

# THE CAMEO OF ASPASIA

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## **Dedication**

First and foremost, to the early Christian women of Greece.

To the women of modern Greece (still going strong).

To Egeria (4th century AD).

And to my fourth muse, Claudia.

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## **Somewhere in Pella, Greece, 195 AD. Summer**

Helena's hands were drenched with dew. She breathed in fresh air, and a sense of joy slowly permeated the atmosphere. She intensely felt each second of the wait, although she was also frightened that she might be recognised, questioned.

She jumped at the smallest noise, and from time to time as she awaited the arrival of the courier, she nervously fiddled with the cameo of Aspasia of Miletus she kept concealed under her robes. When the courier finally arrived, Helena was surprised to see a woman, who hesitantly traced a curved line on the ground with the tip of her toe.

Likewise, Helena completed the image of a fish, gave the courier a smile and took the parchment. Tightly clutching the cameo, Helena walked away.

This rich, elegant Greek lady was at the end of her second year of conversion to Christianity and, little by little, she was getting braver.

These were not easy times for Christians in general, but nor were they particularly harsh because the emperor, Severus, was embroiled in internal disputes.

However, amongst the Christians, there were heresies that had caused great harm, and the eastern cults were making major inroads. Although the worst was yet to come...

In the midst of all the confusion, Helena had stepped forward to become a courier between Pella and Thessalonica, her home city.

For some time now, Christians had been aware how important it was to preserve the Scriptures using a reliable medium, like the parchment employed by Paul the Apostle.

And not only the Scriptures, but also any information that could later be important for the congregations; this would assist them in freeing themselves of heresies. That was why Helena and

her husband had decided to acquire the parchment distribution business of a rich merchant in Thessalonica.

However, that was not enough for Helena. She remembered the women who had accompanied Jesus, financially supporting and serving him for three years, and she decided to become more involved, taking advantage of her social status to act as a courier. Christian women from Thessalonica had already shown their bravery...

But now, she was very afraid. The parchment she carried would be a death sentence if she were detained, so she went straight to the place where her servants, who were really fellow Christians, awaited her and began the journey back to Thessalonica.

The Via Egnatia was busy that day, which made Helena nervous. *"Anyone could greet me,"* she thought. But she realised that the hustle and bustle gave her anonymity. With so many people on the road, the Roman patrols would be less strict.

She did not dare read the parchment en route; she wanted to wait for a safer moment. She put it amongst the other parchments and tried to distract herself by focussing on the diversions afforded by the journey.

Once past the tense moment of the meeting, she began to relax and, contemplating the immense horizon, became caught up in her thoughts.

Until a short time previously, it had been her custom to follow another route, one that led to Mount Olympus and prayer in the city of Dion. She did the same as all the other Greek ladies of her rank. Her life was easy, comfortable and pleasant, and the years flowed happily by.

Like all Greeks, she had her misgivings about the Romans, who had invaded her homeland, a land with a long and illustrious history. But as a Christian, she was beginning to realise that the Roman Empire was a greater threat to her now than it had been previously.

Helena increasingly challenged them with her lifestyle; she felt alive when she took risks, and so she believed her faith was growing stronger.

The tedious journey along the Via Egnatia calmed her and the tense moments passed away, even though she remained alert. She began to pay more attention to the scenery; she took a deep breath, gazing at the olive groves and towards the horizon.

She was overcome by a yearning for silence and for some time she let her mind go blank.

“Aspasia.” she murmured, returning to the present.

Helena considered Aspasia of Miletus, the wife of Pericles of Athens, a model of bravery. Helena did not really understand why there had been so few prominent women in the Jewish world; the Bible mentioned few women of importance.

Women did not have an important role in the Greek world either, but the example of Aspasia seemed closer to home for Helena. It gave her strength and for that reason she always had the cameo about her person, as a reminder.

As a woman, as a Christian and as a Greek among Romans, Helena had to skilfully negotiate many obstacles in her daily life if she wanted to live in God’s glory. “*What other people see.*” she thought.

The hours passed. On the road, she was in a constant state of watchfulness and when, at nightfall, they reached Thessalonica the nervous tension only increased. As they entered the city, Helena felt a cold sweat creep over her, but as soon as she saw her husband, Orestes, she relaxed: a woman with her husband aroused less suspicion.



Finally, the retinue arrived at their mansion, and they were able to rest. The test was over.

They all gathered to open the parchment. The urgent missive came from the Lychnidos congregation and was for distribution from Thessalonica throughout Macedonia and Byzantium as well as Asia.

The letter was about the dates when Pascha should be observed.

The Greek world had observed Pascha, the Resurrection, on the same date as John and the other apostles. However, by the times of Pope Sixtus I (120 AD), Rome and the East followed two different customs regarding the date.

Years later, one of John's disciples, Bishop Polycarp, travelled to Rome to discuss the matter with Pope Anicetus (155 AD) but they reached no agreement on the date when Easter should be observed, and so the two different customs remained.

But now, Pope Victor (195 AD) wanted to impose the Roman custom and threatened the churches of Asia with excommunication if they did not conform.

The consternation of Orestes, Helena and the others was palpable; it was some time before they were able to react.

