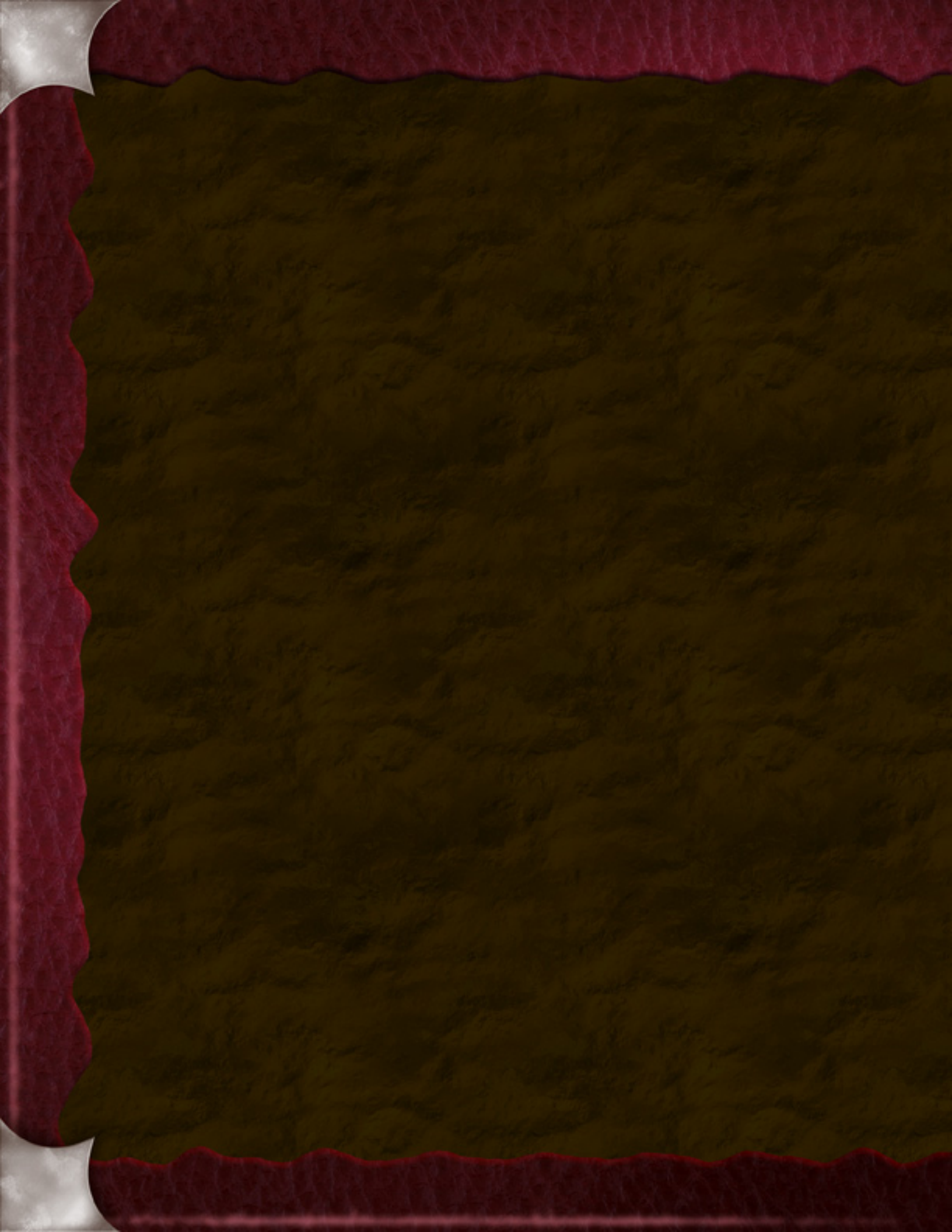


SAINT EUSTACE





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by

Lady Gwendolyn



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CHAPTER 1



Have you ever heard the story from the Old Testament about a man named Job? The monks in the monastery have it available to read, I believe. It is actually an incredible story and very much worth reading. It tells the tale of a man who was tested in a very difficult way to prove his love for God. Why was it so difficult? Job wasn't just showing that he loved God, he was showing how much he loved God. Anyway, I suppose that's enough about Job since this story is about Saint Eustace. There is a reason, though, why I brought Job up. Well, you'll soon see why.

Saint Eustace, before he became a Catholic, was named Placidus. Placidus lived in the city of Rome at the beginning of the second century. He was an excellent soldier and served his Emperor Trajan as the commanding chief of his armies. He was married to a woman who loved, respected, and obeyed him. They had two young sons. Although he was a pagan and worshipped false idols he made sure to always give alms to the poor and help those in need. His wife shared in his pagan idolatry, but also accompanied him with great fervor in his acts of charity. Although their souls were dark without the light of Christ, God had given them the grace to perform corporal works of mercy.

Placidus loved to spend his leisure hours hunting with his soldiers. One day however, it changed his life. He rode with his men through the woods, following the herd of agile deer. They turned here and dashed there as they kept their eyes on the fleeting stags. As they were pursuing them, one of the deer broke from the group and headed off on its own. Placidus drew reins on his horse, causing his men to instinctively stop.

"What sir?" one of his men said. "Shall we pursue that runaway stag?"

"No," Placidus said slowly, as one who is thinking over something that needs an immediate answer. He had had his eye on that deer almost the entire time. Its beauty and its size had made it his desired prize of the hunt. "Funny," he thought, "that it should go a different way. Ha, as if that could stop me!"


"You men follow the herd. I'll pursue this one." he said quickly. Without argument or question, his men, like good soldiers, obeyed their chief and immediately resumed their chase.

Placidus now spurred his horse to a canter. They turned off the path and it was not long before his good hunting instincts had picked up the animal's trail. But this stag was no ordinary deer and its quick feet led Placidus deeper and deeper into the forest. It took all of his effort and strength to keep up with the stag, who still managed to keep a good distance ahead. Time and again the hunter did his best to catch it, but each time it evaded his grasp and lured him on. Not being discouraged or put back in the slightest, Placidus followed his prey with renewed vigor. The chase continued until suddenly the stag stopped. The soldier pulled his horse to a halt and looked around. The magnificent animal had led him to the top of a high peak. He tried to control his heavy breathing as he surveyed his prize, pondering on how he might catch it. Just as he was finalizing his plans, his thoughts ended abruptly in shock. Stunned, he blinked his eyes and stared at the stag - or more importantly its antlers. It seemed

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... that there was actually something ... in its antlers. It looked like a cross, and it shone brilliantly. But there was even more. On the cross, Placidus thought he saw an image of a man. Suddenly, to his further amazement, he heard a man's voice speaking to him from the stag.

