. Philomena in this censored version is true. We have censored his original version which contains errors against the Faith.



O God, who dost sustain us by the merits and example
of Blessed Philomena, Virgin and Martyr,
mercifully grant that, strengthened in faith and charity,
we may never be separated from Thee by any temptation.
Through the merits of Jesus Christ,
Thy Son, our Lord.
Amen.

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SAINT PHILOMENA was born of noble parents at Nicopolis in Macedonia in 289 A.D. Her father was Calistos, Governor of the province. He and his wife were originally pagans but on the day of their daughter's baptism they were baptized also.

In baptism the child received the name of Philomena, the Well-Beloved, or Daughter of Light. When the aged priest poured the saving water on the child's head, the Spirit of God descended on him, and he prophesied like Zacharias of old concerning the future of the one just regenerated in the water and the Holy Ghost. He could not refrain from adopting the words of Holy Writ, "All generations shall call me blessed," to Philomena, and, turning to her mother, a cloud of sadness swept over his face when he said, "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce." But she understood not the meaning of these words.

Years passed in happiness and peace for the parents. The child grew in wisdom and virtue, and they marveled at the glorious workings of grace in the little maiden's soul. She was quite unlike other children and her conversation was rooted in heaven. She showed a supernatural knowledge of the mysteries of faith. The sacred books were to her as a garden from which she culled the choicest flowers. She would often perplex her instructors with her questions concerning heavenly things. But an aged servant of the house, a saintly woman who had gone through the crucible of severe trials for the faith and who was well grounded in it, proved herself a wise teacher and faithful guardian of the child. Macrina was especially solicitous to instill into the girl's soul a firm faith in and a tender love for our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. This was the fountain from which she herself had drawn the courage and strength to persevere in the practice of the most heroic virtue. And when after years of patient instruction and fervent prayer, she noticed that her pupil was well grounded in the knowledge of and devotion to this Mystery of Love, and had been rewarded in return with a desire of consecrating her virginity to God, the good soul wept for joy. This vow Philomena was permitted to make soon after her first Communion, and with her heart inflamed with an ardent love of God, her life one of innocence and purity, she longed for the palm of martyrdom. To shed her blood for Christ, to die for Him who had died for her, was her sole desire. She was well versed in the legends of the Christian virgins who had gained a martyr's crown in the persecutions of bygone years, and her soul was inflamed especially by the example of Agnes, whose triumph achieved not very long ago, was still the theme of praise and admiration in Christian circles.

One warm summer's night, whilst contemplating the stars and elevating her heart to the bliss beyond them, she was overcome by slumber. In the prophetic dream which was vouchsafed her, she saw a countless number of virgins clad in white robes, with palms in their hands, and heard them sing a hymn which filled her soul with exquisite melody. One of the virgins bent over her, and she recognized dear Saint Agnes, who beckoned her to approach nearer and to follow that radiant company. But she was unable to do so, because between them and her lay the sea, and a furious dragon prevented her from joining the procession.

Next morning, when she told Macrina her dream, the trusty servant smiled, took the roll of Holy Writ from its place and read to her: "After this I saw a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and tribes, and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne, and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. And they cried with a loud voice, saying: Salvation to our God who sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb. And all the

angels stood round about the throne, and the angels, and the four living creatures; and they fell down before the throne upon their faces, and adored God, saying: Amen. Benediction, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, honor, and power, and strength to our God forever and ever, Amen. And one of the ancients answered, and said to me: These that are clothed in white robes, who are they? and whence came they? And I said to him: My Lord, thou knowest. And he said to me: These are they who come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell over them; they shall no more hunger nor thirst, neither shall the sun fall on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall rule them, and shall lead them to the fountains of the waters of life, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”²

“My dear Philomena,” she continued, “in the procession thou sawest the holy martyrs, and the one that beckoned to thee was Saint Agnes. Mayst thou happily cross the sea of tribulation, and gain the victory over the dragon.”

Marcellinus, the holy Pope, occupied the chair of St. Peter in Rome. It was the year 302 of the Christian era. The Roman empire was under the sway of Diocletian, whose name will be synonymous with cruelty to the end of time. Instigated by his son-in-law, Galerius, he inaugurated the most cruel persecution which had so far befallen the Christians. Whilst Diocletian and Maximinian attempted to annihilate the Christians in the West, Galerius devastated the East with still greater fury. He caused thousands of Christians to be murdered, and seemed determined to exhaust every means of cruelty in order to attain his end. Neither place nor time, nor age nor sex, were sacred to him. A contemporary writes: “If I had a hundred tongues I should not be able to describe the atrocities and cruelties perpetrated against the Christians by Galerius.”

All Asia Minor was filled with consternation at the news of the furious persecutions. The emissaries of the tyrant found their way into the remotest villages and smallest hamlets in the execution of the emperor’s commandments. Nicopolis did not escape the universal storm. The Christian community there was small, but its members were well known, the more so because Calistos, the chief Christian, occupied so eminent a position. His territory, it is true, did not belong to the Roman empire, but Galerius soon found a pretext for sending his troops there. In this strait Calistos assembled his council and, after due deliberation, it was deemed best that he should go to Rome and place his government under the protection of Diocletian, the chief emperor. At all events it seemed easier to obtain justice of him than of fickle Galerius.

Preparations for the journey were made at once. Eutropia, the Governor’s wife, insisted on accompanying him and, as they could not think of parting with their dear child Philomena, now thirteen years of age, they took her along. The voyage was safely accomplished and they reached Rome in the beginning of the Seventh Month. Calistos immediately took steps to secure an audience with the emperor and, with the help of various presents to the officers of the imperial household, he succeeded. A day was set when the emperor would receive him.

