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The Life of Malchus, the Captive Monk

2 [The life of Malchus was written at Bethlehem, a.d. , 391.]

3 1. They who have to fight a naval battle prepare for it in harbours and calm waters
4 by adjusting the helm, plying the oars, and making ready the hooks and grappling
5 irons. They draw up the soldiers on the decks and accustom them to stand steady
6 with poised foot and on slippery ground; so that they may not shrink from all this
7 when the real encounter comes, because they have had experience of it in the sham
8 fight. And so it is in my case. I have long held my peace, because silence was
9 imposed on me by one to whom I give pain when I speak of him. But now, in
10 preparing to write history on a wider scale I desire to practise myself by means of
11 this little work and as it were to wipe the rust from my tongue. For I have purposed
12 (if God grant me life, and if my censurers will at length cease to persecute me, now
13 that I am a fugitive and shut up in a monastery) to write a history of the church of
14 Christ from the advent of our Saviour up to our own age, that is from
15 the apostles to the dregs of time in which we live, and to show by what means and
16 through what agents it received its birth, and how, as it gained strength, it grew
17 by persecution and was crowned with martyrdom; and then, after reaching
18 the Christian Emperors, how it increased in influence and in wealth but decreased
19 in Christian virtues. But of this elsewhere. Now to the matter in hand.

20 2. Maronia is a little hamlet some thirty miles to the east of Antioch in Syria. After
21 having many owners or landlords, at the time when I was staying as a young man
22 in Syria it came into the possession of my intimate friend, the Bishop Evagrius,
23 whose name I now give in order to show the source of my information. Well, there
24 was at the place at that time an old man by name Malchus, which we might
25 render king, a Syrian by race and speech, in fact a genuine son of the soil. His
26 companion was an old woman very decrepit who seemed to be at death's door, both
27 of them so zealously pious and such constant frequenters of the Church, they might
28 have been taken for Zacharias and Elizabeth in the Gospel but for the fact that
29 there was no John to be seen. With some curiosity I asked the neighbours what was
30 the link between them; was it marriage, or kindred, or the bond of the Spirit? All
31 with one accord replied that they were holy people, well pleasing to God, and gave
32 me a strange account of them. Longing to know more I began to question the man
33 with much eagerness about the truth of what I heard, and learned as follows.

34 3. My son, said he, I used to farm a bit of ground at Nisibis and was an only son.
35 My parents regarding me as the heir and the only survivor of their race, wished to
36 force me into marriage, but I said I would rather be a monk. How my father
37 threatened and my mother coaxed me to betray my chastity requires no
38 other proof than the fact that I fled from home and parents. I could not go to the
39 East because Persia was close by and the frontiers were guarded by the soldiers of

40 Rome; I therefore turned my steps to the West, taking with me some little
41 provision for the journey, but barely sufficient to ward off destitution. To be brief,
42 I came at last to the desert of Chalcis which is situate between Immæ and Beroa
43 farther south. There, finding some monks, I placed myself under their direction,
44 earning my livelihood by the labour of my hands, and curbing the wantonness of
45 the flesh by fasting. After many years the desire came over me to return to my
46 country, and stay with my mother and cheer her widowhood while she lived (for
47 my father, as I had already heard, was dead), and then to sell the little property and
48 give part to the poor, settle part on the monasteries and (I blush to confess my
49 faithlessness) keep some to spend in comforts for myself. My abbot began to cry
50 out that it was a temptation of the devil, and that under fair pretexts some snare of
51 the old enemy lay hid. It was, he declared, a case of the dog returning to his vomit.
52 Many monks, he said, had been deceived by such suggestions, for the devil never
53 showed himself openly. He set before me many examples from the Scriptures, and
54 told me that even Adam and Eve in the beginning had been overthrown by him
55 through the hope of becoming gods. When he failed to convince me he fell upon
56 his knees and besought me not to forsake him, nor ruin myself by looking back
57 after putting my hand to the plough. Unhappily for myself I had the misfortune to
58 conquer my adviser. I thought he was seeking not my salvation but his own
59 comfort. So he followed me from the monastery as if he had been going to a

60 funeral, and at last bade me farewell, saying, I see that you bear the brand of a son
61 of Satan. I do not ask your reasons nor take your excuses. The sheep which
62 forsakes its fellows is at once exposed to the jaws of the wolf.