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“ Placidus, why are you pursuing me? For your sake I have appeared to you in this animal. I am the Christ, the only True God. Your alms have risen before me, and for this purpose I have come, that through this deer which you hunted, I myself might hunt you!” Jesus was telling Placidus that it was his acts of mercy and not the incense to false idols which had risen to God’s throne and merited him this mercy. God can read all hearts and knew that Placidus searched for the truth. Every person who searches for the truth with a good will, will always find Jesus.

Placidus, shocked at what he saw and heard, was stricken with a great fear and fell from his horse. Jesus patiently waited the entire hour that poor Placidus was unconscious. When he finally came to, Placidus slowly rose to his feet and said: “Let me understand what you were saying and I will believe you.”

Jesus then went on to explain to Placidus who He was. “I am the Christ. I created Heaven and Earth. I made light to rise and be separated from the darkness. I set the seasons and the days of the years. I formed man from the slime of the earth. For the salvation of the human race I took flesh and appeared on earth. I was crucified and buried, and on the third day I rose from the dead.”

Placidus again fell to the ground, this time in worship and gratitude, accepting the Truths that God had just mercifully revealed to him.

“Lord.” Placidus said, “I believe that You ARE, that You made all things, that You convert the erring.”

Jesus responded, “If you believe, go to the Roman Catholic bishop of the city and have him baptize you.”

A thought occurred to Placidus. “Lord, do you want me to make all this known to my wife and my sons, so that they also may believe in You?”

“Yes,” the Lord said sweetly. “Tell them, and let them be cleansed with you. Then you yourself come here tomorrow morning, and I will appear to you again and tell you more fully what the future holds for you.”

Placidus left, like Our Lord told him too, and headed home. It was evening when he got there and his wife was already in bed. At the sound of his heavy footsteps she sat up and waited for him. He came in and sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Hello,” he said, not knowing how to begin. She smiled back at him.

“Well,” he said at last. “There were some very unusual ... “ he tried to think of a word, “things ... that happened today during the hunt.” He told her of the stag that had broken away. He described it’s size and beauty and how grandly it stood out from the rest of the herd. He spoke of how he had chased it relentlessly ‘til they had reached the summit of a high peak. As he began to describe what he

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saw and heard, his wife, in her excitement, suddenly interrupted him. She cried out: “My master, I too saw Him this past night, and He said to me: ‘Tomorrow you and your husband and your sons will come to Me!’ So now I too know that He is Jesus the Christ!” She called Him Jesus the Christ because Christ is a Greek word that means the ‘Messiah’; and Jesus IS the Messiah of the entire world that the Jews were waiting for, for over three thousand years.

Well Placidus was very glad that Jesus had appeared to his wife, as well, because it made it much easier to convince her of the unusual events that took place. She would have obeyed her husband’s decision to join this new religion, but he was relieved that she had been prepared to accept all he had to say and do. He told her to get the children ready and right then, in the middle of the night, he took his small family to the bishop of Rome - in other words the pope - to be baptized into the Catholic Faith. The Holy Father was overjoyed with the converts and willingly baptized them that night. He gave the names Agapetus and Theospitus to his two small sons. He called Placidus’ wife Theospis and to Placidus himself he gave the name of Eustace.

The very next morning, he went hunting with his soldiers again. They galloped through the woods until they had reached the place where Eustace had heard and seen Our Lord. He told his men to continue hunting and sent them away. After he was sure that they were gone he prostrated himself upon the ground. Suddenly, Jesus appeared to him again, just as He had the day before.

“I implore you, Lord, tell your servant what you promised to reveal to him!” Eustace begged.

The Lord said: “Blessed are you, Eustace, for accepting the bath of My grace, because now you have overcome the devil! Now you have trampled on the one who had deceived you into worshipping false gods! There is only One, True God and One, True Religion. Now your faith will be seen! The devil, because you have left him, will fight furiously against you. You will have to bear many hardships in order to receive the crown of victory. You will have to suffer much, in order to be brought low from the lofty vanity of the world. But then you will be exalted again but in the riches of the spirit. Do not lose courage, nor look back upon your former greatness. Through your trials, you are to become another Job. But when you have been humbled, I will come to you and restore to you your former glory. Tell me, therefore! Do you wish to endure trials now or at your life’s end?”

Eustace thought about what God had said. God would send him these trials, not as a punishment but as a test. But it would be even more than a test. Anyone that perseveres through the suffering that God sends them, gives great glory to God. Out of His love for us though, God does not simply do it for His own glory but also to give merit to those that suffer patiently for the love of God. They purify and heal their souls from the horrible damage of their sins. As their souls become more clean and strong, the person grows closer to God. God has revealed to His Catholic Church that the rewards of the Saints in Heaven are measured in the degree that they have loved God before they die. It is easy to say that we love, but it is hard to actually do it. Love is proven by obedience and by suffering. Christ said that if we loved Him we would obey Him. He also said that there is no greater love than to lay down our life (to suffer even unto death) for our friends. When we suffer willingly whatever trials God sends us we are obeying His Will for us and suffering for Jesus Who is our greatest “Friend”. Among other things, He uses our sufferings to help Him save souls and help the poor souls in Purgatory.

CHAPTER 2


In the amount that we suffer in this life with virtue, we will be that happy with God forever in Heaven. He knows this and that is why He gives us trials - not an ounce more than we can handle - and offers us every grace we need so that we will carry our crosses and receive the greatest merit possible. God was offering Eustace this chance to suffer for his sake, for the Saint would receive all of his strength from God, and his happiness in eternity would be very great. Eustace was given the grace to understand all these things and made his decision.

“Lord, if it is to be so, order the trials to befall us now, but grant us every help to bear them!”

Jesus smiled. “Be of good heart! My grace will guard your souls.” With those words, Our Lord returned to Heaven.

Eustace went home and again told his wife all that had happened. Together they waited to see how Christ’s words would be fulfilled

CHAPTER 3

“apa,” Little Theospitus put his finger to his father’s head. “How did you get that scar?”

Before Eustace could answer, his other young son informed Theospitus that scars like that were the price a great general like their father paid for fighting under the emperor. It showed his courage and bravery - more glorious than wearing over a hundred medals.

Theospitus was a little confused with the enthusiastic explanation from his older brother, Agapetus.

