

STRATILATES

IV-Vth century¹

Translated by Ch. W. Jones (Biography of a Legend, pp. 29-36) on the latin text edited by Karl Meisen

In the days of the great emperor Constantine there was unrest and dissension in Frigia Adaifalorum, and it was suggested to the most benign emperor that the evils be exterminated. At once he sent an army with the officers in command who were called Nepotianus, Ursus, and Eupoleonis. Crossing the strait from their station in Constantinople, they eventually sailed into the Lycian prefecture.

They came to a place called Andriake, which constituted the port for the metropolis of Myra lying three miles, more or less, from it. There they took shore leave from their anchored ship because there was no wind for sailing. Some of the soldiers separated from the main group, to find food and recreation—ostensibly to buy food for the whole party. Shortly some looters, impersonating those soldiers, were arrested for looting and pilfering. As a result a great crowd started to riot in a plaza called Placomatus. Even the Myrians at the metropolis heard the crowd, who were mobbing the soldiers as if they were the lawbreakers.

The tumult and noise were great indeed. Hearing it, the servant of God Nicholas, who administered the Holy Church of God there as bishop, walked down to quiet the disturbance, asking whether anything wrong or illegal had been done. As he arrived at Andriake, the officers of the army saw him and hailed him, drawing him into conference. The soldiers who knew him and the others who met him for the first time greeted him and embraced him with great affection. He asked them: “Where do you come from, and on whose business do you come, and for what reason do you come?”

¹ Anrich dates the text to the VI century. The same opinion has Ch. W. Jones, convinced that the first part contains historical truth. He thinks a fiction the second part (Stratilates) because, according to him, has no external evidence. It would have been interesting to know what Jones would have thought if he would have known the *History* of Zosimos (end of Vth century) that gives an extraordinary external evidence (an historical context extremely similar to that of Stratilates, that hardly a posterior Hagiographer could have been able to know). Therefore the text should be dated in the IV century (when the revolt of Nepotianus took place and when this officer became emperor for one month). As a second redaction it could be postponed to the V-VIth century, (*Father G. Cioffari*)

They told him: “We are peaceful. Our most benign emperor sent us to engage in battle with some lawbreakers, and we are on our way. Pray for us, most holy father, that we may prosper on our journey.”

Then the holy bishop invited them to go back to Myra with him, there to receive his blessing and to partake of food. The soldiers, admiring both the most holy bishop himself and his softspokenness, commanded everybody to quiet the tumult and thereby avoid arrest. Then Nicholas urged the soldiers to climb with him to the bishop’s palace.

Just then some people came from the city to that most holy man, saying: “Lord, if you had been in the city, three innocents would not have been handed over to death as they were, because Judge Datianus, taking those three men into custody, has ordered them beheaded. The whole city is in a turmoil because Your Sanctity was not to be found there.”

On hearing this, the most holy bishop became downcast. After speaking with the soldiers, he took their leaders and crossed the city.

Coming to a plaza named Leonti, he asked those who were coming away from those who had received sentence whether they were still alive. They told him that the men still lived and were directly ahead at a place known as Dioscorus, which they would find at the martyrdom of the brother confessors Crescentius and Dioscorus. As they were talking, Nicholas said that the victims ought by now to be coming out. When they got to the gate, some told him that they were in a place called Byrra: that was to be place of the beheading.

Saint Nicholas, now running, found a great crowd of people before the executioner, who was holding his sword up, anticipating the coming of the holy man. When Nicholas came up to the place of the confessors of Christ, he found the three men with their faces covered with linen cloths. They had been placed in position, with their hands tied behind them. They were bending their knees and bowing their heads, expecting death.

At that moment Saint Nicholas, according as it is written, “The righteous are bold as a lion” (Proverbs xxviii, 1), fearlessly grabbed the sword from the executioner and cast it to the ground. Loosening the men from their chains, he took them with him to the city.

Walking down to the Pretorium, he thrust open the door and entered the presence of Eustathius the Praeses. The Praeses, hearing from a guard what had been done, now walked up to honor the holy man. But the servant of God, Nicholas, turned away from him saying: “Sacriligious blood shedder! How dare you confront me, apprehended in so many and such evil acts! I will not spare or forgive you, but will let the mighty emperor Constantine

know about you—how many and how serious are the sins which you have been discovered in, and in what fashion you administer your princely prefecture.”

Then Eustathius the Praeses fell to his knees and begged him: “Be not wrathful with thy servant, lord, but speak the truth, that I am not the guilty one, but the heads of state, Eudoxius and Simonides.”

Nonetheless the holy man answered: “It is not Eudoxius and Simonides who did this, but silver and gold.” For the holy man had learned that the Praeses was to receive more than two hundred pounds of silver to execute the citizens for crime. Yet the most holy man, after the officers of the army had earnestly spoken in behalf of the Praeses, granted him pardon, once the charges which the Praeses had leveled against the three men were cleared.

Then the army chiefs, during their refection with the very holy man, asked him to pray for them, and received from him his benediction. After prayers, they bade good-by and sailed away. Finally coming to Frigia and pacifying the tumultuous populace, they returned to their quarters at Constantinople. A great reception was prepared by those who were in the city. As if taking the triumphs away from the master of the forces, and the emperor and his whole court, they came to be lionized in the palace.

