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# PUDENS'S RING

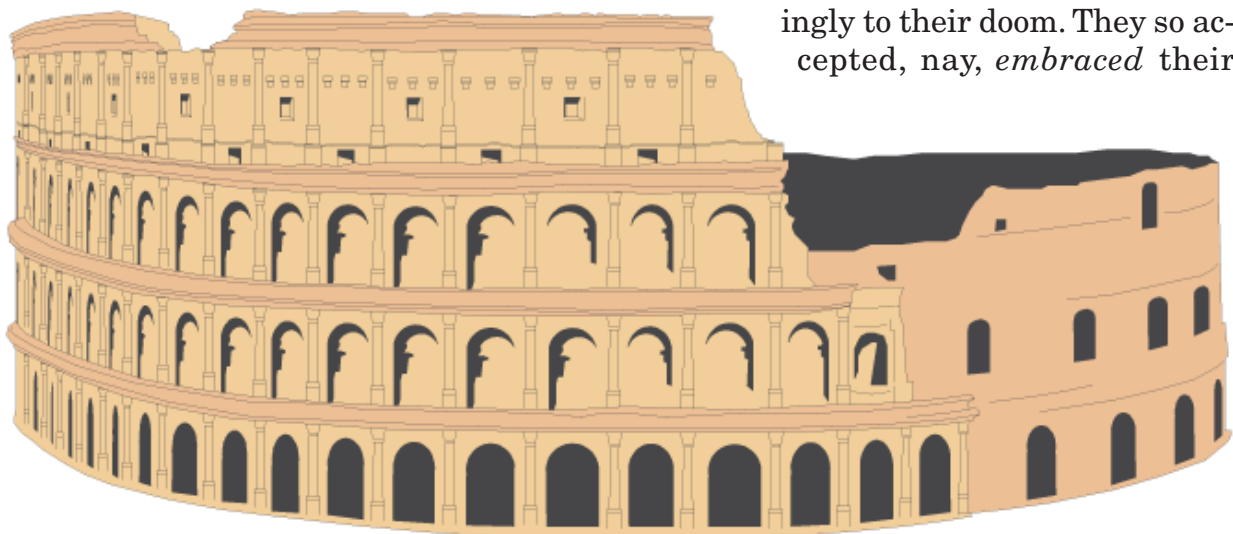
BASED ON THE TRUE STORY  
PRESERVED IN THE WRITINGS OF TERTULLIAN

By Roderick Graciano

Revised: June, 2004

**T**he little group of condemned Christians blinked their eyes as they emerged from the bowels of the Carthage prison on that 7th of March, in the year of our Lord 202. The morning sunlight blinded them briefly as they glanced eastward at the top of the amphitheater looming above the rooftops of the shops and brothels. As their eyes adjusted to the brightness, they amazed the curious onlookers in the street by waving cheerfully at them. They smiled brightly as though they were parading to a wedding feast.

The assistant to the warden, a soldier named Pudens, directed his charges around the corner for the short walk to the amphitheater. *This was certainly not the usual band of criminals*, Pudens mused to himself. This group went willingly to their doom. They so accepted, nay, *embraced* their



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fate, that the warden would spare Pudens no other comrades for the trip to the arena, considering additional guards superfluous for the task.

Saturus, the eldest of the prisoners, walked in the rear beside Pudens. As the entire amphitheater came into view, that massive structure styled after the Roman Coliseum, Saturus turned to the warden’s assistant and said, “May God bless you this day, Pudens!” The soldier turned his head briefly to meet the eyes of Saturus, and then returned his gaze to the group walking before him. “I’m marching you to your deaths and yet you bless me, Saturus?” he said.

“I do indeed,” said Saturus, “for it is not really to our deaths, but to our glory. Nor do I hold you responsible for these trials that have come upon us under the policies of Severus. This is not your fault but rather our destiny, that we might testify to our neighbors of our hope that reaches beyond the grave.”

“You would still make me a Christian, Saturus,” said Pudens wryly.

“It is my dying prayer that you will follow the example of the warden who received our Lord not three nights ago.”