Eustace gently picked up his youngest son and put him on his lap. “Agapetus calls it a price, Theospitus, because you can never get the reward of a victory without going through the battle. The harder the battle, and the harder you fight, the more likely you will receive a wound or a scar like the one I have atop my head. But when,” he poked the nipper’s knee, “the battle is indeed over, and you have fought with all your courage and strength, then you will receive the reward of victory. And any sign that shows what pain you went through is a jewel that shines for all to see. It shows how terrible was the battle in which you had such a glorious victory. So- “

Eustace and his sons were interrupted by a distinct clang that resembled their gate being used. Heavy and hurried footsteps were heading towards them. In came one of Eustace’s servants who seemed to be in great distress.

“Master,” he addressed Saint Eustace. “You need to come with me right now!”

“What is it?”, asked Eustace. “Is there something wrong?” He looked at his wife, Theospis. He could see the worry behind her eyes.

“The women,” the servant stammered on, “and a few of the men have become deathly ill. If you were to ask me, I’d say by the looks of it, it’s a plague. Almost everyone has caught it.”

Eustace’s eyes met Theospis’. Both had the same thought. Our Lord had said only a few days ago, that there were trials ahead. They had begun. Eustace sensed his wife’s courage was waning as the reality of their future was becoming more clear. The commander-in-chief took a deep breath and without words encouraged the hearts of his household to embrace what God had sent them. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. His very example and demeanor revealed his determination to anchor his family to Faith in God as they were tossed about in this storm of trials. He would face these hardships with the same courage and bravery that had won him that scar on his head.

He smiled bravely at Theospis, thus bringing courage back into her soul, and told her to take Agapetus and Theospitus out of harm’s way until he could deal with this. Then he directed his attention to the servants. But it was not God’s will that the servants live longer. Every man and woman that served Eustace - even the servant that warned him in the first place - caught the deadly disease and died within a short time. Soon afterwards his animals - the horses and herds - all died as well.

CHAPTER 3

Then when Eustace, grand commander-in-chief of Emperor Trajan, was reduced to the state of being deprived of servants and livestock, lawless men sought to take advantage of him. One night, when the house was still, and his family in bed, Saint Eustace was awakened by unfamiliar footsteps. He quickly realized that he was being robbed. The nature of the noises were those of men who have a less than honest task to perform. The first thought he had was his family's safety, as opposed to the security of his possessions. He quickly and silently made sure that his wife and children were unharmed. The time that elapsed from when the thieves had broken in to when they had awoken him had been longer than Eustace had imagined. By the time that his family was safe, the thieves had had their fill and taken everything they could get their hands on. It was a rich-less house that Eustace's family woke up to that morning - they had nothing left.

Eustace, however, blessed God and thanked Him for the sufferings. They were hard, very hard. Especially for Eustace, since he was used to having authority over people - most of whom were now dead. He was also used to having many possessions and luxuries at his disposal. He was a very popular man and a grand general with many friends. Now, what would they all think if they knew what had befallen him. In order to escape the disgrace of poverty, Eustace decided to take his small family and leave. They had nothing left - nothing to cling to - no reason to stay. So that they might avoid gossip and humiliation, Eustace prepared his family to flee in the middle of the night.

Eustace's flight was not only hard on him but was also a shock for the king and the Roman senators. They had lost an excellent commander-in-chief and could find no one that could equal, much less surpass, Eustace' talents.

Nevertheless, Eustace and his small family headed towards the sea. His plans were for them to settle in Egypt. They got to the docks, boarded a boat and sailed towards their destination. On they traveled, perhaps thinking that they could begin anew in the foreign country. Land was in sight and all the passengers prepared to go ashore. The time came to pay for the passage and Eustace had nothing to give. He exchanged glances with Theospis and then looked at his boys. Everything had either been lost or stolen from them back in Rome. Even if he had money though, it would not have mattered. The captain of the ship wanted a different kind of payment. He commanded that Eustace's beautiful wife be held on board. He intended to marry her himself...

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“**N**o!” Eustace said emphatically, “I will never give you my beloved wife!” The captain argued and threatened but Eustace absolutely refused. Seeing that he was getting nowhere, the master of the ship changed his tactics. So that he could have the Saint’s wife, the captain told his crew to throw Eustace overboard. Eustace sadly looked at his two small children. What would happen to them? He couldn’t leave them with a dead father and no mother. He was unable to resist any further, and although he did not agree, he could not refuse. Theospis was kept onboard as she sadly watched her husband and two boys go ashore. Her eyes filled with tears. As the courage in her heart began to fall again, she couldn’t strengthen it with Eustace’s. She sought for the bravery in his eyes but they showed only the anguish in his soul. Had the Lord truly abandoned them or was this a trial that would end with death? As they walked further from the dock, Eustace turned his tearful eyes towards the boat. “Woe to me,” he cried to his sons. “Woe to you, a man of no morals - without the true Faith - has stolen your mother by force.”

As Eustace traveled on with Agapetus and Theospitus they came to a rushing river. Their father couldn’t possibly attempt to carry both boys over at once without endangering all their lives. Eustace picked up the younger of the two and prepared to cross. “Stay and wait for me, Agapetus,” said the father to the elder son. Agapetus nodded and watched his family wade out into the flooding river. The strong soldier dragged his feet through the strong currents and struggled to keep his boy above the water. As he reached the opposite shore, he quickly discovered that the waters were rising over the banks and that Agapetus was in danger. Warning Theospitus to wait for him and his brother, Eustace began his return journey to Agapetus. When he was halfway across the river, he heard a cry from behind him. He turned to see poor Theospitus trying to run from a wolf. Before Eustace could take any steps to return to him, the wolf had taken the frightened child in its jaws and scurried into the forest. Almost immediately after this, while Eustace was still trapped by the swirling waters, a lion appeared from nowhere. Quickly, it seized Agapetus and carried him off. Eustace felt powerless to defend either, much less both, of his children. Nor could he decide which to follow. Since both happened almost at once, it was impossible for him- in the middle of the river- to rescue either one, no matter which one he chose. The desolate soldier began to moan and miserably pull his hair as he beheld his beloved sons’ unhappy end. There may be no sorrow equal to that of a father who must watch his children suffer and even die while he is unable to help and protect them. Eustace was overwhelmed with grief. If it was not for God’s grace, he would have abandoned himself to the relentless waters.

