

## The Letter of Theodosius

"The Epistle of the monk Theodosius to the Archdeacon Leo concerning the capture of Syracuse. Translation from the Latin and Greek taken from F. Marion Crawford, *The Rulers of the South*, 2 vols. (London, 1901).

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Most Divine Sir:— To follow out the details of those things what had happened to us, a longer time and a more convenient occasion would be necessary, and a letter is too short to contain the whole series of the things that have been done. On the other hand it seems to me that to be silent about these things, and about the common grief felt by almost the whole world — for I can readily believe that all must pity us who have even heard the name of Syracuse — to keep silence, I say, would seem to be the part of a paralyzed intelligence and of a man overcome by indolence; of which one of the prophets has spoken, as by the mouth of God, saying, 'I have received them with scourges but they have not repented.' But if I undertake the narrative of these events, no matter how, it will be of some use to both of us. For it will bring me some consolation to speak, since by speaking I have some hope of being relieved from the evils by which I am now tormented, because it is a fact in nature that if one explain in words those things by which one is troubled, the bitterness of the soul is tempered; but you on your part shall at least receive the fee of tears if, perchance, you shall bestow them in pity upon the narrative you follow.

"O you, sir, who have enjoyed divine honours, we are fallen into the power of the enemy, and we are taken at last, nor did Jerusalem, when it was taken, experience worse things, neither Samaria which was overcome before Jerusalem; such ruin have we suffered as never the isles of Chetim knew, nor barbarous countries, nor any cities that can be reported. Such was the slaughter that on the same day every weapon with which defence had been made was broken to pieces, bows, quivers, arms, swords, and all weapons; the strong were made weak, and the violence of the foe drove to surrender those defenders, those brave men whom I may well call giants, who laboured with all their might, who hesitated not before that day to suffer hunger and all labours, and to be pierced with numberless wounds for the love of Christ, and who were all put to the sword after the city was taken. At length we are fallen into the hands of the enemy, though for a long time we defended ourselves from the walls, and though many times there was fighting on the sea, which indeed was a horrible sight, filling with consternation the eyes of those that looked, for the vision is indeed dismayed by the atrocity of those things which are often brought before it. We were vanquished after many attacks made upon us by night, and many a hostile ambush, after engines had been brought up against the walls with which these were pounded almost all day, after a grievous storm of stones hurled against our works, when the tortoise-shed that destroys cities had been used against us, and those things which they call subterranean rats; for not one of those things which are of use for taking a city was left untried by those who were in charge of the siege; the intense desire to possess our city had already inflamed their hearts, and they contended to the utmost with one another, excogitating new engines from day to day, the more easily to take and destroy the city. Nevertheless, in the admirable wisdom of His councils, God protected us in a measure from these. But of what use is it to continue any further in tragic strain, complaining of the chaos of evils which our enemies heaped upon us by their enormous ingenuity? Did they leave anything uninvaded or untried, which seemed to them capable of inspiring terror in the besieged, and of filling their hearts with dismay?

"Time admonishes me to turn to those things which were done within the city, and I shall say a few words at length concerning these matters; without, the sword laid waste our strength, and fear did