63 4. On the road from Beroa to Edessa adjoining the high-way is a waste over which
64 the Saracens roam to and fro without having any fixed abode. Through fear of
65 them travellers in those parts assemble in numbers, so that by mutual assistance
66 they may escape impending danger. There were in my company men, women, old
67 men, youths, children, altogether about seventy persons. All of a sudden the
68 Ishmaelites on horses and camels made an assault upon us, with their flowing hair
69 bound with fillets, their bodies half-naked, with their broad military boots, their
70 cloaks streaming behind them, and their quivers slung upon the shoulders. They
71 carried their bows unstrung and brandished their long spears; for they had come
72 not to fight, but to plunder. We were seized, dispersed, and carried in different
73 directions. I, meanwhile, repenting too late of the step I had taken, and far indeed
74 from gaining possession of my inheritance, was assigned, along with another poor
75 sufferer, a woman, to the service of one and the same owner. We were led, or
76 rather carried, high upon the camel's back through a desert waste, every moment
77 expecting destruction, and suspended, I may say, rather than seated. Flesh half raw
78 was our food, camel's milk our drink.

79 5. At length, after crossing a great river we came to the interior of the desert,
80 where, being commanded after the custom of the people to pay reverence to the
81 mistress and her children, we bowed our heads. Here, as if I were a prisoner, I
82 changed my dress, that is, learned to go naked, the heat being so excessive as to
83 allow of no clothing beyond a covering for the loins. Some sheep were given to me
84 to tend, and, comparatively speaking, I found this occupation a comfort, for I
85 seldom saw my masters or fellow slaves. My fate seemed to be like that of Jacob in
86 sacred history, and reminded me also of Moses; both of whom were once
87 shepherds in the desert. I fed on fresh cheese and milk, prayed continually, and
88 sang psalms which I had learned in the monastery. I was delighted with my
89 captivity, and thanked God because I had found in the desert the monk's estate
90 which I was on the point of losing in my country.

91 6. But no condition can ever shut out the Devil. How manifold past expression are
92 his snares! Hid though I was, his malice found me out. My master seeing his flock
93 increasing and finding no dishonesty in me (I knew that the Apostle has given
94 command that masters should be as faithfully served as God Himself), and wishing
95 to reward me in order to secure my greater fidelity, gave me the woman who was
96 once my fellow servant in captivity. On my refusing and saying I was a Christian,
97 and that it was not lawful for me to take a woman to wife so long as her husband
98 was alive (her husband had been captured with us, but carried off by another

99 master), my owner was relentless in his rage, drew his sword and began to make at
100 me. If I had not without delay stretched out my hand and taken possession of
101 the woman, he would have slain me on the spot. Well; by this time a darker night
102 than usual had set in and, for me, all too soon. I led my bride into an old cave;
103 sorrow was bride's-maid; we shrank from each other but did not confess it. Then I
104 really felt my captivity; I threw myself down on the ground, and began to lament
105 the monastic state which I had lost, and said: Wretched man that I am! Have I been
106 preserved for this? Has my wickedness brought me to this, that in my gray hairs I
107 must lose my virgin state and become a married man? What is the good of having
108 despised parents, country, property, for the Lord's sake, if I do the thing I wished to
109 avoid doing when I despised them? And yet it may be perhaps the case that I am in
110 this condition because I longed for home. What are we to do, my soul? Are we to
111 perish, or conquer? Are we to wait for the hand of the Lord, or pierce ourselves
112 with our own sword? Turn your weapon against yourself; I must fear your death,
113 my soul, more than the death of the body. Chastity preserved has its
114 own martyrdom. Let the witness for Christ lie unburied in the desert; I will be at
115 once the persecutor and the martyr. Thus speaking I drew my sword which
116 glittered even in the dark, and turning its point towards me said: Farewell,
117 unhappy woman: receive me as a martyr not as a husband. She threw herself at my
118 feet and exclaimed: I pray you by Jesus Christ, and adjure you by this hour of trial,