Ever since Diocletian had proclaimed himself the “lord over life and death,” an audience with the emperor was a great risk: it might cost a person’s life. He was the supreme master of his

² Apoc. 8:7-19.

subjects' life and death. His throne was continually surrounded by a guard of praetorians and lictors, armed with their fasces and axes, watching for a sign from their master to put them to immediate use. As with his predecessors, love of power had become a mania with Diocletian. He thought himself a god and exacted divine honors and worship from the slavish creatures about his throne. About this time, this mania had developed, in consequence of circumstances attending the martyrdom of St. Vitus and others, into a blind fury suggestive of demoniac obsession, and it is a well-known fact that his son died actually possessed by a devil. Conscience upbraided the tyrant, and nocturnal visions disturbed his sleep. The victims of his tyranny appeared to him in his dreams, and thereby he was driven to such a frenzy that he ordered the murder of his best friends.

It is obvious that under these circumstances Calistos had reason to tremble at the thought of the audience. But when he was admitted, together with his wife and child, into the emperor's presence, Diocletian was exceptionally in good humor. To impress the strangers with his greatness and supreme dignity, he received them in his throne hall costumed as the false god Jupiter and bearing the attributes of that false deity. His predecessors, Caligula and Heliogabalus, also had loved to play with these symbols of power. He was surrounded by the dignitaries of the empire and by the lictors.

As Calistos, Eutropia his wife, and their child, Philomena, entered the hall, a suppressed murmur escaped those present, called for by the appearance of the child. Just budding from childhood into womanhood, the maiden was of dazzling beauty. She glided into the hall, clad in a beautiful white garment, and impressing all present with her virginal purity and nobility of soul, as well as with her personal beauty. The emperor also felt the influence of her presence and, with friendly mien, invited the strangers to approach, inquiring for the cause of their coming.

Calistos respectfully stated his case, and the emperor listened composedly. But when in the course of his statement the Governor confessed that he was a Christian, Diocletian's features underwent an ominous change. Nevertheless he suffered him to conclude his address, meanwhile intently regarding Philomena. The virgin could not but feel an indefinable dread at his looks, and a glow of color rose to her face whilst her eyes modestly sought the floor. When Calistos had finished, Diocletian cast a knowing glance at his courtiers and said:

“Hark, Calistos! It was quite superfluous to be so profuse in thy statement. The proposition embodied in it is simply as follows: Thou fearest that our co-emperor, Galerius, to whom we have entrusted the eastern empire, is about to take the city Nicopolis and to transfer from thy full coffers the wealth which he so sorely needs. This fear is well founded, for I cannot but admire my son-in-law's cunning, and only wonder that thou wast so long in discovering this fact. There is not the slightest reason for accusing us of injustice in this proceeding, for we are the lords of the Roman empire, and consequently of the world. Thy possessions in comparison with ours, are like a grain of sand compared with the ocean. What can the sand-grain do against the power of the waves? Its absorption is a law of nature: the right of might. True, thou art entitled to resistance and canst array thy army against us; but what can a mouse do against a lion? And as thou with all thy army art but like a mouse in comparison with Galerius and his hosts, it is but just that he annihilate thee.” And turning to his courtiers he inquired: “Am I not right?”

“Well said, imperial lord!” was the unanimous response. “Thou speakest like a hero, like a god.”

Calistos stood trembling with indignation at such mean treatment, but conscious of his inability to retaliate, he invoked God’s help secretly in his heart. Diocletian continued:

“This is one view of the matter. But there is an aggravating circumstance: thou dost profess the faith of the Nazarene. Thou art a Christian, Calistos, art thou not?”

“Yes, I am a Christian!” Calistos courageously replied.

“And thy wife, is she also Christian?”

“I am!” modestly answered Eutropia.

“And thou, little one,” the emperor said to Philomena, “art thou, too, infected with the poison? Dost thou adore the Nazarene?”

All eyes were intent on the maiden when she solemnly replied: “Yes, I adore Him whom thou callest the ‘Nazarene.’ I was consecrated to Him from my birth, and shall belong to Him who is my God and Saviour in time and eternity.”

A murmur of dissent swept through the hall. Diocletian’s features darkened as he said:

“You have all heard it: they are Christians, adherents of that damnable sect against which we have published our edicts and which we are resolved to annihilate. Hence Galerius has not only the power, but it is his duty to trample in the dust this lot of conspirators. This being the case, I cannot understand, Calistos, how thou couldst dare to approach my throne and invoke my aid against my son-in-law Galerius. Thou remindest me of the man who to escape the claws of the tiger took refuge in the jaws of the lion. Well done, indeed! Ha, ha, ha!”

The courtiers dutifully joined in their master’s mirth.

Calistos felt his courage ebbing away. He clearly saw the impending danger and shuddered. He resolved to have recourse to a last means—to appeal to the emperor’s vanity. He said:

“True enough. I was well aware that I was about to enter the lion’s den when I resolved to appeal to thee. Thou wast pleased to compare thyself to a lion, and one of the foremost traits of the animal is magnanimity; whilst it is ever ready to engage in combat it disdains to swallow a mouse. Thus it is also unworthy of thy prowess to send the legions that subdued the nations of the earth and carried the renown of thy name beyond the seas to conquer a city which is unable to resist them. Let robbers do this, but let not the glorious page of history which contains the record of thy deeds be defiled by such an undertaking.”

“Thou speakest well,” replied Diocletian, “thy comparison is good. It shall be as thou wishest: the lion disdains to swallow the mouse. Thou shalt announce our generosity to thy whole people.

I shall induce my son-in-law to spare thee and thine! I take thee under my protection, and during thy sojourn in Rome thou art my guest.”

“Accept my most sincere thanks,” answered Calistos, greatly relieved that his little stratagem had succeeded. “I am thy servant,” he continued, falling at the emperor’s feet. But he told him to rise and said:

“To prove thy gratitude for the great favor I bestowed on thee, we hope thou will grant us the wish we are about to express, and which, moreover, will redound to thy great honor.”

“Ask what thou wilt, most gracious lord! If it is in my power to grant it, I shall do so.”

