

PRISCILLA OF ALEXANDRIA

I. Priscilla, it's you, Priscilla...

A great rumor filled all the streets leading down to the old port of Kibotos. It was a muffled stamping of feet, and the cries of a furious multitude.

Priscilla, who was playing with her brother Marcus, stopped, thinking that the sea made less noise on stormy nights as it broke on the cliffs of the isle of the Pharos.

Suddenly, she perceived the click of the two enormous battens of the solid cedar-wood door of the palace, which had been closed in haste.

“The demons! The demons are coming!” someone shouted.

Immediately afterwards, a desperate howl rose from the interior courtyard to the room where the children were, and that howl became a regular, frightful lament that seemed to be emerging from the throat of a beast rather than a human throat.

Priscilla leaned out of the window and perceived a slave named Mammoea on all fours on the mosaics with an animal expression on her face. She was a Phrygian renowned for her fasting and the Christian austerity of her life. She was reputed to have once seen the Virgin Mary, but she could not hear the syllables of the word “demon” without falling into a singular crisis in which her voice lost any human intonation, as if the demon had entered into her by virtue of the force of the word.

Marcus burst into idiotic laughter and came to huddle against his sister, touching her arm and her shoulder, as he had a habit of doing every time he was close to her. This time, Priscilla did not think of pushing him away. Footfalls filled the staircase.

“Throw the pikes out of the window,” ordered a voice.

The door opened and Priscilla saw her grandfather on the threshold. He was simulating calm, and a mocking smile was fixed on his lips. He raised his right hand and waved it, as if to reassure his trembling grandson and a few servants who were waiting his orders in the vestibule and on the steps of the marble stairway. He gave the impression of saying: *I've seen many others!*

Old Diodorus had been twenty years old in the times of the Emperor Julian and he had indeed, as he frequently repeated, seen many others. The pagan populace did not frighten him. At Hamath in Syria he had dispersed with blows of his staff a procession of naked priestesses who were attempting to invade the Church of the Epiphany, to the sound of tambourines, in order to replace a statue of Bacchus therein. He had nearly been stoned alongside Bishop Georgius of Cappadocia.¹ He had contributed under Theodosius to the destruction of the temple of Serapis.² He would not allow himself to be frightened by the cries of hatred of the prostitutes of Rhacotis and the thieves of the embalmers' quarter. They had been wrong to bring out weapons and close the door. It was, on the contrary, necessary to open it wide. He would appear on the threshold and the crowd would flee before his gaze...

Diodorus the son held him by the arm and held hard. Although he had inherited his father's piety, he had neither his violence, nor his courage.

“My God! My God! It's necessary to be careful because of my children...”

Old Diodorus shrugged his shoulders. “Hide them in the cellars if you're afraid.” And he went downstairs and traversed the courtyard, heading for the door.

Voices were rising from the street now, as lugubrious as the cries of wild beasts in the desert, and the sound of sticks hitting the wood of the door was audible. The porter had fled somewhere in the palace, taking away the heavy key. People searched for him and called to him. That lasted several minutes.

¹ Georgius was the Arian bishop of Alexandria from 356 to 351. He died in 361, two years before Julian the Apostate, which implies that Old Diodorus is presently in his late sixties.

² Theodosius I (347-392), Emperor of the East from 379-392 and then of the entire Empire until his death. Notoriously, he did not prevent or punish the destruction by Christians of the Serapeum in Alexandria in 391.

Diodorus the son's teeth were chattering. He suddenly made a resolution.

He turned toward Thoutmos and Tehenna, two slaves whose fidelity was proven and who were ordinarily charged with the care of the children.

"Leave with them by the little garden door. Run to the bishop's house. Confide them to him. Come back when the Praetorian guards have rendered justice. It should be over in an hour, but one never knows."

Fear took possession of Marcus and he started crying. He could not be stopped. Thoutmos rolled him up in a woolen cloak and they all went into the garden.

It was the moment when twilight changes into night. Between the gilded mosaics of the fountain the water jets rose up higher than usual and the orange-trees had a heavier perfume. Priscilla would have liked to sit down on the sand, to breathe in the evening air and not to be obliged to flee the wickedness of men.

The garden door opened into a back street in the Epsilon quarter. It was deserted. The two slaves, each carrying a child, started running. By turning right they could have reached the great Serapeum in a few minutes, but they would have bumped into the crowd that was coming from the western part of the city and feared being recognized as servants of Diodorus.