so within, so that I might well say that in that ancient prophecy Moses spoke of us. For as before we had sinned against God like the people of Israel, we have drunk of the same cup of the divine wrath that Israel drank; we were taken captive after we had suffered hunger long, feeding upon herbs, after having thrust into our mouths in our extreme need even filthy things, after men had even devoured their children — a frightful deed, that should be passed in silence, although we had before abhorred human flesh — oh! hideous spectacle — but who, for his own dignity's sake, could weep such deeds in tragic strain? We did not abstain from eating leather and the skins of oxen, nor from any other things soever which seemed capable of relieving men exhausted by hunger, and we spared not even dry bones, but dressed them to make ourselves a cheerful meal — a new sort of food abhorrent to the custom of mortal men. What will not unceasing hunger force men to do? Many of the Syracusans were driven to grind the bones of four-footed beasts in the mill, and these wretched men stilled their hunger with the stuff, after wetting it with a very little water. The fountain of Arethusa supplied us abundantly with water for such uses. A measure of wheat was sold for a hundred and fifty pieces of gold, but the millers sold it for more, even for two hundred pieces, so that, strange as it may seem, a roll weighing two (p83) ounces was sold for a piece of gold. Add to this, that a beast of burden was sold for as much more than three hundred gold pieces as it was the more fit for food when put up for sale, and the head of a horse went to fifteen gold pieces and sometimes even to twenty; the flesh of asses was considered something most delicious. No sort of domestic bird or fowl was left, and oil and all sorts of salt provisions had long been eaten up, even such things which, as Gregorius Theologus says, are usually the food of the poor; no cheese, no vegetables, no fish. Already the enemy had forcibly taken possession of the two harbours between which Syracuse lies, having previously levelled to the ground the defences which were called the 'brachiolia,' and which once kept the enemy from entering the harbours. Now this thing came to pass, by far the most terrible thing; a most grievous pestilence, alas, followed upon famine, and some were tormented by the disease called lock-jaw, so named from the contraction of the nerves; apoplexy dried up half of the bodies of some others, it killed others instantly, but many who were attacked by the same disease could only move half their bodies or were altogether deprived of the power of motion; others, their bodies inflated like bladders, presented a horrid spectacle to the beholder, and though death was always hanging over them, it hardly set those wretched creatures free in the end with the severest suffering, for even death p84was obeying the divine command, and was thereby not a little retarded. Indeed, to those things which I have already mentioned, very many more could be added, which would require a longer narrative than can be sent by a man given up to custody. For what else can I do than condense and crowd such great things into few words, being shut up in prison where I have not one hour of peace and quiet? The thick darkness of my prison, which hangs over my eyes, weakens and dulls my sight, and the noises made by the others who are confined in the same place agitate and disturb my mind.

"The tower, which was built at the greater port, at the right-hand angle of the city, was first struck and then partly fell down under the violence of the catapults with which the enemy hurled enormous stones. Five days after the destruction of this tower, the wall of the rampart, which had before been connected with the tower, was destroyed by the force of the catapults; thereupon great terror entered into the hearts of the besieged, but nevertheless those noble and truly brave men sustained the attack of the enemy under the leadership of his blessedness the Duke and Patrician, and did their best to second his tremendous exertions, beyond all that can be expressed in words, during twenty days and as many nights, when a wall fell down upon those who were bravely and nobly defending the approach on that side, and who thus manifested their inborn nobility p85of spirit, and held it to be the highest praise to be wounded in every part of their bodies for the defence of the city. And now, indeed, whoever chose to go to that rampart, which was called by the people the Unfortunate, might see there many men mutilated in divers and strange ways; for some had their eyes dug out, and others