“Well said. I take thee at thy word. I ask thee for the hand of thy daughter.”

An ominous silence followed these words. The courtiers looked dubiously at each other, and Calistos was so overwhelmed that he was unable to speak.

“Why dost thou not answer? I think such an offer should render thee extremely happy.” remarked Diocletian.

“True, thou dost overwhelm me with honor; such an offer exceeds my most sanguine expectations. But pardon me if I remark that thy imperial majesty was pleased to jest,” answered Calistos.

“To jest? By no means! I was pleased with thy daughter, for nowhere have I found beauty comparable to hers. I love her, and shall not rest till she is mine.”

“Ineffable honor, most gracious lord! How shall we ever be able to thank thee for such condescension?”

“Do not speak of condescension. I love her, and that is sufficient. Am I not at liberty to choose my wives wherever I wish? Am I not the lord of the world? I choose thy daughter. She shall share my throne and thou, instead of being a petty prince in a semi-barbarous country, shalt be amongst the first in my empire. This is my imperial will; thus have I decreed and thus shall it be. The offer is an acceptable one, is it not?”

“If thou art really in earnest, my lord, we prostrate ourselves before thee, and filled with gratitude kiss thy hands.”

“That is unnecessary. Thy consent is sufficient. Of course, thy wife is of the same mind?”

“I agree with whatever my lord Calistos says and does. And, moreover, how could a mother refuse so great an honor for her child?”

“Well said. Now, we have only to hear what the young lady has to say. Thou hast heard, Philomena, the proposition I have made: dost thou consent to become my wife?”

With palpitating heart, and with a deathly paleness overspreading her features, the child regarded her mother, who beckoned to encourage her, and said: "O mother, I cannot say yes!"

Diocletian persisted: "What answer am I going to have?"

"I beg thy pardon, most gracious lord," remarked Calistos; "our child is overwhelmed at the great happiness in store for her. She is unable to find words, and it will be necessary to give her time to compose her mind. To-morrow she will gladly give her consent."

The emperor assented, and dismissed them.

Philomena's parents had educated her for heaven; yet it was their desire that she should accept Diocletian's offer, for they knew very well that by a refusal they would incur his displeasure with all its disastrous consequences.

"Remember, my child," Calistos addressed her, "what a splendid opportunity of doing good thou shalt have at the side of this mighty monarch. Sharing his throne, thou wilt be able to protect thy Christian brethren from persecution. Perhaps thou shalt even convince him of the truth of the Christian religion and convert him. Then the continual massacre of Christians will cease, the Church will flourish in peace and coming generations will call thee blessed."

But Philomena remained firm, and replied with a heavenly wisdom quite beyond her years: "Dear father, thou allowest thyself to become a victim of illusion; thy hopes will never be realized. So deeply is Diocletian sunken in depravity, that he is impenetrable to higher emotions. Instead of elevating himself at my side to the sublime heights of Christian truth, he would seek to draw me down with him into the abyss of corruption. Instead of saving him, I would be exposed to the danger of becoming his associate in crime, and the blood of the victims of his wrath would cry out against me, too. May the Lord preserve me from such a fate! Moreover, thou canst not sever the sacred bond which binds me to the Lord. Well dost thou know that three years ago I vowed my virginity to Him on the happy day of my first Communion."

"Thou wast then of too tender an age to know the importance of the step thou didst take. A vow made at such an age does not bind."

"Far be it from me to take advantage of such an excuse. I knew well what I did when I followed her example whom we salute as the Mother of the Redeemer, and vowed my virginity to God. No, no! I shall never cancel my vow. I know but one spouse, our Lord Jesus Christ."

"But consider that the man who claims thee for his wife is Diocletian, the mighty Roman emperor, the lord of the world. He will place a crown on thy brow and endow thee with immeasurable wealth."

"Great, indeed, is Diocletian's power and wealth; but is he in comparison with the Eternal King to whom I am betrothed? I renounce Diocletian's crown and choose for my part my Saviour's crown of thorns on earth, and in heaven the imperishable diadem of victory promised to those

who are faithful to Him. I renounce a wealth which I must leave behind me one day, and seek the inexhaustible treasures heaven.”

“But what if Diocletian, incensed at your refusal, turns his wrath against us and destroys us? Remember, that our fate rests with him, that we are entirely in his hands. Hast thou no consideration for us? Hast thou effaced the last vestige of filial love from thy heart?”

“It is better to lose our lives here below and to be reunited in eternal bliss, than to try to avoid temporal death and thereby incur everlasting punishment. Therefore I beseech thee by the blood of Christ to refrain from further effort to change my resolution of remaining faithful to my heavenly spouse, Jesus Christ, even at the cost of my life.”

A heavenly halo seemed to surround the maiden as she spoke these last words—words which no doubt were entered into the Recording Angel’s book of life.

Less firmly grounded in Christian principles than their daughter, Philomena’s parents were too strongly wedded to the world to share her sublime sentiments. Placed in the position of choosing between the highest glory on earth and an ignominious death, they preferred the former and hesitated not to influence their child to do the same. Especially did her mother Eutropia beg her with tears and blandishments to defer to Diocletian’s wish. Calistos, too, was inconsolable. “What does it profit us now,” he exclaimed, “to have received a daughter from the God of the Christians, when He is about to take her away from us at the very moment when she is to become our joy?” His faith, heretofore so firm, was shaken, and he inclined more and more to use every means to induce Philomena to submit. But all his efforts were of no avail.