They made a wide detour. They passed furious bands. Alexandria had been ignited by the setting sun with a fire of the hatred of gods.

As if in a dream, Priscilla watched the long longitudinal avenues file past, some of which were born in the azure-tinted blue of the sea and went to terminate in the ashen pewter of Lake Mareotis. The monuments were innumerable. They were heaped on top of one another like stone fruits in a porphyry basket. Many destroyed temples had become churches, but there were temples that had been allowed to subsist because of their beauty, because they were a wealth for the city. At certain crossroads, they faced chapels like inexorable enemies supported on pylons and threatening them with their monumental doors.

Lanterns were illuminated along the terraces. Priscilla saw in passing the spiral staircases twisting their white steps toward the hill of the Paneum; the pathways lined by sphinxes and sycamores uncovering in their perspectives the mysterious dome of a hypogeum; the long colonnades in the Greek style succeeding monuments of the Ptolemaic era like a procession of young hierophants paused in the contemplation of the past. The ruins of the temple of Isis were compact and terrible, showing like severed limbs their quadrangular pillars with cubic capitals, where images of the cow-headed goddess Hathor still subsisted. Those of the temple of Poseidon were light and white; laurels had grown in the cracks between the paving-stones and invaded the broken altars, and doves had taken up residence in the foliage, making a great flutter of wings there.

There were beds of roses in front of private dwellings, and clumps of mimosas emerging over walls and almost obstructing the roadway. An Osirian colossus overturned during a riot, but which had not been moved because of its weight, had been surmounted by an image of the Virgin. In the triangular plaza where Saint Peter's Church stood there was a forest of obelisks, and the old house of the philosopher Olympios raised up its sculptural accumulation, in which Egyptian and Hellenic art were mingled: emblematic figures henceforth deprived of meaning, which has been covered in places by large white crosses.

Sometimes a torch illuminated the furious faces in passing. Priscilla began to tremble as they passed under the Tetrastyle of Vespasian because its four enormous pillars intercepted the last glow of the sky. They turned into the street of the Sema, but there a man who was clad in a yellow veil in the Syrian manner and who was running in the opposite direction called out to them with a triumphant tone in his voice: "Is it true that Diodorus' house is being pillaged?"

Then they went down the street of the Sema, went past the four porphyry lions of the little temple of Serapis and the twelve bronze winged horses of the Museum. They heard a confused clamor and saw the great stone stairway of a hundred steps that led to the Serapeum encumbered by a menacing crowd.

Bishop Cyril's dwelling was at the top between the three hundred columns of syenite erected by Ptolemy Soter. It dominated the entire city. It had been built, along with the Church of Saint Arcadius,

with the sacred stones of the temple of the god Serapis, destroyed some years earlier by the patriarch Theophilus.

Thoutmos stopped, thinking that he could not get the children into the hands of Bishop Cyril without danger. Discouraged, he turned to Tehenna.

“Let’s head for the gate of the Necropolis,” said the latter. “We can go to my sister’s house. The children won’t be safer anywhere else than they will in her house.”

Thoutmos hesitated. He never saw his sister-in-law. He knew that she prostituted herself in the Rhacotis quarter. She was married to a strange individual who was known as “the man who believes in nothing,” and who exercised the decried profession of embalmer.

“What will the master say when he finds out?”

But Marcus, whom he had set down on his feet, suddenly started running hither and yon, uttering cries. It was necessary to catch him.

“Jesus! Jesus! Protect us!” Tehenna started repeating.

“Oh well, let’s go to your sister’s house,” said Thoutmos.

They made a detour, skirted the Rhacotis quarter, arrived at the gate of the Necropolis, and penetrated into the district of the same name.

It was a mass of side-streets in which all the artisans of métiers relative to embalming and the ceremonies of death had once lived, but since Theodosius had forbidden the embalming and also the incineration of the dead it was only legal simply to bury them in the ground. The Necropolis quarter had been partially deserted and had become the refuge of ambulant merchants, prostitutes and thieves. A few embalmers still remained there, and those who had not renounced the ancient Egyptian rites transported the cadavers of their relatives to them, in order to come back and retrieve them when they had become mummies. That was the profession that Thoutmos’ brother-in-law exercised.