Eustace sadly climbed out of the river weeping, “Alas, alas! Once I flourished like a tree, but now I am almost leafless! Woe is me! Once I was surrounded by a multitude of soldiers, but now I am alone, and even the company of my sons is denied me! I remember, Lord,” Eustace raised his eyes to Heaven, “that you told me it was my lot to be tried as Job was tried, but it seems to me that even more ills have come to me than to him. Even if he was stripped of his possessions, he could at least have dirt to sit on, but I have not even that! He had friends to share his misery, but I have only the fierce beasts that stole my sons. Job’s wife was left to him, I am bereft of mine. Give pause, O Lord, to my tribulations

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and set a guard over my mouth, lest my heart incline to evil words, and I be cast out of Thy sight.” He lowered his head to the ground as if in submission to the will of God and went on his way. He came to a certain village and the commander-in-chief to the emperor’s armies sought humble work in the fields of the men that lived there. Thus he lived for fifteen years and yet all the while, in his apparent abandonment, he could not forget the words Our Lord had spoken to him. “But when you have been humbled, I will come to you and restore to you your former glory.. “

CHAPTER 5



So the fifteen years passed and Eustace continued his life in the village. Although the day of his separation from his sons was still a horribly stark memory, Eustace was not fully aware of all that had come to pass that day. As the wolf raced through the forest with Theospitus, the huntsmen on that riverside had seen the helpless child and, with a cry, had quickly summoned help to free him. When he was safe, Theospitus was found to be unharmed. The lion too, was seen by some shepherds who resolutely followed it with their dogs. God commanded the lion to release Agapetus, which he did, leaving him unharmed. The shepherds and huntsmen were from the same village and so the boys were raised not far from each other without even knowing they were brothers.

And while Eustace mourned the sad plight of his wife, he was ignorant of the protection that God had bestowed upon her. She was not forced to become the captain's wife, but was left unharmed 'til the day he died. So from Eustace's view all was lost and hopeless, but from God's view all was playing into place. Eustace thought his wife was maltreated and his sons dead, when Theospis was free from evil and his young boys- now, nearly grown men- in the next village.

Now the Romans all this while were being harassed by enemies. The emperor sat in thought and grieved over the loss of his best general.

"If only Placidus were commander-in-chief of my armies again!" The emperor sadly thought of the terrible disasters that had befallen his best soldier. Now, more than ever did he need a competent general to lead his men to victory. Well, this was the time when he would find him. The emperor summoned countless soldiers and sent them to different parts of the world searching for Placidus, promising that whoever found him would receive great honors and riches.

Now as it happened, two men who had actually served under Eustace (when his name was still Placidus) came to the village where he lived. Eustace saw them from across the field and recognized them by the way they walked. It disturbed him, though, to see them, for it reminded him of his past position of honor. He sighed and said to God, "Lord, I see these men who were with me, whom I had not hoped ever to see again! Please grant that I may again see my wife! I cannot ask for my sons, because they were eaten by wild beasts." And God answered him, saying: "Have confidence, Eustace, because you will soon have back your high honors, and your sons and your wife will be restored to you!" As hard as it was to believe those tidings, Placidus did have confidence in the word of God even though he did not understand it.

As he approached the soldiers, they failed to recognize him and asked if he heard of a stranger they were looking for. His name was Placidus and he had a wife and two sons. After listening to the description of himself, Eustace denied of knowing the man, but nevertheless invited the soldiers to a meal. They graciously agreed and followed their host to his home. Placidus, as he remembered the rank that once was his, had to struggle not to weep. So as to conceal his tears, he abruptly left to wash his face, before serving his guests. His guests were actually not anxious to be served but began to have

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a curious conversation with one another.

“Doesn’t that man look a lot like the one we’re looking for?”, said the first man.

“He certainly does,” the other said. “We’ll watch him closely, and if he has a scar on his head like the one our general had, he’s the one!”

So in came Eustace, prepared to serve his guests, and all the while being under their inquisitive gaze. Suddenly, they leapt from their seats and grasped him warmly. The renowned general was betrayed by the same scar that had fascinated his little Theospitus. With great interest and affection, they asked Eustace about himself and his family.

“Alas,” Eustace grieved, “my sons are dead and my wife is in captivity.”

Then the neighbors, hearing all the commotion, rushed into the house to witness the conversation. The two soldiers began to boast of Eustace’s bravery and skill to their amazed audience. They astounded the neighbors with his past victories and glories. Then they told Eustace about the emperor’s order. They clothed their commander-in-chief in fine robes and prepared to return him to his emperor.

CHAPTER 6



It was a 15 day journey back to Rome, but to Eustace it seemed like he was going back 15 years. Here he was - he had accepted his misery and lowliness and was resigned to being forgotten - but now his honor was being restored to him. The promise of Our Lord, which had for so long encouraged him in his sadness, was now being fulfilled. More than honor, though, Eustace longed to have his heart united with those that he loved. But then, as hard as it seemed, God had promised him that too. Eustace's faith, trust and obedience had won for him God's blessings. And so somewhere inside his soul his hope began to take root once more.

The expectation of the arrival of the former commander-in-chief of the empire was so great that the emperor himself went out to meet him with warm embraces. The emperor listened with sympathy as Eustace explained the remarkable and tragic turn that his life had taken 15 years before. But then Trajan made use of his treasured officer and sent him back to work. They brought the Saint to military headquarters and placed him in full command. Even though 15 years of inexperience had buried his militant talents, when Eustace came into his familiar surroundings he snapped back into that intelligent commander that had earned such a glorious reputation.

A battle needed preparation, and as Eustace surveyed his troops, he was not satisfied with their numbers.

"We're going to need more men," he decided.

"Sir," one of the soldiers said, "are you sure?"

"Look," Eustace pointed to the reports, "Our foes are far too great for this assembly. I want recruits from every town and village. We'll have this number increased."

Eustace's order for new recruits was carried out to the letter, even to the village where his two sons lived. The number of men called from each town was based on a number of factors, including its population. This village was called to send two recruits, of which they chose their best. By the will of God, the locals unanimously agreed that the two men best fit for the job were the shepherd's boy (Agapetus) and that of the huntsman (Theospitus). So the village sent off the two brothers to report in to their father. All of this being done completely on accident by them, but not by God. When the recruits came, Eustace was particularly impressed and pleased with these two athletic and virtuous men. So much so, that he had them placed in his personal company of trusted soldiers.

Off to war they went, confident with their old general back in his place. And Eustace did indeed, by the grace of God, lead his men to a great victory. After which, Eustace allowed a three day period of rest for the men. The troops traveled on until Eustace found the place where they would take it. God guided his choice and the Saint chose the place where, although he did not know it, his wife kept a little inn. The two brothers, by the will of God, took their lodge where, unbeknownst to them, their mother was hostess. One day, while enjoying the retreat, the two soldiers - not knowing any

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of the other troops, began chatting alone outside the inn. They didn't give much attention to their surroundings though, for they were not alone at all. The keeper of the inn had seated herself a short distance away and was listening intently.