Their fellow Christians, who had been converts for more than three years, reassured Orestes and Helena, telling them that they would have to make copies of the missive to send to the different congregations, particularly the ones in Asia, and that, even though the news might already have reached their brothers and sisters by sea, they should also receive it through Byzantium.

All of them set to work copying parchments into the early hours. As dawn broke, they called the couriers, including the one who would take the sea route to Ephesus, and dispatched the letters.

Helena felt her world collapsing around her, she simply could not comprehend. Exhausted, she went to rest for a while as Orestes took charge of their parchment business.

The few, fitful hours she slept were plagued with nightmares. Later, she looked after her young children, who were unaware of what had happened. She did not anticipate giving them a Christian education until they came of age, scared that they would let something slip and be shunned by Roman and Thessalonian society. Now, they were living in times of peace for Christians in Rome and the Greek world, but at any time the persecutions might return.

When night fell, she laid her head on her husband's chest and began to weep; too many tests had come one after another.

She sobbed disconsolately for several hours, and Orestes was at a loss to know what to say to her, but eventually she managed to relax a little and fell into a deep sleep.

## **Lugdunum, Gaul, 195 AD. Summer...**

As was his custom, Irenaeus went to his place of work in the artisan district on the other side of the river Saône, opposite the Roman walled city on the hill.

As he walked, he said to himself. “Now, I have to go. Before, I was sent...”

Years previously, Bishop Pothinus of Lugdunum had sent him as an envoy to Pope Eleutherius in Rome to discuss the Montanists of Phrygia, a heretic schism within the Christian Church.

Both Pothinus and Irenaeus came from the Greek world. There was a strong bond in Lugdunum with their fellow Christians of Asia

and Phrygia, a bond that was possible despite their distance thanks to communications via the busy river and sea routes.

In 117 AD the Christians of Lugdunum had been victims of persecution, as were those of Vienne, the town located a few miles further down the Rhône on the way to the sea.

Pothinus, Blandina the Gaul, and four more fellow Christians died alongside other, Roman, martyrs.

For years, Irenaeus had wondered why he had escaped that massacre and what role destiny held in store for him.

Now that there were increasing rumours of a split within the Church over when to observe Pascha, he knew he had to go to Rome. He knew that this was his mission.

And he remembered Rome. In his youth, Irenaeus had been sent to Lugdunum by Bishop Polycarp, who considered Irenaeus one of his most outstanding disciples. Irenaeus had passed through Rome on his journey; it was there that he had met Justin, the first Greek apologist to publicly defended Christianity before the Roman authorities, opening up a new type of relations with the Roman Empire.

Now, finally, he was going stand up and be counted, not before the Emperor, but before the Pope. Irenaeus was going to mediate

between the Western and Eastern Christians, a difficult and unexpected test.

And, remembering the persecution in Lugdunum, he took courage.

Once more, on his way to work, he avoided the market, the forum and the city's other public spaces. He still remembered what used to happen just a few years previously, when Christians passing through those areas had been subjected to mockery, beatings or even robbed.

Irenaeus was well known by the Roman authorities. Not in vain had he been bishop of the congregation for several years, but he preferred to always err on the side of caution: the wound left by what had happened to the martyrs had still not healed.

## Thessalonica

Although Helena awoke with a start, she felt calm. She went to the parchment warehouse and searched in the hiding place for one of the scrolls. She opened it and read in silence.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then, we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the

Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

She gave a deep sigh on reading those words of comfort from Paul, addressed to the first Thessalonian congregation a century and a half ago. She had been stunned to hear that the danger now came from the church itself, and she needed a sense of perspective.

*“By the ten virgins.”* she thought, *“Let there be enough oil in the lamp to give me light.”*

She took another of the parchments from Paul and continued reading.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

Putting the parchments back in their place, she returned to bed and Orestes.

Her husband continued sleeping. Her mind wandered, mulling over thousands of things. She suddenly realised that material



wealth was a passing thing and that some of life's pleasures were reaching their end.

She remembered the women who had followed Jesus, who out of their own resources had accompanied and supported him and his disciples for three years.

Then she thought about the splendid terrace adjoining her bedroom and the magnificent garden. She felt as if the experience were fading, never to return, and decided to delight in the scent of the plants once more.

She stretched in her bed, wanting to capture the subtleties and sounds of the morning. She felt the soft breeze whispering through the peaceful space and heard the melodic chatter of birds.

Helena took in the deepest breath she could and let the air out in gentle puffs, making air bubbles with her mouth.

One of the curtains started to sway and Helena laughed in amusement. Then she started to make silhouettes with her hands.

The breeze softly changed and suddenly a bird entered the room. She observed the animal, grateful.

A vast sensation of peace spread through the chamber. The marble in it accompanied the elegance of the moment and time seemed to stand still.

A distant rumble of thunder was followed seconds later by another. Helena began to listen. Silence fell.

The birdsong rose in crescendo, filling the garden with the melodic song of the morning chorus.

Helena rose and went to the terrace. From her balcony, she looked towards the horizon, observing the concerto of lightning bolts that illuminated the morning clouds. It was an imposing sight.

She heard more thunder, seeming to invite her to more lofty thoughts. She remembered what she had just read in the parchment, and not just in the parchment; she also felt that life could be full of glory and wonder wherever one was or whatever one did.