In order to reach his dwelling it was first necessary to cross a narrow bridge over the canal that connected Lake Mareotis with the port of Kibotos. The water was stagnant, and an insipid odor charged with miasmas emerged from it. The two slaves made the sign of the cross as they passed over it. Near that bridge, a few years before, the centurion Septimus, responsible for watching over the Necropolis quarter, had had his soldiers throw into the water a number of mummies found in the home of an embalmer, and their plaintive and irritated doubles, it was said, had remained trapped in the putrescence of the waters.

After the bridge there was a long narrow street with a few shops. That street was calm, and those who lived there seemed unaware of the agitations of Alexandria. Women were sitting doorways; a beggar was rooting through the rubbish piled up at a crossroads.

The children walked alongside the slaves, but when the road curved and Thoutmos went into a narrower street that descended a steep slope, it was necessary to carry them again because they sank into soft things and an emaciated dog sometimes frightened them by coming to sniff them.

Thoutmos pushed a wooden barrier. He traversed some waste ground between two cracked walls and found themselves in front of a narrow door with a disjointed judas grille that let a vague light filter through.

Before Thoutmos had knocked, the door opened, and they saw on the threshold the man who believed in nothing.

Priscilla was very glad to know that there was no longer any danger, that they would soon have news and that they would doubtless soon be taken back to their father’s house.

Tehenna had installed her beside her brother on a large woolen cloak. Sleep! She certainly had not slept. On entering that low-ceiling room where a heavy odor of myrrh and cassis hovered, she had had a very strange sensation.

“Priscilla! Priscilla! It’s you, Priscilla!” an invisible breath, an inanimate voice, had whispered in her ear.

No, it was not that tall man with the triangular beard, with bushy eyebrows so thick that one could not distinguish his eyes, and it was not that woman with the ravaged face sitting on the ground, huddled

up, who could have murmured her name so close to her. The perfumed air was full of human presences, and a mysterious activity that was not perceptible to the senses filled the atmosphere of the room.

Who had spoken Priscilla's name—or, rather, what illusion had made her think that she had been named?

The room, which was only illuminated by the smoky glow of an oil lamp, was cluttered with all sorts of objects. In the corners there were heaps of curved tongs, short knives, metal tubes and little saws, as if the master of the place practiced the art of torturer. Full sachets were piled on top of one another, and a bitter odor of spices emerged from one of them, which was open. A set of wooden shelves supported a long row of sealed bottles of blue, yellow and green liquids, and behind them there was a series of little colored masks, some made of cloth, others of gold-lined paper, almost all of them devoid of eyes. Large canopic jars in onyx and alabaster were lined up at the back, bearing on their bulge, in hieroglyphs, prayers to Isis, Nephtys, Neith and Serket, and on their lids the head of a hawk or a dog. Those canopic jars framed a low door, singularly obscure, that seemingly must have opened to the most important room in the house.

Sebek, the embalmer, listened in silence to what Thoutmos and the two women said. He rarely spoke and he never prayed to any god. He belonged by heredity to the inferior sacerdotal caste of Paraschites, but that caste had declined. A kind of malediction floated over embalmers. Sebek was a man scorned in his quarter, firstly because of his profession, and then because it was known that his wife went to prostitute herself in Rhacotis, and that he tolerated it, either out of weakness or because the constant handing of dead bodies gave his mind a bleak indifference to the things of life

"It was bound to happen," said Khepra, the embalmer's wife, shaking her head and making her fake earrings and necklaces rattle. "The gods of Egypt will resuscitate. Is it not shameful that the dead have to be bought here in secret and one had to hide in order to embalm them? The Christians glorify rotting in the ground! They'll rot there!"

Thoutmos made her a sign to shut up on that subject because of the children, but she stamped her heel and repeated: "They'll rot there!"

However, she stared at Priscilla's face with admiration. She even got up to look at her more closely.

"Isn't she beautiful?" said Tehenna, proudly.

"And they're capable of making her a virgin moldering in a monastery!" said Khepra, leaning over.