These words struck deeply into Pudens’s heart for the warden had indeed become a believer. Like Pudens, the hard-bitten warden had never before seen prisoners rejoicing in their cells. Neither had he ever before seen

condemned people comforting their visitors, rather than the other way around. The warden’s hungry heart had finally driven him to ask Saturus the reason for the joy that glowed in his countenance, and Saturus had instructed him in the faith of the Nazarene. The warden had not proclaimed his faith openly, but Saturus knew, and Pudens knew, that the grizzled man had believed and was now contemplating retiring quietly from his civil duties and taking the Good News to his people in Cyrenaica. One thing was clear to Pudens: becoming a Christian would be costly. He would not join this movement rashly. His fellow soldiers had not dubbed him “Modest” for nothing (for that was the meaning of his name). Pudens always avoided impropriety and excess, and haste in crucial decisions was not in his nature. Nevertheless, he could not dismiss from his mind the question of whether or not he himself should believe. He had never seen cheerfulness in the face of suffering like these people possessed. Furthermore, Pudens had grown to respect the warden, for the older soldier had seen much in the course of his life and travels and was not given to making reckless decisions either. Perhaps the warden truly had, at long last, discovered which of the gods held the keys to eternal life.

Pudens turned his mind back to his present duty as the group of Christians entered the tunnel-like main gate of the amphitheater. They had no sooner entered the dimness of the gate than devotees of Saturn and of Ceres descended upon them as out of nowhere. The pagan priests and priestesses tried to force costumes upon the Christians that matched their own. One of the Christians, however, the young and noble Perpetua, raised her voice above

the ruckus. “We’re not going forth as a sacrifice to the gods of fertility,” she cried, “but as a libation to our creator, Christ Jesus! Why did we forfeit our lives by refusing the sacrifice to our earthly king, Caesar, if only to die honoring gods to whom we admit no sovereignty over us whatsoever? It was precisely so that we would not be forced to worship other gods that we gave up our lives at the tribunal!”

Pudens was about to intervene, when his commanding officer stepped out of the shadows, sword in hand. “Out of here, you fanatics!” the commander shouted at the pagan priests. The devotees of Saturn and Ceres, seeing the naked steel, bustled out with their armloads of garments uttering no further word. “As for you,” the imposing officer said, coming forward and grasping Perpetua’s ivory jaw in his sunburned hand, “you shall have your wish and face the beasts wearing nothing at all!”

The commander waved Pudens forward, and Pudens directed his charges into the arena. According to custom, Pudens marched the Christians around the perimeter so that the crowd might look closely upon those about to die. As they approached the far end of the oval arena, Saturus said, “Behold, Pudens, the gates of Life and Death are reversed today.”

“What are you saying, Saturus?” replied Pudens glancing at the two gladiator exits. “The gates are as they have always been.”

“Yes,” said Saturus, “but today a different sort of champion will exit by one of them. They will drag us out by the Death Gate, but for us it will prove the Gate of Life.” Pudens shook his head in wonder at these words.

The Christians rounded the end of the oval and then came before the throne of Hilarian, the Procurator who had condemned them. Saturus smiled and waved at the Procurator. Once certain that he had gotten Hilarian’s attention, Saturus then proceeded to point boldly at the Procurator with his finger and then turn his finger upon himself. Saturus followed this gesture with another, pointing his finger into the sky and then again at Hilarian. The crowd understood Saturus well, for they angrily called upon the Procurator to chasten the arrogance of the Christians. “They threaten your honor with retribution from their god!” the audience cried. Hilarian did not need an interpretation of Saturus’s gesture. He’d felt a sudden chill as the pointing finger scratched burning words into his mind: “You judge us, but God shall judge you!” Hilarian’s face contorted in rage and he signaled to the guards standing at his back. Pudens saw what was coming and halted his charges as two of the Procurator’s bodyguards leapt down into the arena. Pudens was not ready to die with these Christians so he could only stand and watch as Hilarian’s men grabbed Saturus and the two men closest to him. Saturus and the other two, Revocatus and Saturninus by name, were tied to posts on a platform in the center of the arena and then flogged to the accompaniment of the cheering crowd in the seats above.

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When the scourging ended, Pudens was amazed to see Satorus and his companions smiling still as they were returned to the group. "You see, Pudens," Satorus said as he took his place again at the back of the procession, "God has even given us the joy of sharing in the sufferings of our Lord!"