The eldest man said to the younger: "I can't remember anything about my childhood, except that my father was the commander of the armies, and my mother was a very beautiful woman. They had two sons, me and a younger one – he was very handsome too," Agapetus smiled at the memory of his younger brother. Then his eyebrows drew closer as things had changed for the worse, " – and our parents took us one night and we boarded a ship going I don't know where. When we got off the ship, our mother stayed on board, I don't know why. Our father was crying as he carried the two of us and came to a river, which he crossed carrying my younger brother, leaving me behind on the riverbank. When he was on his way back to get me, a wolf came and ran off with my brother, and, before my father could reach me, a lion came out of the forest, seized me, and dragged me into the woods. Shepherders snatched me from the lion's mouth and brought me up on their own lands, as you know. I never could find out what became of my father and the boy." Agapetus looked at his unsheathed sword in thought. His mind had often dwelt on his family, forever lost as far as he could reason. His thoughts were interrupted by his companion's weeping.

"Thank God!", the younger soldier looked up at Agapetus'. "From what I hear, I am your brother, because the men who brought me up said the same thing – that they had snatched me from a wolf!" Theospitus threw himself into his older brother's arms who wept with joy and thanksgiving to God for restoring to him one third of his family.

Theospis was deeply moved and silently withdrew from this tender reunion. One thought now plagued her mind. She spent hours pondering on whether or not these two brothers could be her sons. Their names were never mentioned but the description of their parents was hauntingly similar to Eustace and herself. Countless thoughts swirled through her mind but nothing was clear, nothing was certain. Unable to arrive at any conclusion, she was determined to at least return to Rome, her true home and the only place she could hope of finding any news of her family. So Theospis resolved to speak to the commander of the Roman army residing in the town, of which these boys belonged, hoping that he would allow her to journey with them back to Rome. She would be much safer with the army and more sure to arrive at her destination. But would he allow a woman to travel back with them? Even so, could she really hope to find her family again? And in Rome? They were fleeing Rome when she was separated from them. Theospis just shook her head in grief. Thoughts like these weighed heavily on her troubled soul. She raised her eyes to God and prayed. She would stick to her original plan. Ask the Roman general and hope he will generously allow her to join him on their return trip to Rome. Very well then, wait and pray.....

CHAPTER 7

“Sir,” a stern-looking soldier saluted his general while still keeping the door open. The bright morning light came pouring into Eustace’s room. “There’s a woman out here who wants to see you.” Eustace glanced at the door and then signaled the waiting soldier to let her in. Almost immediately, a beautiful woman was ushered into the Saint’s room. She took no time at all to make known the reason for her visit.

“I beg of you, my lord, to order me returned to my native land, because I am a Roman and thereforeaforeigner here,” she slowly said the last few words as she began to study the commander’s face. When her eyes met his, her heart nearly stopped. The commander had hardly a moment to consider her request when he suddenly found she’d thrown herself at his feet.

“Um....,” Eustace stuttered, trying to look at the woman’s anxious face.

“I pray you, my lord,” she begged, “tell me about your early life, because I think you are Placidus, commander of the armies, and are also called Eustace, whom the Savior converted when you were still Placidus.” The soldier was taken aback. “You underwent one trial after another. Your wife – and I am she,” Eustace studied her more carefully, “– was taken from you at sea but was preserved from abuse and degradation. I had two sons, whose names were Agapetus and Theospitus.”

Eustace took her face in his hands and then, recognizing his beloved wife, instantly pulled her from her knees and pressed her to his heart, weeping with joy. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Eustace raised his grateful eyes towards Heaven. God had answered His servant’s prayer, and while Eustace believed his sons were lost, God had at least restored to him his faithful wife. “My master,” Theospis said at last through her tears, “where are our sons?” Eustace’s heart grew heavy, and he said with some reluctance, “They were carried off by wild beasts.” He went on to explain all that had happened after they were forced off the boat to go ashore. At the end of his narrative, the soldier was surprised to find that he had not broken his wife’s heart but had instead elated it.

“Thank God!”, she exclaimed, bursting with joy. “I think that as God has given us the gift of finding each other, He will also give us the joy of recognizing our sons.” Her husband gave her a disbelieving stare. “I told you,” Eustace insisted, “they were carried off by wild beasts. I saw this myself!” Did she hear anything he’d said?

Throwing off his doubt, she respectfully explained herself. “Yesterday, as I was sitting in my garden, I heard two young soldiers telling each other about their childhood. After listening to one another, they came to realize that they were long lost brothers that had been miraculously reunited by the True God. After listening to their details, I am convinced that they are also our long lost sons that the same True God, in His mercy, is now restoring to us! I beg you sir ask them! They will tell you!”

The two men in question were sent for immediately. Upon their arrival they were asked to give an accounting of their youth. As Eustace heard his sons speak of their past, he clearly recognized it as his

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own. The saintly parents grasped their long-lost children with tender embraces. Kisses were exchanged amidst the tears of joy shed by that family which was whole once more. When the Roman army found out what had happened there arose a deafening cheer, and they all rejoiced for the reuniting of their commander-in-chief's family. Also they celebrated - from the soldiers' point of view - their great military victory over the barbarians.

The time came for everyone to return to Rome. The Emperor Trajan though, had died while they were gone and was succeeded by a man named Hadrian. The new emperor gave Eustace and his family a magnificent welcome and then hosted an elegant banquet to celebrate his victory in battle as well as finding his family. The very next day, to continue the celebration, the emperor led a procession to the temple of one of their many false gods. He went so that everyone could offer a sacrifice in gratitude. As Hadrian did so, he noticed one small point. Where was his commander-in-chief? Why was he not offering sacrifice to the idols, as he had done in the past, after a triumphant battle? And wasn't his family just reunited after many years of pain, grief and separation? Surely an offering must be made to compensate for that!

But Eustace did not owe either victory to devils (for all "gods" except, of course, the Most Holy Trinity, are false "gods". To worship them is to give honor to the demons, not to the One True God).

"I worship Christ as God and I sacrifice to One, True God alone!", the great soldier said bravely. He knew the consequences- the consequences of every battle- would be a wound. Some just leave scars ... others are mortal.