Priscilla saw above her face enormous glaucous, moist eyes, with large bistre circles, a fleshy mouth, features hollowed out by pleasure, reposing on a fat, almost milky neck. She felt the woman remove the Arab shawl with broad green stripes from her shoulder, and that she set it down over her, doubtless so that she would not be cold; and then, in that warmth, she became drowsy

In that torpor she had the sensation that somewhere, from a shadowed corner, an insect had risen into the air to circle around her, buzzing. It left behind it a wake of gold, which enveloped her. She could not make out the contour of its wings, but she sensed that it was a dangerous insect, of a bizarre form, with a black head, whose sting must be redoubtable. She was afraid of it; she would have liked to chase it away, but a sort of unhealthy attraction prevented her from moving.

The insect brushed her skin and suddenly alighted between her two girlish breasts. It was heavy and cold, and Priscilla's entire little body stiffened, prey to a delicious wellbeing.

She woke up, and retained herself from uttering a cry. Suspended around her neck by a golden thread there was a little black stone, which she palpated, and the contours of which seemed inexplicable to her. She knew that there were talismans against which it was necessary to protect oneself, because they communicated sins that certain impure beings had stored within them. She took it off immediately and threw it away, wondering whether it was not to the contact of that stone that she owed the moisture that was covering her and the disturbance by which she had been gripped.

She looked around. Tehenna and Khepra were asleep, side by side. The two men must have gone to find out what was happening in Alexandria.

She got up, set aside the blanket and the shawl that covered her, taking care not to wake her brother, and took a few paces across the room, very quietly. She was intrigued by the stifling perfumes and the singular objects that surrounded her.

She had reached the door at the back and perceived that the door was only pushed to, and that there was another room behind it, the grandeur and emptiness of which she perceived by the tremulous light of a vacillating lamp.

The door yielded without grating and Priscilla, obedient to her curiosity, crossed its threshold.

“Priscilla! Priscilla! It’s you, Priscilla!”

She heard that whispered appeal again in her ear, so close but which seemed to be coming from very far away. The tone was plaintive, and she had heard it before, but where and when? Her memory could not pin it down.

To her right, stone sarcophagi were lined up, which seemed to be full of a bluish liquid, and a star whose light filtered through a skylight caused sapphire scintillations to run over it periodically. Facing her, there was an almost equal file of oblong wooden cases, encrusted with stones of all colors. And Priscilla, who had taken a few steps into the room, perceived then that she was in the midst of the dead.

They were not all in the same stage of their journey. Those to the right were reposing in natron water, rubbed with bitumen, stuffed with myrrh, cinnamon and aromatic herbs. They waited there for forty days before being impregnated with gold and wrapped in bandages, before receiving on their faces the masks with enamel eyes, in order to take their place for eternity in a hieroglyphic coffin, amid the symbols of all the gods, and to confront, motionless, the great course of time.

Priscilla did not experience terror. The voice that had named her had too much sadness and benevolence. She leaned over a single mummy, for while one is still in childhood, one retains a certain clairvoyance. On the base of the coffin she read the name *Theodula*.

That was the name of a pious old lady who had been a friend of her mother and had always had a great affection for Priscilla. She lived in a small house surmounted by a cross and surrounded by a garden full of currant bushes, not far from the sea, in the part of the Bruchium that touches the Macedonian Acropolis. There, conducted by Tehenna, Priscilla had gone to see her almost every Sunday. The old lady waited for the child in an interior courtyard, and when footsteps resonated in the corridor, at the habitual hour, she invariably got up and said: “Priscilla! Priscilla! It’s you, Priscilla!”

She had attached herself forcefully to existence at the end of her days, although she had apparently received few pleasures in life. She had consulted a priest of Osiris to discover in what measure the rite of embalming permitted the double to subsist after death and continue to know physical joys. Priscilla recalled having heard her grandfather Diodorus wax indignant at those returns to ancient superstitions, and even affirm that Theodula would be damned for it, in spite of a life of piety.

Priscilla gazed at the black, shriveled, unrecognizable form that old Theodula made for a moment. There was nothing frightening about it; it was more conducive to pity. Priscilla recalled the bright garden where she had walked among beds of irises and carnations, and where she had handed her clusters of currants with astonishingly slender white hands. She would have liked to be able to offer her fruits in her turn. But no, never again! Old Theodula was now staring at her, from behind her golden mask, with enamel eyes circled with bronze; her hands were crossed over her breast, enveloped in sheaths of porcelain, and a little terracotta scarab was in the place of her heart.