In the midst of these troubles Diocletian summoned them to receive their answer to his proposal. They went with heavy hearts. The emperor received them alone in a small but luxuriously furnished apartment. Diocletian was seated at a table loaded with costly presents, such as gold rings, bracelets, a diadem with precious stones of immense value and a variety of other ornaments sufficient to captivate a thousand girls. Like the tempter in the desert who said to our Divine Saviour, “All these will I give thee, if falling down thou wilt adore me,” Diocletian offered these gifts to Philomena on the sole condition that she marry him. He used every blandishment to influence her decision, and was zealously seconded by Calistos and his wife. But Philomena remained firm; she refused the gifts and resisted all endeavors to gain her consent. At length the emperor, who saw that all his efforts were in vain, became furious and, violently pushing away the table so that the costly gifts fell to the floor, he approached the trembling maiden and exclaimed:

“What, this stubborn damsel dares to spurn an emperor’s love? Thou dost prefer a crucified Jew to me, the lord of the world? I offered thee my crown; thou hast refused it and shalt repent of thy obstinacy. I am accustomed to have my will, and if a woman finds favor in my eyes I take her. With thee I made an exception and begged for thy love. Thou hast refused me, and by the gods, thou shalt regret it!”

He called to lictors, and pointing to Philomena, cried: “Take her, cast her into the prison beneath my private apartment. She has dared to spurn me, the equal of the gods!”

The lictors proceeded to execute the emperor's command. Philomena trembled as the men stretched out their hands towards her. But Calistos stood guard over his child and exclaimed: "Dare not touch her, or you are dead men!" Eutropia fell at the emperor's feet, asking his pardon. "Have mercy on us," she cried, "and do not separate us from our dear child, or, if the decree is irrevocable, let us die with her!"

"Die," laughed Diocletian, "who speaks of dying? Your daughter shall not die, at least not presently. I only intend to give her time to reconsider in prison her decision and to come to a more satisfactory resolve. Perhaps isolation will bring her to her senses. If this be not the case, I possess the means to turn her away from her love of the Nazarene. But for your sake I shall order that no harm befall her. As soon as she shall be ready to do as I wish, everything shall be forgotten, and from out of the prison's cell she shall ascend the throne. But woe to her and you if she persists in her refusal!"

And turning to the lictors, he cried: "Why stand you there idle? Do your duty!"

This was easier said than done, for Calistos, a man of powerful build, still guarded his child. Now one of the lictors ventured to lay hands on her, but scarcely had he touched her, when a powerful blow felled him to the floor. The father defended his child, and the other lictor prudently retreated a few steps. Diocletian was amused at the lictor's defense and applauded Calistos. But the struggle had brought on several other guardsmen. They overpowered him and led Philomena away.

Ponderous and strong iron doors had closed on Philomena. She was in prison. For the first time in her life she was separated from her parents, totally excluded from all intercourse with human beings, alone with her sorrow. She keenly felt the loneliness of her situation. Grace, which had hitherto upheld and filled her with heroism, seemingly abandoned her. Weeping, she fell on her knees, buried her face in her hands and gave vent to her grief. Death-like silence reigned in the dark cell, into which only a slender streak of light found its way through a small opening high up in the wall. The walls were damp and moldy, an icy blast was wafted through the foul air, and the straw couch on the stone floor seemed alive with gruesome vermin. A large rat ventured near Philomena, and she shrieked loudly. The terrors of her situation presented themselves to her in their full reality. She saw the innocent pleasures of her youth vanished forever, her young life doomed before its promises were realized. She contemplated the sorrow of her parents, whose tears she was not permitted to dry without becoming unfaithful to God; she realized the terrible dilemma to which she was reduced—either to sacrifice her filial love or to endanger the salvation of her soul. Prison, the anguish of suffering either the repulsive endearments of a libertine, or the torments of the rack and an ignominious and cruel death confronted her like spectres.

After the first paroxysm of grief had subsided, the poor child turned for help and strength to God in prayer. Her soul soared up into the presence of her divine spouse and was penetrated with light and consolation. Then she sank into a sweet slumber, and the dream she had had three years ago again presented to her view the choir of virgins clad in white garments following the Lamb with palms in their hands. Again one of the virgins, younger and lovelier than the rest, bent over her, saying: "Dost thou not know me, dear sister? I am Agnes, the spouse of Jesus Christ. Soon thou,

too, will join us.” And when Philomena extended her hands towards the vision, her heavenly visitor smiled. She awoke, and behold, on her hand she saw a drop of blood!

And before her stood Diocletian, who addressed her, laughing: “Well, my girl, hast thou slept well? I hope thou hast changed thy mind during the night. Am I right?”

Terrified at the sound of the voice so detested by her, the maiden retreated to the remotest corner of her prison cell and called aloud for help. Nothing but the scornful laughter of her tormentor answered her.

“Cease thy noise, child! Nobody hears thee. Thou art in my power, and even thy so-called spouse Jesus of Nazareth will scarcely be able to deliver thee. Therefore hear what I have to say. Thou art aware that I offered thee my hand in marriage, and I am still ready to redeem my promise. Be sensible, do as I wish, or, by Jove! thou shalt not leave this dungeon alive.”

“Have mercy on me! Spare me, a mere child!” she cried. “By all that thou lovest and cherishest, I implore thee to leave me in peace!”

“Thou shalt have peace, tranquility and happiness in every shape—do but accept my offer!”

“Never, never!” she cried, lifting up her hands in terror.

“Indeed thou canst! And I will overcome thy stubbornness. Until now I had too much regard for thee, because thou art so delicate and tender. But now my patience is exhausted. Either thou dost consent to become my wife, or I shall use violence and make thee my slave. I am master of thy life and death.”

Furious with rage he took hold of her arm and held it as in a vise. The child trembled with fear and called aloud for help. “Now thou art in my power: yes or no?” cried the tyrant.

“No! No! Thou shalt never have part in me. I belong to my heavenly spouse. O Jesus, protect thy servant!”

“Ha, ha! She calls on the Nazarene!” laughed the emperor, “No doubt but he will presently appear and deliver her. We shall see! Ha, ha, ha!”

“Jesus, help me!” sighed Philomena, trying with all her might to free herself from the emperor’s hold. “Jesus, help!”