She enjoyed the unending spectacle, enjoyed feeling the breeze caress her cheek, enjoyed the scent of her garden and the birdsong.

Fascinated though she was, she suddenly noticed warmth on her back.

## **Lugdunum**

On the island between the Saône and the Rhône there were many Greek citizens who worked transporting different types of stone from Greece and Asia for construction of the city's buildings. It might be said that there was a small Greek city at the foot of the walled Roman hill. Gauls and Greeks shared this area, although there were also sumptuous Roman villas.

Irenaeus was thinking about visiting the Vienne congregation to dispatch a courier to the other side of the Mediterranean and reassure the brothers and sisters of Asia and Phrygia. He was a prolific correspondent who had sent numerous epistles to Ephesus for their redistribution from that city. However, he decided

that it would be better to wait until the meeting with the Pope before sending news.

The summer was hot and stuffy, with winds from Africa that had invaded the city, bringing with them an unbearable humidity. Irenaeus was sweating copiously.

He wanted to go to Vienne; he needed to leave the city and stretch his legs to set his thoughts straight. When he reached the artisan district he found his companion, Donatien the Gaul, who had been making vessels destined for northern Gaul all morning.

“I’m leaving for Vienne; I need a change of air.” said Irenaeus.

“Hmm... dangerous times, Irenaeus, but this time not because of Roman persecutions. We are setting the snare for ourselves.” answered Donatien.

“Yes, it’s not just the Romans and the heresies, we also have to put our own house in order!” Irenaeus added.

“And you are on the front line. That’s a lot of open fronts. Are you ready?”

“I am tired, overwhelmed, and I can’t think in this blasted heat.” he answered.

Donatien pointed to the woods on the right of Lugdunum and adopted a melancholy tone.

“We Gauls hold banquets in the forests. It is our home. My ancestors celebrated on what is now the walled hill of Lugdunum. If there is another persecution, by Romans or by the Church itself, I will flee to the forests of my ancestors and won’t stop until I reach the great isle, to the north, beyond the Roman’s walls. I want to hold banquets and feel free, far from oppression, wherever it comes from. I miss the freedom and customs of our ancestors, I want to live in nature, not practising crafts that Romans despise.”

After a short silence, Donatien continued. “I look to the North, Irenaeus, I look to the North because this, here, disgusts me. But the problem is Jesus. His love overwhelms me, and I also look east, to Jerusalem. What the Romans did to Blandina, here in Lugdunum, is the glowing ember that penetrates my soul and makes me feel Jesus, and that fire burns in me, breaking my fury. I have lost my bearings... Freedom or love, Irenaeus, which is more powerful?” he asked.

“It is written that we Christians are a people of kings, priests and prophets. A people of kings! The like has never been heard! And who do you flee from? Another man? Among men, there is none who is above the others. A tyrant on his own is merely a poor wretch. ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto

God the things that are God's.' Donatien, nobody can take your freedom away, it goes with you, just like your love of God. We are kings, but remember, the Kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. Behave like a free king, full of love, wherever you are."

Donatien regarded him closely.

"Thank you, Donatien," Irenaeus continued "speaking to you has given me my strength back. You Gauls make me envious: you still have places where the Romans have not made their presence felt. The North of the great isle, you say? We Greeks do not have that luxury."

"Well, kings also make vessels" he winked, "while they are sent on greater missions, like saying that God loves the world."

And he set to work making vessels too.

## Thessalonica

“There is going to be an onslaught of epistles from the congregations.” Dioscorides commented to Orestes and Helena. The copyist of parchments, a longstanding Christian, knew very well that a storm was coming. “We must organise.” he added.

“What do you suggest?” asked Orestes.

“We must make one more copy of the most important epistles. That means we must examine them carefully; it will not be easy.”

“Some of us will copy the epistles for our congregation and others will act as couriers over land and sea.”

“I want to be one of the couriers. If I stay at home all day thinking about what is happening, I will go mad.” said Helena.

“Greeks against Romans, yet again. Before, in a war between nations, now in the peace of the Church.” mused Orestes “It beggars belief.”

“This is nothing new.” Dioscorides interrupted, “Polycarp went to Rome decades ago about the same matter, but Pope Anicetus was better disposed. The current pope, Victor, is different.”

“But why?” asked Helena in anguish.

“I fear that we Greeks are no longer at the heart of Christianity, we are taking a minor role, just as happened to the Jewish Christians.” Answered Dioscorides.

“At the heart of Christianity?” Helena was amazed.

“Papal succession happens in Rome, as you know,” answered Dioscorides, “but the weight, the influence of the Greeks in the Church these days is very strong. It still uses our language in the scriptures, but that too may be coming to an end. We took over from the Jewish Christians as the strongest group in the Christian Church without showing them contempt for being in the minority. Nowadays, Jewish Christians are less common than a few decades ago, when being a Jewish Christian or a descendent of a Jewish Christian was something to be proud of. The Jewish-Roman wars have weakened them and left them once more without a



homeland. They have regrouped but are much more secretive than before. Now it is us Greeks who are held in contempt in Rome. The letter says we will be excommunicated if we do not give up the customs of the apostles regarding the date of celebrating Pascha. This is a full-scale deviation of doctrine and, what's more, an ultimatum to the Greek world to capitulate. I tend to think about these things, when what is really important is faith and a life of good works, not social acceptance. I wonder whether we Christians are not becoming too worldly..."