Emperor Hadrian was in a rage! He had a great hatred for Jesus Christ and all the faithful Roman Catholics who were members of Christ's One, True Church. So the angry tyrant ordered Eustace and his family to be thrown to the lions. Soldiers came and reluctantly bound their own general, along with his wife and sons, and brought them into the arena. The emperor sat comfortably in his special seat overlooking the entire arena. He wanted to be able to watch every gory detail as the wild and starving lions tore these Catholics apart while feeding on their living flesh. Slowly he raised his arm to signal the release of the beasts. He held his hand long in the air hoping that Saint Eustace, or some member of his family, would become filled with terror and openly reject Jesus Christ. He waited what seemed to everyone in the stadium to be a very long time. But there were no outbursts for mercy, no begging for a chance to live at any price.

Hadrian sensed the admiration from the soldiers at the courage and moral strength of their former leader. The emperor was jealous of Eustace's popularity. He was even more jealous of the Saint's courage. He had hoped to humble the great Catholic general by forcing him to beg for mercy while denying his God. Instead, it was the pathetic, little dictator who was being humbled by this great man. Everyone there could see that Saint Eustace was now serving his God with the same faithful and steadfast bravery as he had, in the past, served the country that was now putting him to death.

As the emperor's embarrassment rose, so did his anger. And as his anger rose, so did his vicious desire that the beasts would be particularly brutal today. Suddenly - swiftly - like a guillotine, Hadrian's hand fell. From the opposite end of the arena there immediately came the sounds of wooden bars and

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metal gates in motion. In an instant a ferocious lion appeared which quickly bounded across the arena towards his victims.

How could this possibly be the fulfillment of God's promise to Eustace? Ending his life in a blood-stained arena would certainly qualify for "trials at your life's end." Yet, that wasn't the choice that he had made. Eustace knew that God always keeps His word and struggled to believe that as he saw his family's end come nearer with every leap of the ravenous beast. As his wife and sons huddled around him - seeking his strength and his faith in God - he heard again the words that Jesus had spoken to him that day so long ago, "I will come to you and restore to you your former glory!" Eustace would not yield to the doubts that were swirling around inside of him. Somehow God would keep His word! Eustace clung to this. As he watched the ferocious lion gaining speed, spitting out the dust of the arena floor from beneath his claws, he refused to believe that God would not keep His promise - even in the face of a brutal and immediate reality that proved the opposite to be true. Didn't his wife get taken from him by force? Didn't he see, with his own eyes, each of his sons carried off, in the mouths of wild beasts? And yet, God kept His word. He said He would restore Eustace to his former glory. Now, here they were, huddled together in the midst of an arena, filled with fellow citizens assembled together to watch him and his family members die a cruel and humiliating death. But God would keep His promise! Suddenly the lion was near them and leaped high into the air to pounce upon his victims. Eustace saw the blurring body of the animal that had been starved, driven mad with hunger, as it now closed in for the kill. But God would keep His word ... somehow ...

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Saint Eustace seemed to be waking up from a dream.

He found himself pursuing a herd of agile deer with some of his most trusted soldiers. Suddenly the largest, most magnificent animal broke away from the herd and Eustace commanded his men to pursue the others but the prize stag would be his. Almost immediately he was alone with the animal at the height of a tall peak when it stopped and turned majestically toward him. From between the antlers there began to glow a brilliant light, in the center of which was the figure of Man upon a Cross.

As Eustace fell from his horse he heard, "I am the Christ! I created Heaven and Earth...For the salvation of the human race I took flesh ... I was crucified and buried, and on the third day I arose again."

Struggling to stand, the pagan military commander cried, "I believe that You are, that You created all things, and that You convert the erring, if they will obey You. I want to obey!"

The Voice touched the deepest part of his soul. "Blessed are you Eustace for having accepted the Truths of My Church, The Roman Catholic Church, ... by this you have defeated the devil who previously had deceived you into worshipping false gods. Because you have trampled him under foot by true Baptism he will fight furiously against you to drag your soul down to hell with him. You will have to endure many hardships in order to receive the crown of victory!... Do not lose courage...My grace will guard your soul and those of your loved ones...You will have to suffer much ..." As these words echoed in Eustace's ears the light grew until it blinded him completely.

When the light dimmed, he was back on his estates surrounded by the dead bodies of his servants of his livestock. The commander general for the entire empire had to stand by helplessly while evil men plundered his house, stealing all of his gold, silver and other possession of value.

As he gathered his wife and sons around him he realized that he was on the deck of a boat, anchored off a foreign land and his wife was being brutally dragged from his embrace. He turned to make certain of the safety of his sons only to see each of them carried off in the mouths of wild beasts. Alone, penniless, exiled in a foreign land he stood, paralyzed by shock until the bitter cold of a relentless and driving rain forced him to seek shelter.

He seemed trapped in a gray mist, surrounded by demons that were mocking him for believing in Jesus and trusting in Him. Eustace was sorely tempted to lose faith in the True God, but Our Lord gave him the grace to hold on, even in the face of all these crushing misfortunes. He remembered that Jesus had told His followers, "Unless you deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Me, you cannot be My disciples."

Then, in quick succession, he was discovered by some of his old soldiers, restored to his former position as the military leader for the entire empire and reunited to his beloved wife and children - all

of whom had been protected by God Himself.

Standing at the head of a large banquet table, beside the emperor himself, he realized that he was greater now than he had been before he lost everything. His family, together again, was closer and loved each other more deeply than before. Ironically, it was specifically because they had been separated. His position, wealth and possessions were all greater than before. Even his glory was greater. After Eustace's surprise return, he had led the imperial forces against enemies that had been plaguing the empire while he'd been away. His troops had won great victories. He himself had new, fresh scars - new fresh glory - for it is a glory to be wounded when you are fighting in a just war and he was defending the people of his country from invaders. He gently touched the fresh new marks of honor which testified to his bravery and courage.

Suddenly he heard, "Large new jewels for your crown of glory?" It was his precious sons Theospitus and Agapetus who approached, bearing their own scars from their recent battles. Eustace looked pleasingly at his sons who, by the grace of God, had grown into such fine, brave, moral young men.

As he formed a prayer of gratitude to God in his heart, he noticed at the table where he stood, his treasured wife sitting nearby. What a gift it was for a husband and wife to share a love that is pleasing to God, when so many marriages do not. A love that begins with each person's own love for the One, True God that they then share with each other. This love then draws them closer and closer to God first, and then towards their spouse. Yes, Eustace had much to be thankful for...