119 do not shed your blood and bring its guilt upon me. If you choose to die, first turn
120 your sword against me. Let us rather be united upon these terms. Supposing my
121 husband should return to me, I would preserve the chastity which I have learned in
122 captivity; I would even die rather than lose it. Why should you die to prevent a
123 union with me? I would die if you desired it. Take me then as the partner of
124 your chastity; and love me more in this union of the spirit than you could in that of
125 the body only. Let our master believe that you are my husband. Christ knows you
126 are my brother. We shall easily convince them we are married when they see us so
127 loving. I confess, I was astonished and, much as I had before admired the virtue of
128 the woman, I now loved her as a wife still more. Yet I never gazed upon her naked
129 person; I never touched her flesh, for I was afraid of losing in peace what I had
130 preserved in the conflict. In this strange wedlock many days passed away.
131 Marriage had made us more pleasing to our masters, and there was no suspicion of
132 our flight; sometimes I was absent for even a whole month like a trusty shepherd
133 traversing the wilderness.

134 7. After a long time as I sat one day by myself in the desert with nothing in sight
135 save earth and sky, I began quickly to turn things over in my thoughts, and among
136 others called to mind my friends the monks, and specially the look of the father
137 who had instructed me, kept me, and lost me. While I was thus musing I saw a
138 crowd of ants swarming over a narrow path. The loads they carried were clearly

139 larger than their own bodies. Some with their forceps were dragging along the
140 seeds of herbs: others were excavating the earth from pits and banking it up to keep
141 out the water. One party, in view of approaching winter, and wishing to prevent
142 their store from being converted into grass through the dampness of the ground,
143 were cutting off the tips of the grains they had carried in; another with solemn
144 lamentation were removing the dead. And, what is stranger still in such a host,
145 those coming out did not hinder those going in; nay rather, if they saw one fall
146 beneath his burden they would put their shoulders to the load and give him
147 assistance. In short that day afforded me a delightful entertainment. So,
148 remembering how Solomon sends us to the shrewdness of the ant and quickens our
149 sluggish faculties by setting before us such an example, I began to tire of captivity,
150 and to regret the monk's cell, and long to imitate those ants and their doings, where
151 toil is for the community, and, since nothing belongs to any one, all things belong
152 to all.

153 8. When I returned to my chamber, my wife met me. My looks betrayed the
154 sadness of my heart. She asked why I was so dispirited. I told her the reasons, and
155 exhorted her to escape. She did not reject the idea. I begged her to be silent on the
156 matter. She pledged her word. We constantly spoke to one another in whispers; and
157 we floated in suspense between hope and fear. I had in the flock two very fine he-
158 goats: these I killed, made their skins into bottles, and from their flesh prepared

159 food for the way. Then in the early evening when our masters thought we had
160 retired to rest we began our journey, taking with us the bottles and part of the flesh.
161 When we reached the river which was about ten miles off, having inflated the skins
162 and got astride upon them, we entrusted ourselves to the water, slowly propelling
163 ourselves with our feet, that we might be carried down by the stream to a point on
164 the opposite bank much below that at which we embarked, and that thus the
165 pursuers might lose the track. But meanwhile the flesh became sodden and partly
166 lost, and we could not depend on it for more than three days' sustenance. We drank
167 till we could drink no more by way of preparing for the thirst we expected to
168 endure, then hastened away, constantly looking behind us, and advanced more by
169 night than day, on account both of the ambushes of the roaming Saracens, and of
170 the excessive heat of the sun. I grow terrified even as I relate what happened; and,
171 although my mind is perfectly at rest, yet my frame shudders from head to foot.