had their noses cut off, some had lost their ears, others their eyelids; the jaws of others were red with blood from wounds of darts and arrows, and some were wounded in the forehead, and some in the heart, and in many ways; the bodies of some, the breasts of others, lay open from the wounds they had received; they suffered, in a word not here and there, but in every part. For the enemy besieged the city with all their forces, and was so far superior in numbers, that although it is hardly to be believed, a hundred of them fought hand-to-hand with one of us, covering their antagonists with no common glory in dangers which it required the highest courage to face. But I used to call to mind the zeal of the athletes whenever I came to a place where they were fighting fearlessly and splendidly and earning great glory for deeds well done. But when the number of our sins had so greatly increased that the drawn sword of the wrath of God was drunk with them, then, on the twenty and first day of May, and on the fourth day after the wall had fallen, the city was reduced into the power of the enemy; and the mention in which it was taken is well p86worth describing, for it was full of horror. For when the stern displeasure of God against us had scattered hither and thither the stoutest of those who resisted the enemy, and had called away our famous Patrician with his companions from the walls to their own houses, in order that they might take some food for their bodies' sake, then it was put into the hearts of the barbarians of renew the attack at that fatal tower of which I have p87spoken; and when they had advanced those engines which they used for throwing stones, the murderous traitors who invaded our city enjoyed the spectacle. Nor had they undertaken a hard matter, since but a few soldiers were guarding the tower, and the citizens did not suppose that it was a time for fighting, so our defenders felt safe and thought of nothing less than of going to the ramparts. Therefore, while the enemy were hurling stones into the city in a fearful manner, and compassed it all round about, a certain wooden ladder, over which the half-ruined tower was usually reached by the garrison, was broken down, and thereupon a great din arose; when the Patrician heard this, he sprang up at once from the table without finishing his meal, full of great anxiety for the ladder. As soon as the barbarians perceived that the ladder was broken down, for they were hurling their stones in its vicinity, they approached the walls with weight greatest alacrity, and seeing but a few men guarding the tower, vigorously drove them back and slew them; and among them was the blessed John Patrinus. After this they ascended without opposition and took possession of the place, and thence they spread through the city like a river in the sight of those who were gathering together to defend it. First they slew to the last man those who were drawn up in line against them at the porch of the Church of the Saviour, and with a great rush they opened the doors and entered the temple with drawn p88swords, as they panted for breath, to emit fire from their nostrils and eyes. Then indeed people all ages fell in a moment by the edge of the sword, princes and judges of the earth, as we sing in the psalms, young men and maidens, old men and children, both monks and those joined in matrimony, the priests and the people, the slave and the free man, and even sick persons who had lain a long time in bed. Merciful God, the butchers could not even spare these; for the soul that thirsts for human blood is not easily satisfied by the death of those who first face it in anger. And I may use the words of the holy Sophonias to tell of that day of disaster and of woe, that day of fear and ruin, that day of darkness and of gloom. But of what use is it to narrate in many words each separate thing that happened to the chief men, since such an account would strike horror to the ears that heard, and even to the very soul?

"Our great Patrician, who had retired into a certain fort, was taken alive with seventy men on the next day, and on the eighth day after the fall of the city he was executed. He bore his fate with so high and brave a heart as to admit nothing unworthy of his constancy, nor did he show the very smallest sign of fear; nor is that strange, since it had been impossible to induce him by any means to betray the city for his own safety, though there were many about him not only ready to approve the plan, but to help in its execution, had he (p89) wished it; but he chose to die without stain, trusting to save those who were with him by sacrificing his own life for many, after the example of our Lord, rather than to let