"Pope Victor must feel himself in a very strong position to behave in such a way." responded Orestes. "The church is starting to look like the Empire."

"Maybe that is the reason we have never behaved as the Romans are doing now. In two centuries of Christianity, the Greeks have not been an empire, nor have the Jewish Christians" added Helena.

"Alexander the Great must be turning in his grave..., what might Greek Christians have done if he were alive..." conjectured Orestes.

"Do you mean that with an emperor in Greece we would also have fallen into the trap?" asked a surprised Dioscorides.

## Lugdunum

Donatien had asked to accompany Irenaeus to Vienne. The Rhône flowed peacefully, surrounded by leafy forests that afforded the walkers some protection from the stifling heat of that summer.

As they quietly made their way, Donatien continued asking about homelands.

“Jesus did not free a homeland, Israel; rather he prophesied about Jerusalem and about the Temple, and the Jews have dispersed, right up to the present day.” said Irenaeus.

“Do you think they will return to their homeland, and one day be free of Roman oppression?” asked Donatien.

“I suppose, when they are as lambs...” answered Irenaeus “because, what was the army that delivered Israel from Egyptian oppression? The guidance of the crook of Moses. The children of Israel did not fight. That is why I believe they will return when they are lambs.”

“Do you think that we Gauls should also be lambs?” asked Donatien.

“Yes, always. A flock of lambs to become a holy flock. But I cannot say if you will recover your homeland in that way. What I said about the children of Israel, was because of Egypt.”

“I have heard about the Jewish-Roman wars.” said Donatien. “On the one hand, it frustrates me that they have not returned to their homeland, and on the other, I am happy because the Jews denounce us.”

“They think we are heretics and fight against us just as much as the Romans do because they fear for the future of their people.” said Irenaeus. “Now they see that our numbers are steadily growing, which makes them even more anxious. But I have a doubt: the Jews were attracted by the gospels for many years, why does this not seem to be the case now? Is it because of how we Christians behave? Is it because we have lost authenticity?”

“If the Jews do not see us as attractive, there will be other nations that ignore us too.” Donatien affirmed, “And yet our numbers continue to grow everywhere. Why are there hardly any Jewish Christians among us now?”

Irenaeus walked a few paces in silence before answering.

“Many things have happened in the Jewish Christian world..., many divisions: Jewish Christians, Jewish Christians of Greek origin, the Ebionites, the Nazarene sect... and I do not know how far the Jewish Christians reached in the East, in India or along the Silk Road, nor what happened there... I really do not understand why there are so few Jewish Christians among us now. Nonetheless, there are still Jewish Christians in the East. After the destruction of Jerusalem, many returned to that city and their number became so large that Emperor Hadrian ordered the profanation of some of their sacred sites. Donatien, the Jewish Christians overcame the destruction of Jerusalem, the death of many of the apostles, the bishops of Jerusalem and exile. As long as there are strong congregations of Jewish Christians, although they are only in the East, I will not feel so concerned. I must admit that I do not like the fact that their numbers are few here, in the West. I do not like it at all. Jews are not attracted now by the gospels, there are hardly any

Jewish Christians in the West... No. I do not like that at all... Hmm, there are many divisions now between Jewish Christians, and between Greek Christians and Roman Christians. It seems like a curse, but there are proofs.”

“Proofs?” asked Donatien in amazement.

“We were evangelised by Jewish Christians.” answered Irenaeus “And who fervently keeps watch over them in the West? What’s more, falling into the temptation of despising the Jews could become very dangerous for us: take us away from our fellow men, from our origins, and we might lose perspective about the story of salvation contained in the Bible. If we forget, what are we?”

“I was thinking of Blandina, of her martyrdom,” said Donatien, “but I can see I needed a broader perspective.”

## **Thessalonica. Autumn**

Helena was horrified to see the beginnings of calluses on her hands from making bandages and garments for the sick of Thessalonica's congregation; later she would worry about how she could explain them to her society acquaintances.

"I am a prisoner of luxury!" she angrily exclaimed.

"Put your hand on my forehead." Phidias softly requested "I don't have much longer."

She delicately touched him, knowing that this brother's days were nearly over.

"I have heard that in Rome they are starting to bury our brothers and sisters in subterranean catacombs. Some brothers and

sisters have donated their lands for this. They put a coin or a cameo in the niche to remember the year of the burial. What will you do with me?" asked Phidias.

"Don't worry, you will still be with us for some time." she answered.

"I have also heard that they look for children cast out by the Romans and care for them in their final moments. Later, they bury them in the catacombs." Phidias continued.

When the time came, the presbyter began to prepare the room where they would celebrate the last supper, commemorating Jesus. When he finished, they brought the sick as close as possible, prayed and happily shared out the blessed bread.

Later, Orestes and Helena discreetly returned home accompanied by their fellow Christians Daphne and Dioscorides.

On the way, Helen asked Dioscorides.

"Why does Paul the Apostle call us 'my children' in his epistles if he is only a fellow brother?"