But was her soul in the paradise of Jesus or was it beginning its peregrinations in the immense fields of the Amenti?

Thoutmos’ face was grave when he reappeared, followed by the embalmer.

“Jesus has protected us in bringing us here. It’s him who has saved these children!”

Marcus groaned, complaining about being woken up, and buried his head under the blanket.

Priscilla understood from the words exchanged that they were now going back to Alexandria peacefully, but that something had happened that no one dared say. She stepped on a hard object and saw on bending down the stone that she had earlier found around her neck and had thrown away. It was an ancient priapic emblem, eroded by time.

“The little princess didn’t want to keep the god Khem,” said Khepra softly, fixing her large glaucous eyes upon her, “but it doesn’t matter. The god only needs a second, during sleep.”

Then Priscilla remembered the burn between her breasts and the frisson that had run through her, and she experienced a great repulsion throughout her flesh.

The return seemed infinitely long. There were legionaries at all the crossroads, and the street where Diodorus' palace stood was full of them.

In the courtyard, slaves were standing immobile with torches, having the obligatory sadness in their features that is the rule in funeral ceremonies.

Then Priscilla noticed, with surprise, that two of the four marble vases that were in the corners of the courtyard had been smashed, and their debris scattered. A slave kneeling on the floor was washing the mosaics with water. A sticky red patch soiled a column.

She did not have time to be astonished. As Thoutmos set her brother down, still half-asleep, on his feet, Bishop Cyril appeared at the door of house, holding her father Diodorus by the shoulders, who was with him, bent double, his eyes half closed, his thin mouth forming the arc of a circle, livid and trembling.

"Courage!" said the Bishop, untiringly. "Come on, courage!"

He stopped when he perceived the children.

"Your grandfather was a saint," he said, raising his voice with an artificial solemnity, as if he were speaking as much for the slaves and the soldiers, and as much for posterity, as for Priscilla and Marcus, to whom he was addressing himself. "God wanted to recall him to his side. He has given him the glory of dying a martyr to his faith. Remember his example and be champions of Jesus all your life, like him."

Priscilla was immediately struck by the conventional character of those words. She loved her grandfather and she would subsequently feel a deep remorse at not having felt a sharp dolor immediately. Her sole thought now was to prevent her simple-minded brother Marcus from starting to laugh stupidly or say something incongruous in front of the Bishop, and all those who were looking at them curiously. She took him by the neck and embraced him abruptly. He struggled, but she was able to hold him against her until her father, having shaken the Bishop's hand, weeping, and escorted him as far as the street, had taken them back into the house.

That night, Priscilla went to sleep to the murmur of chanted prayers, and it was not until the next day that she found out what had happened.

Old Diodorus, while supervising the construction of a church the previous day on land that belonged to him, had perceived children playing, some of whom had long and curly hair. He had seen that as an indication of paganism, a sort of bravado against the simplicity of Christian fashion. He had had them seized by slaves and their heads shaved before him.

That had aroused the indignation of the pagan families to which they belonged. The news had spread from quarter to quarter. After the temples, they were attacking children! A dog-clipper had incited the mob while waving enormous shears and shouting that it was necessary to do the same to Diodorus. That idea had taken hold. The rabble of the port had followed the dog-clipper and had come *en masse* to surround Diodorus' house

Misfortune had determined that the irascible old man, confident in the majesty of his person, had opened the door wide. He had been knocked down. The dog-clipper had come too far to do nothing, but as Diodorus was extraordinarily bald, desiring nevertheless to show the crowd a trophy, he had attempted to tear off the skin of his scalp with the point of his scissors.

Diodorus was dead. The soldiers had arrived just in time to prevent the pillage of the palace by the pagans.

The funeral was celebrated with extreme magnificence. All the monasteries in Egypt were represented there. The news of a new martyr having penetrated into the deserts where the solitaries lived, several of them, with their hirsute manes and their animal skins, had set out on the march to attend the burial of the pious Diodorus. Several days after everything had been concluded, they were still presenting themselves at the gates of the city, covered in dust and mud.

Priscilla prayed with such fervor that her knees ached by dint of being folded, and she could only stand up afterwards with great difficulty. The frightful death of her grandfather inspired a horror in her of everything that was not Christian.

She often looked between her two breasts to see whether the little priapic stone that she had had around her neck while she slept had not left traces of a burn.