Alfred J. Church

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I. — AN ACCUSATION

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THE time is the early morning of an April day in the year of Our Lord 112. So early is it that the dawn has scarcely yet begun to show in the eastern sky. The place is a burial-ground in the outskirts of Nicæa, one of the chief towns of the Roman province of Bithynia. We must imagine an oblong building, about sixty feet in length and forty in breadth. The roof is arched, and at the highest point, perhaps twenty feet from the ground. The further end from the door is semi-circular, like what is called an apse in church architecture. There are four windows in each of the side walls; these, however are not glazed, but furnished with wooden blinds, which can be opened or shut as the weather serves. The building is commonly lighted with lamps, six of which hang from the roof. It has little ornament about it; the floor is tessellated, but the work is rough; the little cubes of which the pattern is made are of baked clay, not stone or marble, which are more expensive materials; and the patterns themselves are rude and carelessly worked. The walls are of rough stone, plastered and colour-washed. The semicircular end only is hung, to a distance of about six feet from the ground, with purple curtains.

Such was a Christian church in the early part of the second century.

It must not be supposed that even this simple building had been erected for its own use by the Christian community. Even if it could have found the means to do so,

it would not have ventured so to attract public attention. For the Christian faith was not one of the religions which were sanctioned by the State; and it existed only by sufferance, or rather, we might even say, by stealth.

This meeting-house of the Christians of Nicæa was really the club- house of the wool-combers of that city. The wool-combers' guild or company had, for some reason, passed to other places. Old members had died, and few or no new members had been admitted. Much of its property had been lost by the dishonesty of a treasurer. Finally the few surviving members had been glad to let the building to persons who were acting for the Christian community. No questions were asked as to the purpose for which it was to be used; but, as two or three out of the half-dozen of surviving wool-combers were Christians, it was well understood what this purpose was. It would have been, by the way, more exact to say "a burial club." This was the object for which it had been founded. Its social meetings had been funeral feasts; hence its situation in the near neighbourhood of a cemetery. This made it particularly suitable for meetings of the Christians. Assemblies held before dawn—for this was the custom—and close to a burial-ground, would be little likely to be observed.

The congregation may have numbered one hundred persons, of whom at least two-thirds were men. There was a division between the sexes—that is to say, the men occupied all the seats (benches of the plainest kind) on one side of the building, and the front half of those on the other. It was easy to see that, with a very few exceptions, they were of humble rank. Many, indeed, were slaves. These

wore frocks reaching down to the knees, cut square at the neck, and for the convenience of leaving the working arm free, having one sleeve only. These frocks were made of coarse black or brown serge, trimmed at the bottom with sheepskin. Two or three were sailors, clad in garments so coarse as almost to look like mats. Among the few worshippers of superior station was an aged man, who wore a dress then rarely seen, the Roman toga. The narrow purple stripe with which it was edged, and the gold ring which he wore on the forefinger of his left hand, showed that he was a knight. His order included, as is well known, the chief capitalists of Rome, and, among other speculations, was accustomed to farm the taxes. Titus Antistius—this was the old man's name—had been the agent for this purpose in Bithynia, but he had for some time retired from the occupation. His age, his blameless character, and the wealth which he dispensed with a liberal hand, helped, together with his rank, to make him the principal character in the Christian community of Nicæa. He sat on a cushioned chair, but the privilege had been conceded to him quite as much on account of his age and infirmity as of his social position.

The only other member of the congregation whom it was necessary to mention was an elderly man who sat immediately behind Antistius. His dress, of plain but good material, showed that he belonged to the middle class. His name was Caius Verus.

The semicircular end of the building was reserved for the clergy, of whom three were present. They wore the usual dress of the free citizen of the time, a sleeved tunic, with a

cape over the shoulders that reached to the waist. The only thing that distinguished them from the congregation was that their dress was wholly white. One of the three was an old man; his two colleagues were middle-aged. The three sat facing the people, with a plain table used for the Holy Supper in front of them. On either side of the apse, as we may call it, on the line which divided it from the main body of the building, were two reading desks. On each a volume was laid. One of these volumes contained the Old Testament, in the Greek version of the Septuagint, the other the New.

The minister left his seat behind the Table, and advanced to address the people. It was evident that his agitation was great; indeed, it was some time before he could command his voice sufficiently to speak.