“Death and damnation, witch!” suddenly cried the tyrant, letting go his hold as if he had touched red-hot iron. He seemed beside himself, and dancing round the cell wild with pain, cried: “I shall teach thee to give up thy nefarious witchcraft.” And furious with rage he left her.

What had happened? Had the “Nazarene” shown His power in favor of His servant? Yes, the power of the name of Jesus had asserted itself and baffled the tyrant, smiting and disabling him.

Scarcely had Diocletian recovered his composure, which had been sorely shaken by the sudden attack, than he ordered the poor child to be put in heavy chains like a criminal, to prevent her from exercising her “sorcery.” For the present, however, he ceased his visits, for the pain he had experienced when laying hold of Philomena had been so excruciating that he did not feel tempted to try the experiment again.

Philomena’s condition was now more pitiful than ever. The heavy chains which weighed down her tender limbs bereft her of the power of motion. Darkness and silence enveloped her, and she saw no one but the prison-master, who brought her a jug of water and a piece of hard bread every morning. Her parents were not permitted to visit her. In this condition the poor child remained for thirty-seven days, her only solace being prayer to her divine spouse. A supernatural peace descended into her soul and confirmed her in her resolution to remain faithful to her Saviour until death.

THE APPARITION

Diocletian might deny to human beings admission to the prison, but he could not prohibit the appearance of heavenly visions. It was a warm summer’s night. The emperor’s palace resounded with the revelry of drunken courtiers, but silence deep and solemn reigned in Philomena’s dungeon. She was absorbed in prayer. Suddenly she became aware of a light brighter than the sun. It filled her cell, and from it stepped forth the figure of a majestic lady bearing a child in her arms, and her benignant countenance filled Philomena’s heart with heavenly joy.

“Fear not, Philomena,” said the vision. “I am Mary, thy Mother. I came to announce to thee a glad message. Three days more and thy captivity ends. But a great trial awaits thee before then: have courage, however, for in the hour of tribulation my Son’s grace shall mightily assist thee. Moreover, I commanded the angel who once announced to me the message of salvation, to watch over thee. He will be at thy side and never leave thee for a moment until he shall have brought thee to the throne of my Son, where a crown awaits thee. His name is Gabriel, and his power will do great things for thee, for thou art my well-beloved daughter, for whom my Son has prepared everlasting glory. Therefore be of good cheer! Already the angels await thy coming and thy spouse is ready to meet thee.” With these words the Blessed Virgin placed the divine Child into Philomena’s arms, who embraced her and filled her heart with joy.

Whilst the visit from heaven consoled the holy maiden in her prison, the spirits of darkness took possession of the revelers in the emperor’s banquet hall. Diocletian himself lay prostrate on a couch; he was overcome by wine and was no longer able to sit up. Maximian, a soldier of great size and strength, roared like a wild beast and destroyed costly vases in his drunken fury. Daja, a semi-barbarous Thracian, sang a lustful rhyme; Sennon, the centurion of the imperial body-guard, cursed fiercely and belabored with the shaft of his spear his praetorians who lay about drunk.

Suddenly, in the midst of a song, Daja stopped. A thought had entered his mind which impelled him to rouse his imperial master from his slumber. “Imperial lord,” he cried, “what news for tomorrow? Are there no Christians to be tortured, no heads to be cut off, no rack to be employed?”

Forsooth, business is becoming slack and I am tired of Rome. In Nicomedia we have more diversions. Galerius is an inventive genius when he sets his mind to torturing Christians.”

“Well said, Daja,” replied Diocletian, with a heavy tongue. “I have a piece of work for you. Philomena, the Christian, who spurned me, and moreover made me feel her power of sorcery in the night of my visit, must die.”

“And die at once!” cried Daja. “Shall I go to the dungeon right off and choke the witch to death?”

“Not so fast, Daja!” answered Diocletian. “Death shall come to her by degrees. Slow torture shall be her reward for spurning me, the emperor.”

“What punishment has your imperial majesty decreed for the contemptible wretch?” inquired Maximian.

“I think I shall condemn her to receive the same punishment which was decreed for the Nazarene: I shall have her scourged. It is the most ignominious and cruel of all tortures. If she survives we shall still have time for further proceedings against her.”

Loud applause greeted this announcement. The rioters reveled in the thought of feasting their eyes on the victim of the terrible punishment in store for the delicate maiden. The morning had scarcely dawned when Philomena was led forth from the dungeon, and after again resolutely refusing Diocletian’s offer, she was taken to the inner court of the palace and subjected to the unspeakable torture of the scourge. This punishment was so severe, that very often those condemned to it died during its infliction. We therefore cannot but admire the power of Divine Grace which sustained the life of this tender child amid so cruel suffering.

The execution of Diocletian’s cruel order is over. The holy maiden’s tender body is covered with wounds, her blood has saturated the floor and walls. Like her Saviour, there was not a sound spot on her from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head. A few more stripes, and she would have fallen dead. Death would indeed have been a mercy, but she was not privileged to die as yet, and the scourging was merely the beginning of her torture. She was released from the pillar to which she had been bound, enveloped in a sheet, which was soon dyed by her blood, and borne back to her dungeon. There she was left alone, in the expectation that she would be found a corpse in the morning.

Who can describe the jailer’s amazement when, instead of a corpse, he next morning found the maiden in blooming health? All the wounds were healed, the pain was gone and the bloody sheet alone gave evidence of the sufferings of the day before. Her countenance shone like the sun, and rejoicing, she sang hymns. Two angels had appeared to her during the night and poured a heavenly balm into her wounds, which healed at once. They left her filled with supernatural consolation.

The jailer hastened to inform the emperor of the unusual occurrence. He had the maiden brought into his presence, and was filled with amazement on beholding her in perfect health and full

vigor whom he had seen covered with wounds and blood, and well-nigh dead the day before. Unable, however, to recognize the hand of God in so extraordinary an event, the resplendent beauty of his victim impelled him to try again to persuade her to fulfill his wish.