"We are all lambs of the flock, although among us there are those who guide. It is always forgotten that the greatest of all, John the Baptist, is the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. Do not be anxious, we all make mistakes. Peter doubted before and after Jesus

was resurrected, in his vision at Jaffa. May the Lord grant us the knowledge to understand things in life..." After saying this, he remained pensive for a few moments. "For some time now, I have felt that wisdom is not so present among us as before."

"Do you mean the Holy Spirit?" asked Helena.

"Yes. Before, there was more mention of prodigies among us, and in times past there were more prophets and prophetesses, and the Holy Spirit manifested itself in gatherings."

"I can't help thinking about the gospels..." Daphne added, "when Jesus invited the disciples to multiply the bread and fish. They did not dare, and on more occasions, he insisted that they should accept their extraordinary relationship with God... Finally, in the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared to some of the disciples, but nothing changed. Jesus would eventually say that he who had most faith was the Roman centurion. It is as if we had lost something in our relationship with God." she concluded.

"We are losing strength in faith," lamented Dioscorides, "and now some of our brothers are enlisting in the legions when it is the meek who are blessed."

"Like lambs among wolves, that is where the Lord sends us..." murmured Helena.



“I am curious.” interrupted Orestes, changing the subject, “Did none of the three thousand brothers and sisters who were at Pentecost come here to Thessalonica? Was Paul the Apostle the first?”

“As far as we know, none.” answered Dioscorides. “We believe that there were some in the south of Greece, but we cannot be certain.”

“Is there no record of it in the parchments?” asked Helen, amazed.

“In truth, we do not know anything about this subject. There are gaps due to so many persecutions and denouncements.”

“Let us take advantage of this relatively calm period to put things up to date in the congregations.” Daphne sighed.

“Talking of work, the parchments await us; they are arriving from and being sent to all of the congregations after what happened in Rome.” said Dioscorides.

## **Rome. Autumn**

Irenaeus was on his way to Rome to see Pope Victor; along with other western bishops, he had written a letter to the Pope, but finally decided to take it himself.

During the journey he fondly looked back on the days when he had met Justin in the city. Justin, the first apologist, the first to dare address the emperor and explain about the Christian faith: a bold act.

He asked himself whether it would now be his turn to be an apologist before Pope Victor. How things had changed!

He also recalled his first mission to Rome as an envoy of Bishop Pothinus of Lugdunum. That mission had saved his life because he had escaped the massacre of the martyrs in his city.

When he returned, he had striven to breathe new life into the embers of the congregation's ashes. Now, he felt easy because, barely twenty years later, the congregation was strong again.

Used to avoiding the Romans, he eluded the patrols that travelled the road, swiftly making his way to Rome despite his advanced age.

After a few days, he entered the great city again and, when he reached the place where his fellow Christians were, was surprised that they did not draw the half figure of a fish on the ground. The letter signed by the bishops and himself was sufficient introduction.

Then, they took him into the presence of Victor, who courteously greeted him.

*"Salve, Irenaeus, scourge of heretics."* Irenaeus gave him two kisses and Victor began to read the letter . *"So, you are like Polycarp, you defend the dual customs regarding the celebration of Easter. Hmm. How do you celebrate Easter in Lugdunum?"*

“Following the Roman custom.” Irenaeus answered with decision.

“Bravo, Irenaeus, bravo.” responded Victor. “In Rome, not following the Roman custom was leading to chaos. Some celebrated on one date, and others on another; this division was weakening us in our own eyes and in those of others. And this is in Rome; in other places it is worse. Today the problem is a date, tomorrow it will be about other matters. We must eradicate this problem! Pope Anicetus and Polycarp were wrong to advocate a continuance of the dual customs that went back to Pope Sixtus; look what it has brought us. When Pope Pius fixed the date for the observance of Easter for all of us, he should have been obeyed by all, and that is what I intend to accomplish now.

Irenaeus held his breath. After a few seconds he began to speak.

“You know that I defend the Roman custom. It might, perhaps, be prudent to order strict observance of the custom of Pius in Rome and allow the East to follow their custom.”

“Hmm...” Victor mused, “The congregations of the East have besieged us with epistles. Write to them on this matter. You are the most brilliant disciple of Polycarp and that will convince many.”

“As you wish.” Irenaeus answered.

“Bravo, Irenaeus, scourge of heretics, write the letter. By the way, how are things in Lugdunum? Here, relations with the Romans are improving somewhat.”

*“Being pope means either dying a martyr or of old age, in that order; but dying a martyr for the whole gospel, not just for parts of it.”* Irenaeus thought.

A few moments later, Irenaeus swallowed and said, “There is *pax*.”

“Good, good. Of course, you know that I am changing the liturgy from Greek to Latin, everything should be unified. And the authority of the Church of Rome must be uncontested all over the world.”

A while later they took their leave. Irenaeus remained in the city a few days longer, gauging the mood of the congregation and then began the return trip to Lugdunum.

A cold sweat was his constant companion on the journey home. Anxiety and remorse gave him no rest and he only felt respite when he remembered that his eastern brothers and sisters would not be excommunicated.

At times he wept and wondered what he would say to his brothers and sisters of the congregation, particularly the Greeks. Lugdunum, that rare jewel of the East at the heart of the West. And what would the Gauls think? What would he say to Donatien?

How would the Roman brothers and sisters react?

His return journey was like an act of penitence.

