

SAINT URSULA

by John Ruskin

A hagiographical work about Saint Ursula, the legendary Christian martyr and patron saint whose story of faithfulness unto death has been significant in Christian tradition and devotional life.

4 Chapters

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Saint Ursula

PREFACE

Fors Clavigera! -- to the ignorant a stumbling-stone, to the Philistines a laughing-stock, but to the Initiate a sweet remembrance of many a happy hour passed in informal chat with the Master. The real Ruskin enthusiast has read every word of Fors, and reckons it not least among the precious treasures of the Master's pen. But it remains a fact that to the vast majority of those who have heard of Fors Clavigera, it is but an excellent example of Ruskin's eccentric seeking after curious titles; and the beauties of these letters are as effectually buried as if they had appeared in a country journal. It is in the desire of rescuing one of the choicest bits in all Fors that the present little booklet is offered to the clients of the "Celestial Lily" as Mother Church names the noble Martyr, St. Ursula. Though, of course, a life of this royal maiden has an interest for me apart from its authorship by Ruskin. As one dedicated to the cause for which the little Princess and her "legions" lost their lives, as one tenderly devoted to her and as privileged to be sheltered beneath her protecting mantle, I look upon this story as one of the sweetest relics of the "Age of Faith." It makes no difference to me, as it made none to John Ruskin (and thank God there are many like him), what learned Bollandists and others tell us of the legendary character of the Princess of Over-sea. The essential thing, as Ruskin remarked, is that a great people chose so to represent their highest aspirations. It will remain eternally true, to use his words, that "we see the Saints better through a nimbus of religious enthusiasm than a fog of contemptuous rationalism." To all who, like Ursula, love holy living and unselfish dedication to a noble cause, greeting -- AN URSULINE OF NEW ORLEANS.

I THE STORY OF ST. URSULA

There was once a just and most Christian King of Britain, called Maurus. To him and to his wife Daria was born a little girl, the fairest creature that this earth ever saw. She came into the world wrapped in a hairy mantle, and all men wondered greatly what this might mean. Then the King gathered together his wise men to inquire of them. But they could not make known the thing to him, for only God in Heaven knew how the rough robe signified that she should follow holiness and purity all her days, and the wisdom of St. John the Baptist. And because of the mantle, they called her Ursula, 'Little Bear.' Now Ursula grew day by day in grace and loveliness, and in such wisdom that all men marvelled. Yet should they not have marvelled, since with God all things are possible. And when she was fifteen years old she was a light of all wisdom, and a glass of all beauty, and a fountain of Scripture and of sweet ways. Lovelier woman there was not alive. Her speech was so full of all delight that it seemed as though an angel of Paradise had taken human flesh. And in all the kingdom no weighty thing was done without counsel of Ursula. So her fame was carried through the earth, and a King of England, a heathen of Over-sea, hearing, was taken with the love of her. And he set all his heart on having her for wife to his son AETHER, and for daughter in his home. So he sent a mighty and honourable embassy, of earls and marquesses, with goodly company of knights and ladies and philosophers; bidding them, with all courtesy and discretion, pray King Maurus to give Ursula in marriage to AETHER. "But," he said, "if Maurus will not hear your gentle words, open to him all my heart, and tell him that I will ravage his land with fire, and slay his people, and make himself die a cruel death, and will, after, lead Ursula away with me. Give him but three days to answer, for I am wasted with desire to finish the matter and hold Ursula in my ward." But when the ambassadors came to King Maurus, he would not have his daughter wed a heathen; so, since prayers and gifts did not move him, they spoke out all the threats. Now the land of Britain was little, and its soldiers few, while the heathen was a mighty king and a conqueror; so Maurus and his Queen and his councillors, and all the people, were in sore distress. But on the evening of the second day Ursula went into her chamber and shut close the doors, and before the image of the Father, who is very pitiful, prayed all night with tears, telling how she had vowed in her heart to live a holy maiden all her days, having Christ alone for spouse. But if His will were that she should wed the son of the heathen King, she prayed that wisdom might be given her to turn the hearts of all that people who knew not faith or holiness, and power to comfort her father and mother, and all the people of her fatherland. And when the clear light of dawn was in the air she fell asleep. And the Angel of the Lord appeared to her in a dream, saying, "Ursula, your prayer is heard. At the sun-rising you shall go boldly before the ambassadors of the King of Over-sea, for the God of Heaven shall give you wisdom, and teach your tongue what it should speak." When it was day, Ursula rose to bless and glorify the name of God. She put on for covering and for beauty an enwrought mantle like the starry sky, and was crowned with a coronet of gems. Then, straightway passing to her father's chamber, she told him what grace had been done to her that night, and all that now was in her heart to answer to the ambassadors of Over-sea. So, though long he would not, she persuaded her father. Then Maurus, and his lords and councillors, and the ambassadors of the heathen King, were gathered in the Hall of Council. And when Ursula entered the place