his mind dwell upon anything unworthy of his honour; yet he moved not the hearts of his murderers to any pity whatsoever. His courage was so great, and his readiness to suffer the last extremity, that even Busa, the son of the emir Hajeb, who commanded his death, was filled with great admiration. But he himself had gained this fortitude to die in such good and holy fashion because he had spent the whole time of the war in the contemplation of death, and had excellently exhorted those who were besieged with him, showing them the way that leads to immortality, wherefore, by these deeds of goodness, he had learned to fear the end of life but little; for to those who have prepared themselves by a continual meditation, lest they should find their hearts unready to suffer the end, the journey hence to heaven is not joyless, when it comes at last. But the barbarians took those whom they had made prisoners with the Patrician, all born in Syracuse, and of high station, and some other captives also, and led them out of the city, and made them stand together within a circle; and they fell upon them with a rush, like wild dogs, and slew them, some with stones, some with clubs, some with the spears they had in their hands, and others with such weapons as they found by accident, pressing upon them most cruelly; and furiously (p90) raging in their hearts, they consumed their bodies with fire. I cannot pass over with silence the barbarous cruelties they perpetrated upon Nicetas. This man was of Tarsian family, most wise and brave in war, and during the siege he used daily to heap many curses upon Mohammed, who is held by that nation to be the greatest of the prophets. So they separated him from the number of those who were to be slain, and they stretched him upon the ground on his back, and they flayed him alive from his breast downward, and they tore to pieces his protruding vitals with spears; and, moreover, with their hands they tore the heart out of the man while he yet breathed, and lacerated it with their teeth, most monstrously, and dashed it upon the earth and stoned it, and then at last were satiated, and left it; but of these things elsewhere. Now I, who had already returned to favour with the bishop a second time, and was with him in the cathedral assisting him at prayers at the sixth hour, heard with my ears how the tower was taken by the barbarians, as we came to the end of the canticle. At this news no small fear entered into the hearts of those who heard, for what thing not terrible could we expect, being about to fall most certainly into the blood-stained hands of our enemies? Nevertheless, taking courage as we could, and while the enemy were engaged in plunder within sight of the church, we fled with two other clerks to the altar of the cathedral, naked and ashamed, for we had cast off p91all our garments, excepting what we wore that was of leather. The most blessed father (our bishop) had been accustomed to conciliate the wrath of God at this altar, and to ask help for his children, and his prayers had been answered; and this wonderful thing experience had shown very often, although at this time his prayers were rejected by the mysterious counsels of the heavenly judges. When, therefore, we found ourselves thus in peril, each asked pardon of the other for any sin he had committed, and we forgave one another; and we gave thanks to God that He had allowed us to endure these things. Now, therefore, while the bishop was commending his church to the Guardian Angel, behold the enemy were suddenly there, with drawn swords wet with blood, and they wandered through the whole building, turning hither and thither; and one of them departed out of the throng that moved round and came to the holy altar, and there he found us hiding between the altar and the (bishop's) chair, and he took us; yet did nothing cruel to us, for God had certainly softened his heart a little; he said nothing wrathful nor threatening, feigning timidity in his face, though he was armed with a naked sword which smoked and dripped blood still warm. He looked at the bishop and asked him tolerably clearly who he was. As soon as he knew, he asked, 'Where and are the sacred vessels of the Church?' But when he had learned concerning the place, he led the bishop out of the holy temple p92apart from all the disturbance and tumult, and us also with him, like lambs following their shepherd. When he had reached, by our guidance, the chapel where the sacred vessels used to kept, he shut us up in it and went about to see that the elders of the barbarians should come together as quickly as possible; and then he began to tell them concerning us. We learned that his name was Semnoës, and that he was of illustrious birth; and moved by his speech, or rather, as I should say, because God