## **Thessalonica. Winter**

“Pay particular attention to the letters of Polycrates of Ephesus and Irenaeus.” said Dioscorides in a strong voice, “Follow everything related to them.” The parchment workshop was full of scribes attempting to impose order on the avalanche of letters that were being received.

In the distance, as she made her way to her room, Helena tightly gripped the cameo of Aspasia. When she arrived, she opened a chest and removed a thick bundle of parchments.

She had been writing to several female friends of different neighbouring congregations. She told them details of her daily life

and her faith, as well as describing her trips back and forth along the Via Egnatia and to the city port.

“Hundreds of letters between the congregations and not a single one written by a woman,” she huffed. “We are allowed a voice in the gatherings, but we do not write. And I am getting tired of it.” She clutched the cameo tightly.

She began to write a letter about these things to a group of female friends in Amphipolis, but she was struggling with the text and felt how her anger prevented her expressing herself properly, so she decided to put off the task. She lay down for a while to calm herself and ended up asleep.

A while later, Orestes quickly entered the room, waking her with a start.

“We have reached a decision” he said.

“*We*? What do you mean, *we*? And me?” she asked angrily.

“This is an emergency. We have just had word that the Romans are on Dioscorides’ trail. He must leave, and we have to put the parchments in a safe place.”

Helena shuddered.

“We must leave the parchments in a country house, far out of sight of the Romans. We have to move the workshop there, but



you and I will remain here, in charge of the business.” Orestes told her.

“And continue this pretence before the whole world, even with our children? And continue dressing as a society lady while my brothers and sisters are persecuted and suffer penury? No! I will not hear of it! I can no longer bear it!” Helena shouted while Orestes anxiously begged her to lower her voice.

The following day, Dioscorides left for Byzantium while, on the other side of the city, the congregation took the parchments, disguised as a delivery, to a house in the country.

## **Lugdunum. Winter**

Philomeno, the resurrected member of the Lugdunum congregation, addressed Irenaeus at the gathering.

“Is my testimony no good?”

Irenaeus answered him by citing the gospels.

“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

Next, Alcibiades spoke.

“I still find it hard to believe what happened to you, Philomeno, although I do believe it. But I find it harder to believe what Irenaeus has just told us. The Montanists continue to grow in number in Lugdunum, but in Asia their progress is even more impressive.

They want to revive prophetic activities because they say that there are few prophets... but they do not pay any attention to what happened to Philomeno.”

Irenaeus replied, “Montanism is just another heresy, but one that is very influential. I have spent years attempting to guide them along the right path and I feel that little progress has been made. Between heresies, Romans and the differences in the Church itself, we are surrounded by danger.”

Then Lucretia stood and recited a psalm.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you, Lord, are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

“The valley of the shadow of death...” repeated Philomeno, “How hard is the human heart: centuries and centuries from Abraham to Jesus, and still, they will not listen!”

“John the Apostle guaranteed the truth of the gospels last century.” interrupted Irenaeus, “He was followed by Polycarp and others. Now there are very few of us left from the next generation:

Polycrates of Ephesus, myself and a few others. What will happen?”

The gathering remained silent as nobody was brave enough to take up his challenge. None except one.

“Let it be me.” Philomeno declared. “Teach me, Irenaeus.”

Irenaeus sighed.

“Can we ask that prophets come?” Alcibiades asked.

“Do you doubt it?” demanded Lucretia “Prophetesses too.”

## **Amphipolis. Spring**

“Do you think it will work?” Helena asked Orestes.

“The parchments from the library at Pergamon were looted, the papyri at the library of Alexandria were burned, just like the papyri at Herculaneum... This must work, it has to work!” He exclaimed, looking at the sketch he had been given. “It is a large cellar with passages that serve as airtight compartments. The parchments will not burn through accident or because they have been abandoned, and they will be protected from the damp by greased wrappings. We do not intend to ever leave this workshop, but if we had to, they would be preserved for the future like a buried treasure. What a great idea the catacombs are!”

“I must go, I am leaving for Amphipolis as courier.” Helena said.

“Be careful, my love.” Orestes replied, gazing at her tenderly.

After several days’ journey, Helena had almost reached the bridge over the Struma that provided access to Amphipolis when she suddenly heard raised voices.

She was overcome with anxiety. Not only did she have parchments for several different congregations, but also letters for her female friends in the city.

Various merchants were arguing in the middle of the road and two Roman patrols quickly appeared. One of them remained by the merchants, but the other started inspecting some of the passers-by.

When they reached Helena’s retinue, the Romans stopped for no reason. She broke out in a sweat and flashes of what had happened to the martyrs came to her mind.

After a few anxious minutes, the traffic began to move along the road, and they entered the city. She stopped with a couple of companions at the arranged spot and the retinue went on its way.

The three of them entered a luxurious house and there they met Hector and his wife Irene, fabric merchants and members of the Amphipolis congregation.

“What a beautiful spring we are having!” Irene exclaimed as she took Helena’s arm. The two companions stayed behind, chatting with Hector, while the two women strolled off into the garden.

“How long before you are baptised?” asked Irene.

“A few months, very few.” Helena answered, glowing with happiness.

“Do you still write a lot?” Irene wanted to know.

Helena grasped the cameo tightly.