But the Devil instilled immoderate envy of them in the heart of the man who was master of forces. He rendered a writ to the prefect, Ablabius, who on hearsay evidence could betray them to their death, promising him one thousand, seven hundred pounds of gold. The prefect Ablabius, agreeing to the proposal, entered the presence of the emperor Constantine and said to him:

“Most pious lord, a great sedition and conspiracy has been formed against Your Potency by the officers of the army who were sent to Frigia. For I learn as a fact that they have engaged themselves to rise up against Your Clemency. They make pretence that they are acting in your behalf while they work for money and bribes and create high honors for themselves. When I learned of this, I could not keep silent; for such iniquity is contrary to my principles. Now, immediately, if it please Your Clemency, act!”

The emperor was consumed with wrath. He immediately ordered the officers to be placed in custody without inquiry.

After a short time, those who were plotting against the officers put great pressure upon the prefect Ablabius, saying, “Why do you remand them to prison but leave them alive? As long as they stay in prison they can help their own cause.”

So the prefect, after listening to them, announced himself to the emperor and said: “Most pious lord, behold how those men whom you ordered to be incarcerated, Nepotianus, Ursus, and Eupoleonis, live on in prison, developing their intrigues throughout the imperial rule of Your Amplitude and Potency!”

When the emperor heard these assertions, he ordered the officers to be beheaded by the sword during the night.

The prefect, on obtaining this order, immediately left the palace and instructed the warden of the prison, saying: “These three men, whom you have safe in prison, should be prepared for the decree of death this night.”

The warden went at once to the officers on hearing this, and with bitter tears cried out to the three men: “Men and my lords, sorrow grips me, and fear and trembling. Ay me, would that I had never seen or heard of you! But now I do speak, and do you listen! Tomorrow we shall be separated one from another, for you are ordered to die. Whatever you possess, -silver or gold or anything else that you can give away, send off. For this night you have been ordered to die!”

The men, hearing these words from him, tore their clothes and hair from their heads, and threw themselves in the dust, crying aloud, “What evil did we do, that we should perish so miserably?”

One of them, Nepotianus, remembering what the holy man of God Nicholas did in the case of the three men, crying out with tears said, “Lord God of Saint Nicholas, have mercy upon us; and just as Thou didst with the three men who were iniquitously and unjustly adjudged to death in Lycia, when Thou didst save them, now in like fashion save us. Saint Nicholas, servant of Christ, though you be far from us, bring your intercession the nearer to us, and your behest to Thy Lord God and Our Lord Savior Jesus Christ. Intercede for us that we be rescued from iniquity and the deathbearing tempest, that we may be deemed worthy to come and adore the most holy tokens of thy paternity.”

When Nepotianus had uttered this and more in the same vein, then all three as if with one voice prayed to the same effect. Then Saint Nicholas himself appeared on that very night to the emperor. He said to him:

“Constantine, emperor, rise and free those three men whom you have remanded to prison, Nepotianus and Ursus and Eupoleonis, officers of the army, who have been condemned on hearsay. If you do not obey me, I will stir up an uncontrollable revolt against you, and hand over your carcass and your entrails to the wild beasts for food, bearing witness against you before the celestial King Christ.”

Then said the emperor, “Who are you, and how did you get into my palace?”

Said the holy man, “I am Bishop Nicholas, a sinner, who lives in the metropolis of Lycia.”

With these words he disappeared. Nevertheless, the same night he made his way to confront Ablabius the prefect, saying to him: “Ablabius, stricken in neither conscience nor mind, rise and free those three men, officers of the army, whom you hold in custody, though innocent. But if you do not wish to listen to me and to resolve to free them, I shall bear witness against you before the immortal King Christ. You will fall ill and end as food for worms, and your whole family will perish evilly.”

Ablabius said to him, “But who are you and where do you come from, to speak so?”

Then Saint Nicholas said, “I am Nicholas, a sinner, servant of God. I am the Metropolitan in Myra.”

Having said this, he disappeared in the same fashion as before. When the emperor awoke, he sent for Abiabiatus, saying, “Go, call the prefect Ablabius, and tell him what I saw and heard.” As soon as he had told the messenger all that had happened, he sent him away.

Similarly the prefect sent the same nuncio back to the emperor, telling the same story. And immediately the emperor ordered the three officers of the army to be presented to him in the presence of his court and commoners as well as the prefect.

When they had all assembled, he said to the officers: “Tell me, what kind of magic do you do, that you can so affect us in our sleep?”

But they stood silent, staring at the ground. Then he asked them the same thing again. One of them, Nepotianus, said: “Most pious lord, your servants know nothing of magic. But if we had thought of any such thing, or if we have done any evil against the majesty of Your Pious Emperorship, may Your Benign Potency order us to undergo the most horrible torments and punishment of torture.”

The emperor said to him, “Tell me, do you know anyone by the name of Nicholas?”

Hearing that name Nicholas, the officers were inspired and uplifted in heart. As if with one voice they said: “Lord God of Saint Nicholas, hear us. And as Thou didst save those three men who unjustly faced death in Myra, the metropolis of Lycia, so do Thou now save us who unjustly and unfairly face death.”

But the emperor said to them, "Tell me, who is this Nicholas?" Then Nepotianus told him what Saint Nicholas had done.

And the emperor said to them: "Now understand this, it is not I who have granted to you your life, but he whom you did invoke, Saint Nicholas, to whom you are devoted. Cut the hair of your head, and don your proper uniforms. Then render thanks to him. And be charitable toward me."

The emperor ordained that they should take several holy vessels and a Gospel all of gold, and two golden candelabra and a gold patina studded with precious stones. Then he sent them away.

They made their way to Myra, the metropolis of Lycia, where they venerated Saint Nicholas. They cut the hairs of their heads and changed their vestments. Amid tears they distributed largesse to the poor from among their own

goods, even gold and silver and raiment. And they continued such acts through many years, glorifying and praising Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, now and for ever, world without end. Amen.