As the Christians completed their march around the arena, the women were led to a gate on the far side to be stripped while Pudens gathered the men behind the animal barrier in the gate near the main entrance. When the Master of the Show signaled, Pudens touched the shoulder of one of the men, in this way wordlessly bidding him go to his doom. Saturninus went first and had the leopard loosed upon him. The leopard raked open his flesh but then lost interest so that Saturninus survived to face the bear later on the platform. When the master of the show signaled again, Satorus pushed his way to Pudens's side. Pudens's hand hesitated in the air above Satorus's shoulder, but Satorus took the soldier's hand and lowered it the rest of the way. "I will return shortly, Pudens," Satorus said, "for they are bringing out the boar, and that wild pig is not the instrument of my release." Satorus went out into the open arena and approached the fur-clad Beast Fighter. The Beast Fighter held the end of a rope which he knotted around Satorus' waist. Satisfied that the rope was well secured to the Christian, the Beast Fighter then turned to where the other end of the rope passed into a large cage, through the slats of which the agitated boar could be seen. The Beast Fighter gingerly lifted the slatted door of the cage and the boar burst out, leaping and twisting in the air. In an instant, the disoriented animal charged, not at Satorus, but in the opposite direction, goring the Beast Fighter in the belly so that the unfortunate man's bowels protruded. The boar would have finished the Beast Fighter then and there if it had not been restrained by the rope tied to Satorus. Satorus in fact, attempted to yank the beast away from the wounded man, upon which the boar began to charge about the arena, dragging Satorus behind him. At length, as the crowd began to hoot, a gladiator came forth and with great show slew the boar with a javelin while the disheveled Satorus was waved back to the gate.

"You see," said Satorus, rejoining the wondering Pudens behind the barrier, "It is as I told you. Days ago I asked the Lord to spare me from the bear, for I dreaded being torn apart by mouthfuls, and He assured me in a dream that my departure will be as swift as a leopard's leap." It seemed as though Satorus had hardly said this, when the leopard was loosed again, and the Master of the Show signaled Pudens that the same man should be sent again into the arena.

"Just as the Lord promised," Satorus said, brushing grit from his forehead. "What I counted on and just now foretold to you is coming to pass. So that you may trust in all I have told you, watch and see what happens. When I go forth yonder, *one bite* of the leopard will bring my victory."

Satorus went out into the open and lifted his eyes to heaven. He raised his arms in worship of the One into whose presence he would shortly step. The leopard, as though signaled by Satorus's raised arms, ran at great speed and lunged at the Christian's throat, bowling him over on the sand. The somersaulting leopard righted himself and ran off as though frightened by his tumble. He did not return to bite again. One bite had been sufficient, however, to open an artery, for when Satorus stood up he was drenched in blood from



his neck to the hem of his garment. The Master of the Show waved Satorus back to the gate, and as the Christian went with faltering steps the people mocked him. "Your god will bless you now!" they shouted. "You've been baptized all over again!"

Satorus sank to his knees when he reached the gate, and the soldier Pudens knelt before him. Satorus lifted his dimming eyes to Pudens's and said, "Farewell! Keep my faith and me in mind! And don't let these events turn you from Christ but toward Him." And with



that he asked for the ring from Pudens's finger. When Pudens handed it over, Satorus looked closely at it for a moment, reading the impression, and then spoke with weakening voice, "It says *fortunate*; let my testimony to you this day bring your good fortune." With that, Satorus pressed the ring against his own throat, and gave it back dripping to Pudens as a legacy, bequeathing it to the soldier as a memorial of his passion. As Pudens slipped the bloodied ring back on his finger, the excellent Satorus flew away through the Gate of Life, and his body sank quietly to the sand.

What happened to the women and the other men on that day in Carthage is well told in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. History does not record what became of the soldier, Pudens, but many who witnessed the death-conquering faith of early Christian martyrs, themselves followed in the martyrs' footsteps. I will not be surprised if we meet the soldier Pudens when we ourselves pass through the Gate of Life.

We are right to be awed by martyrs like Satorus who valued Christ more than life, but let us not overlook the deeper lesson of his death: Satorus also valued *people* more than life, and the needs of others more than his own comfort. One of the greatest triumphs of the early martyrs was the discovery that they could minister to others even as they themselves bled. This kind of ministry is all too foreign to us in our narcissistic culture. We are too emotionally engrossed in the abuses and injustices by which others have rendered our lives less than idyllic, and we overlook opportunities to minister to those who have no hope at all. Nevertheless, the legacy of the early Christians still reappears here and there, in the lives of quiet martyrs in our midst. We see the ring of Pudens on the hand of the arthritic widow who wrests the pain from her mind in order to concentrate on her intercessions for the lost and the straying. We see it on the hand of the young mother who refuses to brood over the tragedies of her own childhood, but has instead turned her emotional scars into wise counsel for teenage girls trying to escape the moral holocaust of our time. We see it on the hand of the weary missionary who casts off his cloak of discouragement in order to reach out again to those who don't yet see any value in his message. Such people are worthy heirs of Satorus's legacy. It is as though they wear Pudens's ring. Undoubtedly, they have known the One who said, "Father, forgive them," and "Son, behold your mother," as He Himself bled.