"Brothers and sisters," he said, "I have a grave and lamentable matter to lay before you. Serious charges have been brought against our brother Verus—for brother I will yet call him. It has been alleged against him that he has gambled, and that he has sacrificed to idols. Caius Verus," he went on, "answer as one who stands in the presence of God and His angels. Do you know the house of the merchant Sosicles?"

Verus stood up in his place. Whatever he may have felt about the truth of the charges and the likelihood of their being proved, he did not lose his confident air. He had stood not once or twice only in his life in positions of greater peril than this, and he would not allow himself to be terrified now.

"I know it," said the accused, "as far as a man may know a house which he enters only for purposes of business. I

have had dealings with Sosicles on account of the Church, as the brethren know. He is a heathen, but a man of substance and credit; and the moneys of the Church have increased in his hand."

"It is true," said the minister; "and I have often wished that it could be otherwise. But the holy Apostle Paul tells us that if we would have no dealings with such men, we must needs go out of the world. But you affirm that you have not companied with him as with a friend?"

"I affirm it."

"Cleon, come forth!" said the minister to a young man who was sitting on one of the back benches.

Cleon was a slave from the highlands of Phrygia—not a Greek, but with the tinge of Greek manners, which had reached by this time to all but the most inaccessible parts of Lesser Asia. He was a new-comer. Verus scanned his face narrowly, but apparently without any result.

"Tell your story," said the minister; "and speak without any fear of man."

Cleon went on in somewhat broken Greek. It is a month since I came into the possession of the merchant Sosicles. He bought me of the heir of the widow Areté, of Smyrna. She had provided in her will that I should be free; but her heir disputed it, and the Proconsul gave judgment against me." The poor lad choked down a sob as he said this, and a thrill of sympathy ran through his audience. "Sosicles knew that I was a Christian, and took two hundred drachmæ from the price for that reason. I heard him say that Christians had scruples and were obstinate. I worked chiefly in the garden; but about a week since I had to take the place of Lycus, the

cup-bearer. The master had flogged him so severely for stealing a flagon of Chian wine that he could not stand. When I came into the dining-chamber the dishes had been removed. I mixed the first bowl, and set it on the table before Sosicles. I filled the cups out of it. Sosicles poured out a libation. 'To Apollo and Aphrodite,' he said. I filled the other cups. There were eight guests in all. They all said the same words, excepting Verus, who lay on the host's right hand. I observed that he drank without speaking. When I saw this, I thought to myself that he must be a Christian; and then I remembered that I had seen him here. The drinking went on. I filled the cups many times. Towards the end of the first watch, Sosicles, who by this time was, as I should judge, half-tipsy, poured out a libation to Hermes. He said to Verus: 'This toast you shall not refuse. For Apollo and his harp you care not; no, nor for Aphrodite with her girdle of love; but Hermes, with his money-bags, is your true god.' Verus laughed, and said nothing. Then Sosicles grew angry. I had heard that he was apt to be quarrelsome in his cups. 'By Hercules,' he said, 'you shall drink it! I will have no dealings with atheists. Drink it, or we close our accounts.' Verus tried to put him off; but it was of no use—Sosicles only grew the more furious. At last I heard Verus mutter the words. About the middle of the second watch I came in again. Some of the guests had gone away; others were asleep. My master and Verus were playing at dice. Each had a pile of money before him. I watched them for a time, and it seemed to me that my master scarcely knew what he was doing. About half an hour afterwards Verus went home. I

noticed that he had a bag of money with him. It seemed heavy. He was quite sober."

Self-possessed as he was, the accused could not quite hide the dismay with which he listened to this narrative. He had not noticed the new cup-bearer at Sosicles' entertainment. He had often heard his host say that he would have no Christian slaves: they were troublesome, and made difficulties about doing what they were told. Accordingly, he had made sure that he was safe. He would gladly have escaped saying the idolatrous words. His Christian belief, without being sincere, was yet strong enough to make him shrink from committing so manifest an offence against it. Of love for Christ he had nothing; but he certainly feared Him a great deal more than he feared Hermes. Still, when he came to balance his scruples against the present loss of breaking with his host, they were found the lighter of the two. So he had come to speak the words; but he had followed them up with a sentence muttered under his breath: "Who, for all that, is a false demon." With this he had salved his conscience, which by this time had come to heal of its wounds with a dangerous ease.