"Tomorrow we shall give thanks for these victories!" declared the emperor Hadrian. "We shall go to the temple and burn sacrifices to our gods!" he announced, to the enthusiastic approval of the pagan assembly. "Our gods?" thought Eustace. There was a time when he was ignorant and actually believed in these "gods". But now he knew better. There is only One True God - The Most Holy Trinity. All other "gods" are false. As the Holy Bible says, demons are being worshipped when we do not worship the True God.

As the boisterous guests continued their cheering and applause, the curtained white marble walls of the palace were somehow transformed into the tapestried cold, dark stone walls of the pagan temple. The emperor was calling on Eustace to offer sacrifices of gratitude and words of praise to the demon "gods" the empire worshipped. Eustace was standing at the altar and a minister of the temple thrust a spoonlike utensil in his hand, filled with aromatic herbs and spices. Across the room, directly in front of the altar, sat the emperor Hadrian in a special throne-like chair. "Give thanks for your deliverance, Eustace!" came the command, rolling across the temple room, like a gentle threat filled with hidden danger.

"Gladly will I give thanks, oh Emperor, for the restoration of my family and the recent victories we have enjoyed over our enemies! But I will thank the true source of our blessings!" declared Eustace - his voice rising above that of Hadrian's. His comments caught the assembly - even the emperor - off guard. "What do you mean 'true source'?" demanded the tyrant.

Standing tall behind the altar, while facing everyone who had come in official procession to offer sacrifice, Eustace raised his eyes to Heaven as he proclaimed: "Hear, my people, that the True God who

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created all of Heaven and Earth is the Most Holy Trinity of Whom the Second Person became a man - Jesus of Galilee. He suffered, was crucified by His own people, the Jews, and was buried. But on the third day He arose again by His own power and made eternal salvation possible for every person that believes in Him and obeys His laws.”

“Lies!” screamed the pagan priests as they rushed to grab him and drag him out of the temple. “Do not listen to him! He lies!”

“I speak the truth!” cried Eustace. “I am a living witness to the power and love of the True God!”

“You will soon be a dead memorial to the power of the empire, if you are not careful with your words, Eustace!” warned Hadrian, beginning to stand as his pure hatred for Jesus Christ and Catholics began to rise up within him.

Easily fending off the puny temple priests, Eustace spoke even more loudly, more boldly: “My countrymen! Have I not risked my life to protect your bodies and your material possessions from our natural enemies that can be conquered?” Affirmative murmurs flashing through the crowd proved that it was true. “Why, then, should I not risk my life now to protect your eternal souls from the unending, unbearable torments of hell which no man can stop! Jesus of Galilee is the Christ that the whole world has been waiting for and so desperately needs!” His voice now was bellowing, so as to be heard above the din of his enemies scattered throughout the assembly. Just like on the battlefield when he would give commands to his men for their safety and success.

“Sacrifice, worship or die!” screamed Hadrian, his voice quivering in anger.

“I worship Christ as God and I sacrifice to the True God alone!” Eustace proclaimed, as his voice rose majestically like the special thunder which flows from the very heights of the heavens and inspires awe and a little fear in all who hear it. He then took his legs, braced himself, and overturned the altar - smashing the stone and scattering burning debris across the floor towards the emperor.

Hadrian responded instantly like a ferocious animal that had just been wounded. He leaped out of his seat and began charging towards Saint Eustace; barking out orders to the temple guards as he raced towards the courageous and holy military commander. Everything else surrounding the furious tyrant seemed to dissolve, and the Saint could only make out the face of Hadrian as he furiously rushed towards Eustace. His face became more disfigured, more distorted as his hatred for Jesus, and all those who loved Jesus, spread like a raging fire within him. As the wretched dictator leaped wildly over the fallen stone altar his features began to appear less and less like a human being and more and more like a lunging wild animal...like a bull...a bear..... a lion.....

A lion!

Saint Eustace instantly realized that he had been reliving all the important moments of his life from his first encounter with Jesus to the present moment...of his martyrdom. The memory of Hadrian’s face that day in the temple gave way to the present reality of the image of a frenzied lion, driven mad by starvation beginning to pounce on his helpless victims.

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But there was a greater danger to Saint Eustace than the ravenous lion. Swarming around him, unseen to human eyes, were a pack of ravenous demons. They were trying to cause him doubt about God so that he would deny Jesus to save his life and the lives of his loved ones.

“Do you want to endure trials now or at the end of your life?” Our Lord’s question rang in Eustace’s ears, He had chosen to suffer then and not now. And they had suffered, much, but God had risen him back to glory just as He had promised. The devils desired more than anything else to get him to curse and reject the True God, just as the first Job had been tempted to do. They tried to inspire Eustace with doubts about God and whispered thoughts into his mind - *God isn’t fair’. Eustace and his family had not done anything so bad as to deserve to be put to death and in such a humiliating way! Eustace was a man of fame and distinction. How could God have him die this way? Besides, Eustace had faithfully served God ... where was his reward? And finally, God said they would not suffer at the end of their life. Now, their lives would soon be over, gnawed to death by a savage beast! How is it possible? To die like this is a severe trial! Either Eustace’s God is a liar or helpless or does not know what He is talking about! No matter which one is true, it means that He cannot possibly be the True God! Reject Him Eustace, quickly! There is still time! Save yourself! Quickly! God does NOT keep His promises!!*

Doubts began to swirl around him so rapidly, Eustace began to feel as though he was drowning in them. But Jesus’ prophecy came back to him, “The devil, because you have left him, will fight furiously against you...but...My grace will guard your souls.” Eustace looked toward Heaven and echoed the words of the Old Testament Job, “Although He should kill me, yet I will trust Him.” At this profound act of faith, all the treacherous liars from hell were put to flight and grace continued to pour into his mind, heart, and soul.

Saint Eustace realized that when we die is not important. It is why we die that matters. God had brought Eustace and his family to this point. If He was now asking them to sacrifice their lives to testify to the truth of the Most Holy Trinity, well, that was God’s right. Hadn’t Eustace risked death for the sake of other creatures - fellow human beings? Didn’t God have infinitely greater rights over his life, and the lives of his family, than mere men? If it was seen as a great honor and glory to die to defend and protect one’s country, then what words could possibly describe dying to defend and protect the truths and the religion of the One, True God?

The lion began to leap straight at Saint Eustace from some distance away. Saint Eustace instinctively pushed his family away as he positioned himself to be the first victim. “If this be God’s holy will for us, then let it be our own as well!” declared Saint Eustace, not only to his wife and sons, but to everyone in the arena as well. He knelt down, braced himself, and prayed for God’s own courage, as the lion began to descend upon him. His wife turned away, as his sons sheltered her between themselves, screening her from viewing the gruesome fate of their father. All three stiffened as they prepared for the worst.