where these lords were, one said to the other, "Who is this that comes from Paradise?" For she moved in all noble gentleness, with eyes inclined to earth, learned and frank and fair, delightful above all women upon earth. Behind her came a hundred maidens, clothed in white silk, fair and lovely. They shone brightly as the stars, but Ursula shone as the moon and the evening star. Now this was the answer Ursula made, which the King caused to be written, and sealed with the royal seal, and gave to the ambassadors of the King of the Over-sea. "I will take," she said, "for spouse, AEther, the son of my lord, the King of Over-sea. But I ask of my lord three graces, and with heart and soul pray of him to grant them." "The first grace I ask is this, that he and the Queen and their son, my spouse, be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "The second grace is that three years may be given me, before the bridal, in which to go to and fro upon the sea, that I may visit the bodies of the Saints in Rome, and the blessed places of the Holy Land." "And for the last grace, I ask that he choose ten fair maidens of his kingdom, and with each of these a thousand more, all of gentle blood, who shall come to me here in Britain, and go with me in gladness upon the sea, following this my holy pilgrimage." Then spake one of the nobles of the land to Maurus, saying, "My lord the King, this your daughter is the Dove of Peace come from Paradise, the same that in the days of the flood brought to the Ark of Noah the olive-branch of good news." And at the answer were the ambassadors so full of joy that they well-nigh could not speak, and with praise and triumph, they went their way, and told their master all the sweet answer of Ursula. Then my lord the King said, "Praised and blessed be the name of our God Malcometto, who has given my soul for comfort that which it desired. Truly there is not a franker lady under the wheel of the sun; and by the body of my mother I swear there is nothing she can ask that I will not freely give. First of the maidens she desires shall be my daughter Florence." Then all his lords rose, man by man, and gladly named each his child. So the will of Ursula was done; and that King, and all his folk, were baptized into the Holy Faith. And AEther, with the English maidens, in number above ten thousand, came to the land of Britain. Then Ursula chose her own four sisters, Habila and Julia and Victoria and Aurea, and a thousand daughters of her people, with certain holy bishops and great lords and grave councillors, and an abbot of the order of St. Benedict, men full of all wisdom and friends of God. So all that company set sail in eleven ships, and passing this way and that upon the sea, rejoiced in it, and in this their maiden pilgrimage. And those who dwelt by the shores of the sea came forth in multitudes to gaze upon them as they passed, and to each man it appeared a delightful vision. For the ships sailed in fair order, side by side, with sound of sweet psalms and murmur of the waters. And the maidens were clad, some in scarlet and some in pure samite, some in rich silk of Damascus, some in cloth of gold, and some in the purple robe that is woven in Judea. Some wore crowns, others garlands of flowers. Upon the shoulder of each was the visible cross, in the hands of each a pilgrim's staff by their sides were pilgrims' scrips, and each ship's company sailed under the gonfalon of the Holy Cross. Ursula in the midst was like a ray of sunlight, and the Angel of the Lord was ever with them for guide. So in the holy time of Lent they came to Rome. And when my Lord the Pope came forth, under the Castle of St. Angelo, with great state, to greet them, seeing their blessed assembly, he put off the mantle of Peter, and with many bishops, priests, and brothers, and certain cardinals, set himself to go with them on their blessed pilgrimage. At length they came to the land of Slavonia, whose ruler was friend and liegeman to the Soldan of Babylon. Then the Lord of the Saracens sent straightway to the Soldan, telling what a mighty company had come to his land, and how they were Christian folk. And the Soldan gathered all his men of war, and with great rage the host of the heathen made against the company of

Ursula. And when they were nigh, the Soldan cried and said, "What folk are ye?" And Ursula spake in answer, "We are Christian folk; our feet are turned to the blessed tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the saving of our souls, and that we may win grace to pass into eternal life, in the blessed Paradise." And the Soldan answered, "Either deny your God, or I will slay you all with the sword. So shall ye die a dolorous death, and see your land no more." And Ursula answered, "Even so we desire to be sure witnesses for the name of God, declaring and preaching the glory of His name; because He has made heaven and earth and the sea by His Word; and afterward all living things; and afterward has willed, Himself, to die for our salvation and glory. And who follows Him shall go to rejoice in His Fatherland and in His Kingdom." Then she turned to her people: "My sisters and my brothers, in this place God has given us great grace. Embrace and make it sure, for our death in this place will be life perpetual, and joy and sweetness never-ending. And there, above, we shall be with the Majesty and the angels of Paradise." Then she called her spouse to comfort and teach him. And he answered her with these words: "To me it appears three thousand years that death is a-coming, so much have I already tasted of the sweetness of Paradise." Then the Soldan gave commandment that they should all be slain with the sword. And so was it done. Yet when he saw Ursula standing in the midst of all that slaughter, like the fairest stalk of corn in harvest, and how she was exceeding lovely, beyond the tongues of this earth to tell, he would have saved her alive, and taken her for wife. But when she would not, and rebuked him, he was moved with anger. Now there was a bow in his hand, and he set an arrow on the string, and drew it with all his strength, and it pierced the heart of the glorious maiden. So she went to God. And one maiden only, whose name was Corbula, through fear hid herself in the ship. But God, who had chosen all that company, gave her heart, and with the dawn of the next day she came forth willingly, and received the martyr's crown. Thus all were slain, and all are gone to Paradise, and sing the glad and sweet songs of Paradise. * * * * Whosoever reads this holy history, let him not think it a great thing to say an Our Father and a Hail Mary for the soul of him who has written it.