“Behold,” he said to her, “how the gods love thee! Jupiter has decreed that thou shalt find happiness at my side; therefore be docile and bow to our imperial will. Thou hast experienced how dangerous it is to oppose us. We were compelled to have thee chastised like a rebellious child. Be wise now, and do not incur our displeasure a second time; rather obey, and renounce the Nazarene, who proved to thee his inability to protect thee.”

“Be silent, unclean tyrant, and do not blaspheme my Saviour,” Philomena replied. “I do not ask Him to deliver me from the torments which thou chooseth to have inflicted on me, but I implore His help to endure them. The liberty which I crave is death. Cease, therefore, thy vain promises: I shall never consent to fulfill thy wish. Thou canst not give me true happiness, because thou dost not possess it thyself. Thou art a mean wretch, and the vengeance of the Almighty, whose servants thou dost murder, will fall upon thee before long!”

Diocletian frowned darkly. “Beware,” he said, “and guard thy tongue. The emperor is not accustomed to such speech.”

“Would that my words would be conducive to thy welfare, instead of rousing thy anger, and that thou wouldst learn to know Him whom thou dost persecute and who one day shall be thy Judge.”

“Of whom dost thou speak? Of Jesus, the Nazarene, the carpenter’s son, thy lover? I do not wish to know Him. Between Him and me there is eternal hostility, combat and conflict to the end.”

“’Tis true, alas! But who, thinkest thou, will gain the victory?”

“Foolish question! How canst thou doubt? Where are now the followers of the Nazarene? Their number is reduced to a mere handful, and these we annihilate as fast as we discover them. Ha! a few months more and not a single Christian shall be found in the whole Roman empire.”

Philomena smiled pityingly. “Couldst thou but look into the future, emperor! Long after the last vestige of the Roman empire shall have been swept from the face of the earth, the Christians will be as numerous as the sands on the seashore. Millions will call reverently and adoringly on the name of Jesus, whilst thy name shall be detested by all who hear it.”

“Cease thy impertinence,” fiercely cried Diocletian, “or I shall have thy malicious tongue cut out.”

But Philomena minded not the tyrant. Like a prophetess she stood before him, her eyes turned heaven ward and her spirit borne beyond time and space into the future.

“Yes,” she exclaimed, “Jesus of Nazareth will triumph. His is the victory. I behold its emblem, the cross, the sign of salvation, rising above this city and shining in the clouds. Not one of thy predecessors persecuted the Christians as fiercely as thou, but thou shalt be the last of

persecutors. The innocent blood shed by thee cries aloud to heaven for vengeance. Emperor and empire—both will be extirpated, but the Church, the Saviour's spouse which thou thinkest to have destroyed, will spread and flourish.”

“Enough of thy insolence, audacious wench! I shall close thy bold mouth forever and send another adorer of the Nazarene to the lower realms. Thou shalt die—but thy death shall be inglorious. I shall have thee drowned like a dog or a cat. In the darkness of the night I shall have thee cast into the Tiber, a stone around thy neck, and may the fishes make a meal of thy flesh. Ho, lictors, seize the witch, but take care that she escape you not: Christians are adepts at sorcery. At midnight cast her into the Tiber where it is deepest.”

The order was executed. Philomena was seized, bound, and returned to the prison, there to await the night.

Dark and black the clouds hovered over Rome, increasing the gloominess of the night which had descended on the city amid a fearful storm of rain, thunder and lightning. Not far from the city walls a bark propelled by strong arms started off and sped swiftly towards the middle of the stream.

“I am really sorry for the delicate maiden,” said one of the rowers; “it is sad for one so young and beautiful to die.”

“What does it concern us, Gabas,” replied another; “are we not accustomed to our work? For three years the slaughter of Christians was our occupation. A bad business, 'tis true; but we must make a living. We are soldiers; the murder of Christians is one of our secondary duties. Is it our concern that Diocletian furnishes us with so much of this kind of work? Let him answer for it! As to that maiden, it is well that she is about to find peace. She must die one way or the other, and drowning is an easy death. Take care that the anchor holds fast and that the rope does not break, so that the business may be speedily dispatched.”

Between the rough men sat Philomena with her hands tied behind her back, and a rope to which was attached a huge anchor about her neck. She was pale, her eyes were closed. Nature within her revolted at the violent death, and her soul sought courage and strength in prayer. Soon the boat had reached the middle of the river. Four strong hands laid hold of the maiden, raised her gently and dropped her with the anchor about her neck into the waves. A heavy fall, a gurgling sound—and all is over.

“She will not return,” said one of the men. “But let us make haste lest the storm overtake us.”

At that moment a stroke of lightning lit up the expanse of water, and the other rower cried out in alarm: “What is it?”

“Woe unto us,” replied his companion, “the dead come back! There is Philomena.”

“Impossible! The rope was new and strong, and the anchor heavy enough to draw down the most expert swimmer. Perhaps it is her spirit. See how it moves and shines! Methinks it will be best

for us to make for the shore and vanish as soon as possible. It is not advisable to meddle with the spirits of murdered people.”

The men rowed with all their might to reach the shore, but in the furious storm which now broke upon them they found it a hard task.

“What a storm!” remarked Gabas. “It seems heaven and earth are angered at our deed. Woe to us, see! She is following us.”

True enough, a shining figure seemed to follow them, and now they clearly recognized the maiden martyr. Flooded with supernal splendor her figure floated on the waves. Her face appeared above the water, her hands were free and folded on her breast, the rope and anchor had disappeared in the depth, and, as if by angels’ hands, the Saint’s body was borne towards the shore by the waves.

Scarcely had the terror-stricken soldiers landed, when they ran into the city and acquainted their commander with what had occurred.

“You are bereft of your senses or overcome by drink,” said he. “You made a bungling job of your task. If you had really drowned her she would not return. Your cowardice played a trick.”