Now he rapidly reviewed his position, and thought that he saw a way of escape. He spoke with an appearance of moderation and candour that did credit to his power of acting.

"I have a fault to confess, but it is not the grievous sin of which Cleon accuses me. It is true that I was at Sosicles' banquet. I repent me of having concealed this from the brethren. But it is not true that I spoke the blasphemous words. What I said was a colourable imitation of them,

intended to appease the unreasonable rage of a tipsy man. Who knows what trouble might have arisen—not to me only, but to the whole community—if I had angered him? As for the dice-playing, I played, indeed; but I played to humour him. I so contrived it that he won back the greater part of what he had lost. If I gained anything, I gave the whole of it to the poor. As for the bag of money which Cleon saw me carry away, it was given to me in payment of an account. These things I confess, because I would not hide any thing from my brethren, and desire to make any amends that they may judge to be fitting. Yet there is something that I would urge. Does not the holy Apostle command that an accusation be not believed against an elder except from two or three witnesses? If I am not an elder, yet the Church has put me in a place of trust. Were I standing on my trial before the unbeliever, would he condemn me on the testimony of a single slave?"

"Take heed what you say," interrupted the minister. "In this house there is neither bond nor free."

"It is so," said Verus. "I spoke after the fashion of the world. But who is this young man? Is he not a stranger, known to you only by a letter which he brought from the elders of Smyrna? Can you condemn me for aught beyond that which I have myself willingly owned on his single testimony?"

He looked round on the congregation as he spoke, and saw that his appeal had not been without its effect. It was true that, as the minister had said, all in that house were equal; but the difference between slave and free man was too deeply ingrained into human nature in those days to be

easily forgotten. And no one felt it more than the slaves themselves. It was they who would have been most shocked to see a respectable merchant found guilty on the single evidence of one of their own class. A murmur of approval ran round the congregation; and when the minister put the question, though some did not vote either way, the general voice was for acquittal.

Before the minister could speak, the old knight rose in his place.

II. — AN OLD STORY

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VERUS bent on the old man the same closely scrutinising look with which he had regarded the slave. Again he failed, it seemed, to connect the face with any recollections in his mind. There was, as we shall see, a dark past in his life which he was most unwilling to have dragged into the light. But he had no reason to associate Antistius with it, and nothing more than a vague sense of distrust haunted him, but he felt that if the old man had anything to say against him, he would be a far more formidable witness than the young Phrygian slave.

"You have been in Rome?" said the knight to Verus.

"Yes," he answered; "but not for some years past."

"Nor I," went on the old man; "nor do I want ever to see it again. She is the mother of harlots, drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus! But when I left it last, seventeen years ago, I carried away with me a memorial of a deed that I shall never forget, nor you either, if there is any thing human in you."

The speaker produced from the folds of his toga a small packet wrapped in a cover of silk. Unwrapping it with reverent care, he brought out a handkerchief stained nearly all over of a dull brownish red.

"Know you this?" he said to Verus.

"Why do you ask me? What have I to do with it?" answered the man, with a certain insolence in his tone. The majority in his favour made him confident.

"Yet you should know it, for it is a blood that was shed by your hands, though the blow was dealt by the axes of Cæsar. If seventeen years are enough to make you forget the martyr Flavius, yet there are those who remember him."

It is impossible to describe the effect which these words produced. In those days of peril, next to his love for his God and Saviour, the strongest emotion in a Christian's heart was his reverence for the martyrs. They were the champions who had fought and fallen for his faith, for all that he held dearest and most precious. He could not, he thought, reverence too much their patience and their courage. Were these not the virtues which he might at any hour be himself called on to exercise.

This reverence had, of course, its meaner counterpart in a base and cowardly nature such as Verus'. The man had not belief enough to make him honest and pure; but he had enough to give him many moments of agonizing fear. It was such a fear that overpowered him now. Any wrongdoer might tremble when thus confronted with the visible, palpable relic of a crime which he believed to be unknown or forgotten. But this was no ordinary wickedness. The betrayer of a martyr was looked upon with a horror equal to the reverence which attached itself to his victim.