But then something happened. Something very unusual.

After thudding down forcefully, practically at Eustace’s feet, the lion stopped in his tracks! Not only did he stop abruptly, but, to the amazement of everyone there that day, he lowered his head towards his intended victims and revered them as Saints. Finally, after humbly recognizing their holiness, this

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wild beast - that had been driven mad by starvation - now meekly withdrew, leaving them completely untouched and, truthfully, somewhat bewildered.

The Emperor Hadrian, though, was not bewildered. He was now insane. Insane with his hatred of the True God and His power. This miraculous performance by the lion could only be viewed as a divine reprimand to Hadrian for being unjust toward this great commander and his family. It was humiliating, and prideful people don't take humiliations very well. Indeed, the tyrant's hatred by now had consumed him. Out of control, he immediately charged Saint Eustace with sorcery. This means that he was saying that Eustace had gotten demons to stop the lion and make it act strangely. This of course was a lie and most everyone in the arena knew it. Sorcerers do not practice virtues like true humility, charity, forgiveness, courage, and the other virtues which Saint Eustace, with the help of God's grace, had obtained through the trials he had endured. No, he was no sorcerer, and most everyone in the arena let the emperor know how they felt. Of course, he didn't care - it made no difference. He ordered that Saint Eustace and his family were to be placed in a large container made out of bronze and in the shape of a bull.

As the family was led to this new place of execution, Eustace's prayers were suddenly interrupted. "Father?" It was little Theospitus, though not so little anymore. "Does every battle have an end?"

They approached the deadly portal. His family all turned toward Eustace.

"...when does the victory begin?" His son finished his question.

"When you have proven yourself a true and faithful soldier," the Saint addressed his whole family, "then the Captain will call you home to celebrate and rest."

Inside the brass bull, Eustace saw Christ beckoning him to come, as He had done 15 years before atop that magnificent stag. This time, though, God was not summoning him to the battle but from it - to a crown of victory - a martyr's crown.

"He's calling us," Eustace stepped into the entrance, then turned toward his small, brave army. "Are you ready?" They had been ready, at any moment, without hesitation, to obey the command of the captain God had given them. Following Eustace, they all entered the brazen animal of death, praying to the good God and commending their souls to Him.

Once he and his family were inside, Hadrian ordered that the great brass doors be shut and a huge fire to be enkindled. Soon the entire shell of the metal bull was completely engulfed in flames. A grim smile curled on Hadrian's lips. He had beaten that Catholic troublemaker! Yes, and the false God of the Catholics! He stood, slowly, trembling in excitement. His voice spilled out like drum rolls throughout the arena.

"They have been abandoned by their God!" he proclaimed, as though announcing that the empire's greatest enemy had been vanquished. "Where is this Jesus of Galilee? His disciples are there," gesturing mockingly towards the glowing figure of the brazen bull, "...cooking nicely! "

And then he laughed. It was a deep, sinister, evil laugh that trailed behind Hadrian as he made his

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way out of the arena. It was a good day after all. That insolent commander-in-chief was dead, or soon would be, together with his miserable family. Their execution would send the right message to all other Catholics in the empire. Hadrian was putting them all on notice that it was his priority, for the good of the nation, that they would all soon be hunted down and exterminated if they insisted upon the divinity of this Jesus of Galilee and the unique truth of His Roman Catholic religion. Yes, he would get started with his persecutions right away. He hoped that they would be the bloodiest so far against Jesus' young Church. Yes, it was a good day after all...

Soon after the emperor left, most everyone else did as well. Most had lost interest after the miraculous taming of the lion. Some even had the honesty to admit that Eustace and his poor family should have been released, by rights, when the initial attempt to execute them had failed. But soon most thoughts turned to the coming evening and how they would entertain themselves before they went to bed.

Everyone snaked out through the exits. Well, almost everyone. A few in the immense crowd had stayed - on purpose. They were secretly Catholics and had stayed to pray for Eustace and his family. They also desired to collect the holy remains of these martyrs each of whom was now a Saint in Heaven. They waited patiently for the fires to die down but when they approached the guards, they were told that Hadrian had ordered that the doors would not be opened for three days. If the fires hadn't killed any of them completely, three days without food or water should finish them off. A nice, slow, painful way to die.

But wait! God had clearly told Saint Eustace that he would only endure trials in the past, not at the end of his life. Being cooked to death slowly over a raging fire seems a very awful trial to endure! And what if somehow they were still partly alive? Then three days of slow, painful starvation would finish them off. But again, that certainly would qualify as a trial to endure at the end? How is it possible?

God, the True God - the Most Holy Trinity - is no liar. He is more faithful to His true servants than they could ever hope to be to Him. Whose grace was it that kept Saint Eustace and his family safe and faithful for all those years? Whose strength do martyrs draw their courage from? Every trial that they endured permitted them to earn merit. Merit is used to make reparation for our sins (and the sins of others) as well as purify our souls, help save other souls, help release the Poor Souls from Purgatory, console the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, and bring us into a closer, deeper union with Almighty God. The reward in Heaven is measured by the amount of merit that we've earned.

Everything God does is done from His immense Love. When something happens that we don't understand, we might think that God is being mean or unfair or that He isn't loving. Nothing could be further from the Truth. The problem is that we do not know God and we do not know what Love really is.

But Christ did promise that they would not endure trials at the end of their life.

When the three days were up, Hadrian was present as the great brass doors were opened. He was there to gloat when the charred and twisted remains of his victims were removed from their fiery coffin. A group of hand-picked officers were given the privilege to enter first. Hadrian was not prepared for the silence that gripped the chamber of death. Seized with impatience, he burst through the portal

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to demand an explanation for the delay. His eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped open as he was stopped dead in his tracks. He obviously was not ready for what he discovered.

There, in the center of the chamber, were the bodies of Saint Eustace, his wife and sons. They were all lying peacefully together as though enjoying a deep and well-earned rest. Not only were their bodies completely intact but there was no evidence at all that they had suffered in the slightest from the heat. Indeed, there was no evidence that they had suffered from anything at all.

God kept His promise.

From Heaven, Saint Eustace now understood that every sorrow and uncertainty that had afflicted them on earth had been fashioned so lovingly by God so that, when they patiently bore these trials for the Love of God, it permitted Him to weave for each of them an immense Heavenly reward. Saint Eustace also remembered that Jesus had promised him, “But when you have been humbled, through your trials, I will come to you and restore you to glory.”

God kept His promise..... again.

THE END

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