brought it all to a good ending, our enemies began to be well disposed towards us. On the same day they plundered the sacred things, and when they had done, the weight of all was five thousand pounds; and they made us go out of the city, overwhelmed with vehement grief, to say nothing of our other ills, and led us to the emir, who had encamped in the old cathedral (San Giovanni).

"He had us shut up in one of those vaulted chambers that are therein, and there it was inevitable that our poor bodies should be afflicted in every way; for the place was naturally filled with evil smells, and with worms that breed and bound in a day, as well as with the mice that were always there, and with swarms of lice and bugs, and literally with armies of fleas; and when it was night, we were overwhelmed by the falling darkness, and the house was filled with smoke which chanced to be made outside, and choked our miserable breath and almost entirely hid us from one another's sight. We were thrown into this chasm with our holy bishop and other clerk of the brethren, for the rest were all butchered when the city was taken; and there we spent thirty days, because the enemy required that time to destroy the defences of Syracuse. Throughout that period the buildings within the circuit of the walls were burned, and the value of all the booty taken was so great that the reckoning when cast up was found to be one thousand thousand<sup>o</sup> gold pieces.

"Not long after this we began the journey to Palermo which we accomplished in the space of six days, borne on beasts bred to carry burdens, but we were conducted by rough and savage Ethiopians. At length, much vexed by the heat in the daytime and by the nocturnal chills, and not having ceased to travel by day and night, we entered the extremely famous and populous city of Palermo; and as we went into the city, the people came out to meet us. They thronged out in great joy, and they sang songs of triumph, and as they saw the victors carrying the spoils into the city we at length saw the multitude of the citizens and of the strangers who had assembled, and that the number of the citizens, as compared with all accounts, had in our opinion not been overrated; for you would have thought that the whole race of the Saracens had come together there, from the rising up of the sun even to its going down, from the north and from the sea, according to the accustomed speech of the most blessed David. (p94) Wherefore the people being crowded together in such a press of inhabitants, began to build and inhabit houses without the walls, to such an extent that they really built many cities round the original one, not unequal to it, if one choose, either for attack or defence. But since, as I began to say, this most evil of all cities possessed a Contarchus — that is the name of the office — he deemed it unworthy of his fame not to make us pass (p95) under the yoke. And not only does he promise himself that he will do so, he even threatens to bring under his power peoples that live far away, and even the people of the imperial city (Constantinople). This being then the state of things, we were brought before the chief emir after the fifth day. He was sitting haughtily on a throne, on a terrace, much pleased with himself and his tyrannical power; and, like a towel hanging in the midst, he showed himself to us first from one side and then from the other. The attendants made the bishop stand forth, and through an interpreter the emir asked: 'Hast thou our manner of praying to God?' Our most wise superior would not admit that. 'Why in that manner?' asked the bishop; 'since I am the high priest of Christ and the leader of the mysteries of the servants of Christ, of whom the prophets and the righteous prophesied of old.' 'They are not prophets to you, in truth,' answered the emir, 'but only in name, since by them you would not be led away to your false doctrines, nor turned from the right path. For why do you assail our prophet with blasphemies?' 'We do not blaspheme the prophets at all,' returned the bishop, 'seeing that we have learned not to inveigh against prophets, but to speak in their behalf and to feel proud of them; but we do not know that one who is revered among you.' Amazed by these answers, the emir at once ordered that we should be again thrust into prison, and being led away we walked through the principal (p96) open place of the city, in the sight of the people; and many Christians followed us openly mourning our misery, as well as men of the contrary sect who were

impelled by curiosity and pressed closely about us and kept asking which was the very famous Sicilian archbishop, and in this way we escaped from the people. At length we were thrown into the common prison; and this is a den having its pavement fourteen steps below ground, and it has only a little door instead of a window; here the darkness is complete, and can be felt, the only light being from a lamp, or some reflection by day, and it is impossible ever to see the light of dawn in this dungeon, nor the rays of the moon. Our bodies were distressed by the heat, for it was summer, and we were scorched by the breath of our fellow-prisoners; and besides, the vermin and the lice, and hosts of fleas and other little insects, make a man miserable by their bites; promiscuously with us there were confined in the same prison, to trade (as it were) with these miseries, Ethiopians, Tarsians, Jews, Lombards, and some of our own Christians, from different parts, among whom was also the most holy Bishop of Malta, chained with double shackles. Then the two bishops embraced one another, and kissed one another with the holy kiss, and wept together awhile over the things that had happened to them; but presently they gave thanks to God for it all, and combated their grief with arguments drawn from our philosophy. While we were living in this way, the abominable day of sacrifice appointed among these people recurred; on which day they boast that they hold in memory that sacrifice which Abraham made long ago, when he sacrificed the ram given him to God for a victim, in his share of the covenant; this, out of ignorance, they call the Pasch, but they do not name the day thus from the fact, for they had no passing over from Egypt to the land of promise, according to the ancient naming of the Pasch, nor from that land to the celestial shore, nor from death to life, as the Christian faith teaches us to use this word; but from life unto death and from this corporeal destruction, which falls under sensation, to that everlasting perdition, and to that fire which shall have no end. In the celebration of this day — strange madness — they took council to burn the archbishop and to offer the most holy Pontiff of Christ as a victim to their evil demons; for a certain man of those who were over the people, having a mouth that breathed like an open sepulchre, said, turning to those who stood round about, 'O fellow citizens, let us keep this feast of the Pasch as joyfully as may be, and make it famous now, if ever, by laying hands upon the bishop of the Christians for our own salvation, for so I am sure that our affairs shall turn out fortunately and shall obtain even a better increase.' So he spoke, but certain old men with wise grey heads, and elders honourably clad in mantles, turned to the people and condemned the thing for the following reason. They said that these things were not true, and that they considered that the record of that day was made sufficiently honourable by the signal privilege of having accomplished the destruction of the city of Syracuse. Thus, God being willing, was the advice of the evil counsellor against the archbishop set at naught. Now from that day to this we have remained captive, in many sorrows, daily awaiting death itself, which perpetually hangs over us prisoners. But thou, O dear and venerable head, remember always thy Theodosius, and mayest thou render our God kind and propitious that He may calm these tempestuous billows, that he may stay them and check them, and that he may turn our captivity, as the flood under the south wind, according to the word of the Prophet King who was of the kindred of Christ. Amen."