Nor was it only the scorn and hatred of his fellow-men that he had to dread. There were awful stories on the men's lips of informers and traitors who had been overtaken by a vengeance more terrible than any that human hands could inflict; and these crowded upon the wretched creature's recollection. His face could not have shown a more overpowering fear had the pit itself opened before him. The

staring eyes, the forehead and cheeks turned to a ghastly paleness and dabbled with cold drops of sweat, proved a terror that in itself was almost punishment enough.

But the criminal was almost forgotten in the thrill of admiring awe that went through the whole assembly. With one impulse men and women surged up to the place where the old knight was standing with the venerable relic in his hand. To see it close, if it might be to press their lips to it, was their one desire. The old man was nearly swept off his feet by the rush. The minister stepped forward, and took him within the sanctuary at the end of the meeting- house. The habit of reverence kept the people from pressing beyond the line which separated it from the body of the building, and they were partially satisfied when the handkerchief was held up for their gaze.

When silence and quiet had been restored, Antistius told his story.

"I went to Rome in the last year of Domitian's reign. It was at the season of the holiday of Saturn, which as some of you know, the heathen in Italy keep in the month of December. But it was no holiday time in Rome. The Emperor was mad with suspicious rage, and no man's life was safe for an hour; and the higher the place, the greater the danger. Yet there was one whom, though he was near to the throne, every one thought to be safe. This was Flavius Clemens. He was the Emperor's cousin: his sons were the next heirs to the throne. He was the gentlest, the least ambitious of men. It is true that he was a Christian, and the Emperor's rage at the time burned more fiercely against the Christians than against any one else; but the Emperor knew

it, had known it for years, and had made him Consul in spite of it.

"When I reached Rome, he was near the end of his year of office. I dined with him on the Ides of December, for he was an old friend, and he told me—for we were alone—how he looked forward to being rid of his honours. 'Only eighteen days more,' he said, 'and I shall be free!'' Ah! he spoke the truth, but he little thought how the freedom was to come. He told me, I remember, what an anxious time his Consulship had been. The Consul, you see, has to see many things, and even do many things, which a Christian would gladly avoid. To sit at the theatre, to look on at the horrid butchery of the games, to be present at the public sacrifices, these are the things which a man can hardly do without sin.

" 'But', he said, 'my good cousin, the Emperor, has considered me. Happily he has been my colleague, and he has taken a hundred duties off my hands, which would have been a grievous burden on me.' And then he went to tell me of some troubles which had arisen in the Church. A certain Verus had the charge of the pensions paid to the widows, and of other funds devoted to the service of the poor, and he had embezzled a large part of them. 'You see,' he went on, 'we are helpless. We cannot appeal to the courts, as we have no standing before them; in fact, our witnesses would not dare to come forward. For a man to own himself a Christian would be certain death; and though one is ready for death if it comes, we must not go to meet it. So, whether we will or no, we must deal gently with this Verus.' And he did deal gently with him. Of course, he had to be dismissed;

but he was not even asked to repay what he had taken—Flavius positively paid the whole of the deficiency out of his own pocket. And he spoke in the kindest way, I know, to the wretch, hoped that it would be a lesson to him, begged him to be an honest man in the future, and even offered to lend him money to start in business with.

"And yet the fellow laid an information against him with the Emperor! It would not have been enough to charge him with being a Christian; he was accused of witchcraft, and of laying plots against the Emperor's life. He used to mention Domitian's name in his prayers, for he was his kinsman as well as his emperor, and they got some wretched slave to swear that he heard him mutter incantations and curses. And Domitian, who was mad with fear—as he well might be, considering all the innocent blood that he had shed—believed it.

"I shall never forget what I saw in the senate-house that day. It was the last day of the year, and Flavius was to resign his office. There sat Domitian with that dreadful face, a face of the colour of blood, with such a savage scowl as I never saw before or since. Flavius took the oath that he had done the duties of his office with good faith, and then came down from his chair of office.

"In the common course of things the senate would have been adjourned at once. But that day the Emperor stood up. What a shudder ran through the assembly! Every one saw that the tale of victims for that year was not yet told. The question was, whose name was to be added? Domitian called on Regulus, a wretch who had grown gray in the trade of the informer. He rose in his place. 'I accuse Flavius