172 9. Three days after we saw in the dim distance two men riding on camels
173 approaching with all speed. At once foreboding ill I began to think my master
174 purposed putting us to death, and our sun seemed to grow dark again. In the midst
175 of our fear, and just as we realized that our footsteps on the sand had betrayed us,
176 we found on our right hand a cave which extended far underground. Well, we
177 entered the cave: but we were afraid of venomous beasts such as vipers, basilisks,
178 scorpions, and other creatures of the kind, which often resort to such shady places

179 so as to avoid the heat of the sun. We therefore barely went inside, and took shelter
180 in a pit on the left, not venturing a step farther, lest in fleeing from death we should
181 run into death. We thought thus within ourselves: If the Lord helps us in our
182 misery we have found safety: if He rejects us for our sins, we have found our
183 grave. What do you suppose were our feelings? What was our terror, when in front
184 of the cave, close by, there stood our master and fellow-servant, brought by the
185 evidence of our footsteps to our hiding place? How much worse is death expected
186 than death inflicted! Again my tongue stammers with distress and fear; it seems as
187 if I heard my master's voice, and I hardly dare mutter a word. He sent his servant to
188 drag us from the cavern while he himself held the camels and, sword in hand,
189 waited for us to come. Meanwhile the servant entered about three or four cubits,
190 and we in our hiding place saw his back though he could not see us, for
191 the nature of the eye is such that those who go into the shade out of the sunshine
192 can see nothing. His voice echoed through the cave: Come out, you felons; come
193 out and die; why do you stay? Why do you delay? Come out, your master is calling
194 and patiently waiting for you. He was still speaking when lo! Through the gloom
195 we saw a lioness seize the man, strangle him, and drag him, covered with blood,
196 farther in. Good Jesus! How great was our terror now, how intense our joy! We
197 beheld, though our master knew not of it, our enemy perish. He, when he saw that
198 he was long in returning, supposed that the fugitives being two to one were

199 offering resistance. Impatient in his rage, and sword still in hand, he came to the
200 cavern, and shouted like a madman as he chided the slowness of his slave, but was
201 seized upon by the wild beast before he reached our hiding place. Who ever
202 would believe that before our eyes a brute would fight for us?

203 One cause of fear was removed, but there was the prospect of a similar death for
204 ourselves, though the rage of the lion was not so bad to bear as the anger of the
205 man. Our hearts failed for fear: without venturing to stir a step we awaited the
206 issue, having no wall of defense in the midst of so great dangers save the
207 consciousness of our chastity; when, early in the morning, the lioness, afraid of
208 some snare and aware that she had been seen took up her cub in her teeth and
209 carried it away, leaving us in possession of our retreat. Our confidence was not
210 restored all at once. We did not rush out, but waited for a long time; for as often as
211 we thought of coming out we pictured to ourselves the horror of falling in with her.

212 10. At last we got rid of our fright; and when that day was spent, we sallied forth
213 towards evening, and saw the camels, on account of their great speed called
214 dromedaries, quietly chewing the cud. We mounted, and with the strength gained
215 from the new supply of grain, after ten days travelling through the desert arrived at
216 the Roman camp. After being presented to the tribune we told all, and from thence
217 were sent to Sabianus, who commanded in Mesopotamia, where we sold our
218 camels. My dear old abbot was now sleeping in the Lord; I betook myself therefore

219 to this place, and returned to the monastic life, while I entrusted my companion
220 here to the care of the virgins; for though I loved her as a sister, I did not commit
221 myself to her as if she were my sister.

222 Malchus was an old man, I a youth, when he told me these things. I who have
223 related them to you am now old, and I have set them forth as a history
224 of chastity for the chaste. Virgins, I exhort you, guard your chastity. Tell the story
225 to them that come after, that they may realize that in the midst of swords, and wild
226 beasts of the desert, virtue is never a captive, and that he who is devoted to the
227 service of Christ may die, but cannot be conquered.