“Yes, and one day I will write to the whole congregation, not just to you women. Don’t look at me like that, Irene, I know what I am doing.”

“Mary fell into the temptation of wanting to tell Jesus what to do at Cana, and Jesus rebuked her.” said Irene “And she was not heard to speak again.”

“That was Jesus, not a man. And Mary was brave because she spoke up, she had personality. Another thing is that she did it inappropriately, but it was brave. Remember, the first people to know that Jesus had returned to life were a group of women, not men,

and they spoke, they were not silent, they told the men, who hardly believed them.”

“Do you think that Greek women are as brave as Jewish Christian ones?” Irene shakily asked.

“Maria was at Golgotha, with no regard for the consequences, and she could have been stoned. We too are brave.” she said, trying to calm Irene.

“Many of we sisters look up to you, Helena. You have not even completed three years of catechesis and you are doing what some other sisters have not yet dared to do.” Irene confessed.

“I felt terrible just a while ago when we were entering the city. I thought the legionaries were going to detain us.” Helen said, letting out a breath. “Irene, all of us risk our lives. At any time, there may be new persecutions, do not lose your courage. In a short time, Orestes and I will rid ourselves of our remaining fortune and live like all the other members of the congregation, we will end our life of semblance.”

“We too have little time left.” said Irene as they embraced. “Let us go to the garden and see how beautiful it is. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about a Diognetus of Byzantium.”



## **Lugdunum. Spring**

Irenaeus went back over his old work, *Against Heresies*, written fifteen years previously.

As a disciple of Polycarp, he had felt coerced into participating in those doctrinal controversies. How many so-called gospels had been censured thanks to his work! How many lambs had he saved and from how much evil by preventing them straying from the path! He breathed deeply and decided to take a stroll around the island.

He was observing the work of some dock workers when laughter interrupted his reverie.

“*Salve*, Irenaeus, Bishop of Traitors” said Apollo, an old Greek fellow Christian who was with some other Montanists. “Is that you, the guardian of traditions?”

Irenaeus was puzzled as to how to reply.

“You call me traitor?”

“You know firsthand when the apostles observed the feast of Pascha and here, you have been teaching something else for decades. Do you serve the Romans? Or, really, who do you serve?” asked Apollo. “Montanus was right.”

It was the first time that Irenaeus had felt as if he had been stabbed in the heart. He shook from head to toe. He knew what the traditions of the apostles were about the observance of Pascha. They had lived the last supper with Jesus! Everyone knew. But it was true that he taught something else in Lugdunum.

Now he was horrified to understand that it was he who had caused the split in the Church, by his infidelity; he, who had worked so tirelessly to keep it strong and united.

He attempted to splutter out some words, but he could not, and ashamed, he fled. When he reached his home, he wept bitterly.

He suddenly missed the help of other bishops.

“Polycrates of Ephesus.” he said to himself between sobs. “He would not have faltered.”

He felt alone and helpless in those lands of Gaul, a Greek isolated from the rest and exposed to all of the troubles of a vanguard, the loneliness of the explorer.

“Too much for one man to bear.” he murmured.

He remembered that in the company of Pothinus he had felt strong, and he was reminded of the passage in the gospels where Jesus sent his disciples out two by two.

“Philomeno!” he managed to say. His face changed, and he went in search of Philomeno: he needed to talk, to confess.

## **Thessalonica. Summer**

“Would Polycrates of Ephesus and Irenaeus of Lugdunum know where John the Apostle buried Mary?” Helena asked Orestes.

“Possibly. The young ask daring questions, it is possible they know the town or the area, although I do not think they know the exact spot of the burial.”

“Why such mystery? Don’t our brothers and sisters discreetly visit the tomb of Philip the Apostle at Hierapolis?” Helena asked again.

“You ask difficult questions that I don’t know the answer to.” said Orestes. “You would do better to ask those who have completed the catechesis.”

“But who is Mary for you?” Helena insisted.

“The most wonderful of all, but not the most wonderful for me.”

he answered, gazing at her intensely.

Helena blushed and after a few moments said, “Well, John the Baptist is the most wonderful of all, but not the most wonderful for me.”

They glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

After a while, Helena continued her questions.

“Was it not Philip who was suddenly taken away after speaking to the Ethiopian eunuch and without warning reappeared in Azotus? All that reminds me of the disappearance of the prophet Elijah. Elijah did not die; he was taken up to heaven.” she affirmed a few moments later.

“But Jesus is the firstborn among the dead” protested Orestes. “It is true that there are passages in the gospels that are difficult to believe. You know that we have left those ones for last because we don’t want to say ‘no’ to God, rather ‘I don’t understand’ and wait for him to illuminate us. But we do not have to dispel all our doubts today!”

“Like telling a tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea...,  
hmm... Jesus walked on water and Peter also walked a little...”  
Helena thought aloud.

She busied herself while clutching her hidden cameo of Aspa-  
sia, until she suddenly said,

“Orestes, have you heard talk of a Diognetus of Byzantium?”

“No. Who is he? One of our clients?”

“A wealthy man who wants to know more about Christians. He  
has a connection with Hector and Irene of Amphipolis. They have  
had dealings with him for some time now and say he is a good per-  
son. Irene asked me to write him one of my letters and I thought  
that...”