“Go and see for thyself! We have done as we were ordered. The anchor was heavy enough to sink a hundred children like her, and the rope was new and strong. It could not break.”

Then she is a sorceress and freed herself by witchcraft. But it shall avail her nothing. Die she must. I myself will go and see whether you are the victims of a delusion or not. Here, Sarmio, Tullus, Cassius! Each of you take two men and follow me! Take chains and ropes to bind the sorceress, so that she may not escape us a second time.”

The men lighted torches, did as they were ordered and followed their chief as if about to capture a band of robbers. On nearing the shore of the Tiber they beheld from afar a shining light, amid which Philomena knelt in prayer between two angels. At this sight the soldiers became terror-stricken.

“They are not human beings,” said Sarmio, “and with spirits I shall not engage in combat. See how her face shines, and, oh, the other two have flaming swords in their hands!”

“Bah! it is all an illusion,” replied the centurion. “Go for them. Against our weapons they cannot prevail. Lower your lances, and forward!”

The soldiers reluctantly obeyed. Just as several lances were about to touch the holy martyr’s breast, one of the angels beckoned towards them and, as if struck by lightning, they fell to the ground. The lances fell from their hands, but else they were unharmed. The centurion was the first to recover from his fright. With a fearful curse he tried to rise, but found himself unable to do so.

Now Philomena spoke, and said, smiling: “Why have you come with spears and swords and clubs to capture a weak maiden? There is no need of all these weapons. I shall follow you of my own free will, because it has been ordered thus by my divine spouse. I had hoped to die in the water into which you cast me, but it is God’s will that I should suffer more in testimony of my faith in Christ crucified. Did He not permit it, you would have no power over me, for he has given me into the custody of His angels. Now let us go hence, for I must suffer for my heavenly spouse.”

Suddenly the angels disappeared, and the soldiers regained the use of their limbs. Their courage returned, and the centurion roared: “Now, sorceress, thou art in our power. Ho, there! Hold her fast and bind her, lest she escape us again.”

She was loaded with chains and securely bound. Yet the uncouth warriors treated her with a certain awe and did not offend her modesty, for even though the angels had departed, the Lord guarded the virginal purity of His spouse.

The news of the extraordinary event spread all over the city, and when, at early dawn, the procession reached the imperial palace, a great crowd of people had assembled there to see the “sorceress.”

Diocletian had suffered a bad night. Alarming dreams had terrified him, and the spirits of his murdered victims appeared to him in shapes more terrible than ever. After being notified in the morning of what had happened concerning Philomena, he was sorely frightened. He refused to see her, and when asked what was to be done with her, he cried in superstitious wrath:

“Do with her what you like, but by all means put her out of the way. Hang her, burn her, kill her with clubs—but kill her! I want to have peace.

“This suits me exactly!” rejoined the centurion. “It will afford capital sport for my Thracian archers, whose arrows have never had so beautiful a target.”

The virgin martyr was taken from the prison into which she had been cast and led outside the city walls, and there bound to a tree. The centurion measured the distance, the archers took their stations, and at the word of command a shower of arrows flew off against the helpless victim. The archers did their business well. Most of the arrows went true, and with the exception of the face there was scarcely a part of her body that was not pierced by the sharp points. The pain was excruciating, and when the arrows were pulled out the blood flowed in streams. The cruel sport was repeated, and now the deadly missiles were aimed at vital parts. Deathlike pallor overspread the maiden’s countenance; she closed her eyes, heavily her head sank on her breast. Loss of blood had exhausted her.

“She is done for,” said the soldiers when they removed the arrows. “At best she can live but a few hours. It is unnecessary to torture her any longer. Let us leave her to die in peace.”

The ropes that bound the martyr to the tree were cut, the bleeding victim was placed on a bier and carried into a dark vault in the amphitheatre, where the corpses of the dead gladiators were

usually laid away. Two soldiers remained on guard before the vault with orders to report when she died.

Time hung heavy on the guards. "O Strabo," said the one to his companion, "I do not see why we should stand here and roast in the sun, only to see a poor, tortured child die. I move that we permit her to die in peace whilst we go over to old Tryphon, who dispenses that excellent Falernian wine."

"Bravo, Marcellus! By the gods, thy motion is a good one. Let us be gone! The girl is as good as dead, she will not wake up again. I am off."

When the two guards returned towards noon, they found it difficult to gain a firm footing. But who can describe their consternation on beholding Philomena, whom they had supposed dead, sitting before the vault on a stone, singing psalms and smiling at their approach? They could not believe their eyes and were afraid to go near.

"By all demons, Strabo," said the one to the other, "there is something wrong there. I never saw the like in my life. It is witchcraft. Let us save ourselves; let Diocletian attend to her himself." And he ran as fast as his legs, still weak from the effects of the wine, could carry him. His companion took the matter cooler. He reported to his captain, who informed the emperor of the turn things had taken. The news spread through the palace; everyone was anxious to see the miracle and hastened to the scene. Diocletian, too, despite his superstitious fear, went out.

"Now, Philomena," he summoned courage to address her, "how long wilt thou persist in thy sorceries and witchcraft?"

"It is not by sorcery and witchcraft that death is kept away from me," she replied, "it is by the power of God, who wishes to glorify His name before the heathens. Instead of ascribing the marvels which you see to witchcraft, thou shouldst rather acknowledge the Lord's power and cease to persecute His Church. For the more obstinate thou art, the greater is thy crime and the heavier will be thy punishment."

"Why persist in speaking of punishment and the Nazarene?" replied Diocletian. "Long since would he have annihilated me, if he did but possess the power. Have I not tortured and murdered his followers every day for years, and was he able to prevent it? I despise thy threats, and thou shalt die in spite of thy Jesus of Nazareth and all his angels. Ho, lictors, bind her again to the tree! Let the archers make her a living target before my very eyes. Die she must!"