II THE DREAM OF ST. URSULA

(CARPACCIO)JOHN RUSKIN In the year 1869, just before leaving Venice, I had been carefully looking at a picture by Victor Carpaccio, representing the dream of a young princess. Carpaccio has taken much pains to explain to us, as far as he can, the kind of life she leads, by completely painting her little bedroom in the light of dawn, so that you can see everything in it. It is lighted by two doubly-arched windows, the arches being painted crimson round their edges, and the capitals of the shafts that bear them, gilded. They are filled at the top with small round panes of glass; but beneath, are open to the blue morning sky, with a low lattice across them; and in the one at the back of the room are set two beautiful white Greek vases with a plant in each, one having rich dark and pointed green leaves, the other crimson flowers, but not of any species known to me, each at the end of a branch like a spray of heath. These flower-pots stand on a shelf which runs all round the room and beneath the window, at about the height of the elbow, and serves to put things on anywhere; beneath it, down to the floor, the walls are covered with green cloth, but above are bare and white. The second window is nearly opposite the bed, and in front of it is the princess's reading-table, some two feet and a half square, covered by a red cloth with a white border and dainty fringe; and beside it her seat, not at all like a reading-chair in Oxford, but a very small three-legged stool like a music-stool, covered with crimson cloth. On the table are a book, setup at a slope fittest for reading, and an hour-glass. Under the shelf near the table, so as to be easily reached by the outstretched arm, is a press full of books. The door of this has been left open, and the books, I am grieved to say, are rather in disorder, having been pulled about before the princess went to bed, and one left standing on its side. Opposite this window, on the white wall, is a small shrine or picture (I can't see which, for it is in sharp retiring perspective), with a lamp before it, and a silver vessel hung from the lamp, looking like one for holding incense. The bed is a broad four-poster, the posts being beautifully wrought golden or gilded rods, variously wreathed and branched, carrying a canopy of warm red. The princess's shield is at the head of it, and the feet are raised entirely above the floor of the room, on a dais which projects at the lower end so as to form a seat, on which the child has laid her crown. Her little blue slippers lie at the side of the bed, her white dog beside them; the coverlid is scarlet, the white sheet folded half way back over it; the young girl lies straight, bending neither at waist nor knee, the sheet rising and falling over her in a narrow unbroken wave, like the shape of the coverlid of the last sleep, when the turf scarcely rises. She is some seventeen or eighteen years old, her head is turned towards us on the pillow, the cheek resting on her hand, as if she were thinking, yet utterly calm in sleep, and almost colourless. Her hair is tied with a narrow riband, and divided into two wreaths, which encircle her head like a double crown. The white nightgown hides the arm, raised on the pillow, down to the wrist. At the door of the room an angel enters (the little dog, though lying awake, vigilant, takes no notice). He is a very small angel; his head just rises a little above the shelf round the room, and would only reach as high as the princess's chin, if she were standing up. He has soft grey wings, lustreless; and his dress, of subdued blue, has violet sleeves, open above the elbow, and showing white sleeves below. He comes in without haste, his body like a mortal one, casting shadow from the light through the door behind, his face perfectly quiet, a palm-branch in his right hand, a scroll

in his left. So dreams the princess, with blessed eyes that need no earthly dawn. It is very pretty of Carpaccio to make her dream out the angel's dress so particularly, and notice the slashed sleeves; and to dream so little an angel -- very nearly a doll angel -- bringing her the branch of palm and message. But the lovely characteristic of all is the evident delight of her continual life. Royal power over herself, and happiness in her flowers, her books, her sleeping and waking, her prayers, her dreams, her earth, her heaven. * * * * "How do I know the princess is industrious?" Partly by the trim state of her room -- by the hour-glass on the table, by the evident use of all the books she has (well bound, every one of them, in stoutest leather or velvet, and with no dog's-ears), but more distinctly from another picture of her, not asleep. In that one a prince of England has sent to ask her in marriage; and her father, little liking to part with her, sends for her to his room to ask her what she would do. He sits, moody and sorrowful; she, standing before him in a plain housewifely dress, talks quietly, going on with her needle-work all the time. A workwoman, friends, she, no less than a princess; and princess most in being so. In like manner is a picture by a Florentine, whose mind I would fain have you know somewhat, as well as Carpaccio's -- Sandro Botticelli. The girl who is to be the wife of Moses, when he first sees her at the desert well, has fruit in her left hand, but a distaff in her right. "To do good work, whether you live or die" -- it is the entrance to all Princedoms; and if not done, the day will come, and that infallibly, when you must labour for evil instead of good. FORS CLAVIGERASunnyside, Orpington, Kent, 1872. * * * * [Illustration] * * * *

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