Orestes shuddered.

“Don’t you realise that this man could expose many fellow  
Christians in the congregations?”

“Hector and Irene know what they are doing and, did Paul the  
Apostle not come to evangelise us? It is not just about helping our-  
selves, but also spreading the good news to others!”

Orestes held his tongue.

“I was thinking that...” Helena continued, “you could write the  
letter I suggest in your own hand.”

“We are not ready.” Orestes responded.

“And do you imagine that the first Thessalonian brothers and sisters were? They had not completed their catechesis and look at all they did. Irene says that I express the teachings well, and that Hector and she will take charge of strengthening his faith. Irene trusts me. And she has asked me to write to Diognetus.”

“A woman?” Orestes asked in surprise. “There are hundreds of thousands of us Christians. Count on the fingers of both hands how many famous female theologians you know. If you reach ten, applaud.”

“If there are not even five, make a fist and strike the table.” Helena responded.

“I’ll write” answered Orestes.

Helena brought a parchment and began to read:

#### The manners of the Christians

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do

they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed.

They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they lack all things, and yet abound in all. They are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless. They are insulted and repay the insult with honour. They do good yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life. They are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

After he had finished writing, Orestes wept.



## **Thessalonica. End of summer**

Helena was looking out the window; she felt the fresh sea breeze on her face and silently thought.

A few week previously she had finished her catechesis, and she still felt as if her face burned, as if she had crossed a desert before reaching fertile lands. Her experience of faith had marked her and she knew that she had to make changes with her children, in her life and her work...

The sea breeze comforted her. She heard a sudden noise and saw a man approaching the house from the port. He was a stranger. She hurried down to see who it was, but Orestes had beaten her to it.

After making the sign on the floor with his foot, the courier said:

“From Irenaeus. I await your answer before setting sail for Lugdunum again.”

Orestes and Helena stood open mouthed.

The courier explained that Hector and Irene, considering it the most effective epistle of Christian apologetics, had sent a copy to Polycrates and Irenaeus, and Irenaeus had written a letter to Orestes and Helena.

Helena fainted.

When she came back to herself, she was alone with Orestes in their room, and he was reading the letter.

Dear Orestes, your reputation precedes you.

From the earliest days you, the Thessalonians, have suffered persecution, been generous with other congregations and effective messengers.

Your letter is full and beautiful, so much so that I felt the desire to communicate directly with you to express my deepest wishes, in the hope that you understand me and also become messengers.

When I went to Rome to see Pope Victor and intercede in the Pascha business, I did not realise that we Greeks would be the second to fall into Pope Pius I’s trap, set decades ago.

He stated that Jewish Christian catechumens should be baptised at Easter, whatever date their catechesis started, which could prolong the period for as long as four years. This is true

discrimination. And he also changed the date for the observance of Pascha.

First it was the Jewish Christians, now it is the turn of us Greek Christians. When Polycarp went to Rome to see Pope Anicetus, he said nothing about our Jewish Christian brothers and sisters. We did not even think about this matter, and now it has negative effects for us.

With my own eyes I have seen Polycarp, who saw John, who was a Jew, who saw Jesus, whose gaze follows me!

You, the Thessalonians, helped the Jewish Christian congregations of Jerusalem when you contributed to Paul's collection for them shortly after you were evangelised. You are an example for all!

Please, talk about this, one community after another is falling into the trap...

Helena gave a shout.

"Good Lord!" she sobbed, covering her face with her hands.

Orestes was perturbed.

"What is the matter?"

"I had forgotten that business about the community of Rome in the epistle to Diognetus!" she exclaimed as she continued her bitter weeping.

She did not have the strength to stand, so she sat on the floor. In doing so, she felt the pressure of the cameo on her body.

“Wait a moment!” she said suddenly, “When did Jewish Christian women stop being important in the congregations?” she asked Orestes.

“Well, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, they mention prophetesses, in the epistle of Paul to the Philippians, he mentions important women, although I don’t know if they were...” he answered.

Helena remained silent for a few moments.

“The female Jewish Christians fell before the male Jewish Christians did.” she said in amazement.

“*Fell?*” asked a puzzled Orestes.

“And there was no pope involved” Helena continued. “Women are made in the image of God, not in the image of man.” she exclaimed in irritation. “Cursed oppression of the Devil!”

Orestes put his hand to his forehead.

After a few minutes in silence, Helena was calmer.

Orestes whispered to her,

“Don’t worry, the Devil always arrives late.” He winked at her.

Helena caressed Orestes’ face.

“My love, start your answer to Irenaeus’ letter in your own hand, so that he can be sure it is you. Then I will take over.”

When Orestes had finished, he stood and embraced her. Then he relinquished his place. Helena finished the missive, then she and Orestes each signed their name.

“Shall we write a copy for Polycrates of Ephesus, another to Hector and Irene, and one more for the house where the parchments are stored?” asked Orestes.

Helena ecstatically nodded her agreement.

When they finished, they met with the courier from Lugdunum and took their leave of him.

From the window of their house, they watched as his ship made sail. Orestes placed his hands on Helena’s shoulders before leaving her.

Once he had left, Helena took the cameo of Aspasia out of its hiding place and, after contemplating the face a few seconds, she said,

“I did better than you.”