The order was quickly obeyed. Again the arrows sped with unerring aim from the bows; but behold, not one of them touched the martyr's body.

"Ha, now I see why you could not kill her! You do not even hit her! And you call yourselves Thracian archers? You are miserable cowards and gutless wretches, but no soldiers!"

The archers resented the reproach, and in proof of their sure aim showed him the arrows still red with blood, which they had used in the morning.

“Try again!” commanded Diocletian, “I shall have each one scourged who misses her this time.”

The archers gnashed their teeth in silent rage, but again sent their arrows in the direction of the martyr. They stuck fast in the tree above her, they fell to the ground at her feet, but not a single one harmed her.

“This is sorcery, imperial lord,” cried the centurion. “My men never missed their aim. A higher power must divert the arrows’ course.

An augur who witnessed the scene explained: “Let the arrow-heads be made red-hot. Witches fear the fire, and their power is harmless against it.”

The suggestion was adopted. But ho! a new marvel! The red-hot arrows sped through the air until they reached the martyr; then, without touching her, they reversed their course and returned with double force on the archers. Six of them were killed outright, and the rest writhed on the ground in fearful pain. Terror and alarm seized the spectators, and many of them struck their breasts and confessed the true God. Others fled in dismay. The emperor was sorely perplexed, he feared a general revolt. He summoned his counselors and said:

“This thing is becoming unbearable. What is to be done with the sorceress? If she continues to baffle our efforts to kill her, our prestige will be gone. The heathens murmur and the Christians triumph. The Nazarene is gaining in favor, and yet we may not confess ourselves defeated. What is to be done?”

“Permit me to make a suggestion,” remarked Nicanor, one of the emperor’s trusted friends. “These Christians are adepts at sorcery, ’tis true, and we have the proofs thereof before our eyes. We have had cases like this before; remember Vitus, who was belabored with clubs, placed in boiling oil, and cast before wild beasts: all our endeavors were in vain. Yet, when the executioner cut off his head the end came. Indeed, to cut off their heads is the only reliable way to get rid of the Christians.”

“Well said, Nicanor! I believe thou art right,” replied Diocletian. “The Nazarene seems to be master of the hidden arts, but I doubt whether he is able to replace a severed head. Well, we shall see.”

All present were anxious to witness the result of the experiment. The emperor ordered Philomena to be released from the tree and scornfully addressed her:

“I see that thy lover’s power is rather great. He seems to be a master sorcerer, and has captured the minds of many by his art. Now I shall give him the opportunity of performing a new trick, and if he succeeds, I also shall believe in him. I will have thee beheaded, and if he is powerful enough to replace thy head in presence of this whole assembly and before my very eyes, I shall believe in him and cease to persecute his followers. No better opportunity was ever offered to the Nazarene to vindicate himself and his doctrine.”

Philomena replied: “Be silent, and blaspheme not the Most High Lord. God, the searcher of hearts, knows thy falsehood and deceit. For a number of years He wrought countless miracles before thy eyes, but thy mind remained thickheaded, because it is the abode of Belial, the spirit of darkness. Thou callest thyself master and lord, but thou art a mere slave, a bloodhound, an executioner, a tool of hell. Even should the Lord perform the miracle thou hast named, thou wouldst not believe, and thy sin would be so much the greater. Do, therefore, whatever thou wilt. If thou thirstest for my blood, take it. My banishment in this abode of sin and cruelty was long enough. I court death, and sigh to be united with Christ.”

“Thy desire shall be fulfilled without delay, insane visionary! Ho, lictors, bring the block, and cut off this foolish girl’s head! And if the Nazarene replaces it not, I shall laugh him to scorn.”

“Thou mayest laugh now; but when He shall come with a legion of angels to judge the world, then wilt thou tremble.”

The lictors took hold of her, threw her to the ground and bound her. In silent prayer she laid her head upon the block. One of the executioners put aside her beautiful hair, another stood by with the axe raised high, ready to strike. The overawed spectators stood in silence.

“Now, Nazarene, is thy opportunity!” cried Diocletian, “now show thy power before all the people! Let us see who is more powerful—thou or I?”

“Come, O Jesus, spouse of my soul!” prayed the martyr.

Diocletian laughed. “Thy Jesus comes not. I am losing patience. Executioner, do thy work!”

The axe descended and the martyr’s head rolled in the sand. The blood spurted high. Once more the eyes of the severed head opened, and then they closed forever. A beautiful smile graced her lips, not a muscle moved, not a sign of pain was visible. A halo of light encircled the head for a moment and then vanished. The martyr was at rest.

The emperor boasted of his triumph and blasphemed: “See now, the Nazarene’s power! She fell a victim to her folly like so many others before her. Thou art vanquished, Nazarene!”

The virgin martyr St. Philomena died on the 10th day of the Eighth Month, A. D. 302, on the sixth weekday, at the very hour when our Saviour died on the cross. But the Nazarene was not vanquished. God is eternal: hence He selects His own time for reward and for punishment.

Diocletian had long ago moldered in the dust. The Roman empire belonged to history. Fifteen centuries had elapsed and the generations that flourished in them were forgotten. St. Philomena’s very name was no longer known, when it finally pleased the Lord to glorify her before the world. In 1802, a marble slab was discovered in the Catacombs of St. Priscilla in the Via Salaria at Rome, bearing the following inscription *Lumena in pace Fi*, which was interpreted to mean: “Filumena in peace.” The stone bore the emblems of martyrdom: an anchor, an arrow, a palm

branch, a scourge and two arrows reversing their course, and finally a lily in token of her purity. With the relics was found a flask containing some of her blood. When the latter was examined, a series of extraordinary miracles began with the luminous appearance of the dried particles of blood, which now shone like burnished gold, now like diamonds and precious stones, and then again were resplendent in all the colors of the rainbow.

The relics of the Saint were transferred to Mugnano, near Naples, and thence the fame of “Little Philomena,” as she was called in Italy, began to spread all over the world.