

Linus

By A. C. Benson

In the old days there was a rich city of Asia, Cibyra by name, a prosperous place of wealthy merchants, full of large stone houses, with towers to catch the breeze, cloisters full of shadow and coolness, looking upon garden-closes set with little branching trees, very musical with clear fountains. The land was not yet wholly Christian, but persecution had long ceased, and those in high places called themselves by the Saviour's name; but still there were many who were heathen in all but name, and did not follow the Way, but spoke or thought of the faith as a heavy burden bound on the backs of men. And there was much wickedness in such cities as Cibyra, men and women following the desires of their hearts, and only when sick or tired, or sometimes ashamed, looking fearfully to judgment.

In Cibyra lived a young man called Linus; he was an orphan; his father had been a Greek merchant, struck down in youth by a mysterious disease, already a dying man when his little son was born; he had named him Linus, thinking in his heart of an old sad song, sung by reapers, about a young shepherd who had to suffer death, and had been unwilling to leave the beautiful free life, the woods and hills that he loved. And his mother had approved the name, partly to please the dying man, and partly because the name had been borne by holy men; soon afterwards she, too, had died, leaving her son to the care of her brother, a strict and stern Christian, but with a loving heart; so that Linus had been brought up in simple and faithful ways; and the only thing that had given anxious thoughts to his uncle was that the child's great inheritance had become yearly greater, many streets and houses having been built on the land which belonged to him. But the boy was simple and pure, very docile and dutiful, apt to learn, loving beauty in all things, fond of manly exercise, hating riot and evil talk, generous and noble in body and mind.

Now just when Linus came of age, his uncle had fallen sick and found himself near his end; he had accustomed Linus to the knowledge of his riches, and had made him understand that his wealth was not only for show and pleasure, but was to be used generously and wisely, to help the humble and poor; and this in his last days was much in his thoughts and often on his lips—though he concealed his coming death from Linus, until at last the boy was roused at night to take leave of his uncle, who had been both father and mother to him; and the dying man's last words had been a prayer for the boy that he might be pure and loving; and then he had sighed and turning to Linus he took his hand and kissed it, and said, "Remember"; and then with another sigh had died, quietly as he had lived; and the boy had known what he meant him to keep in mind, and that it was a charge to him to be careful and generous.

So Linus was left to himself; he was master of a great house and many servants, and with the revenues of a prince; and when his grief was a little abated, and memory was more sweet than sad, he made many plans how to use his wealth; but it is not easy to spend money wisely, and as yet, though he gave a large sum to the deacons for the poorer brethren, he had not been able to decide how to bestow his wealth best, and still his inheritance increased.

Meanwhile his life began to be very full of happiness and pleasure; he loved friendship and merry talk, and music and the sight of beautiful things, rich houses and fair men and women; and he had too, besides his wealth and his beauty, much of the fine and fragrant thing that the Greeks called charm; it was a pleasure to see him move and speak; in his presence life became a more honour-able and delightful thing, full of far-off echoes and old dreams, and the charm was the

greater because Linus did not know it himself; all men were kindly and gracious to him, wherever he went, and so he thought that it was the same for all others; he was modest, and he had been brought up not to turn his thoughts upon himself, but to give others their due, and to show courtesy and respect to all persons, high or low, so that the world was very tender to him; and in the long summer days, with a little business, to make, as it were, a solid core to life, with banquets, and hunting, and military exercises, and the company of the young, the days sped very quickly away, divided one from another by dreamless sleep. And his friends became more and more numerous, and the plans which he had made to use his wealth were put aside for a while. Sometimes he heard a word spoken or saw glances exchanged which somehow cast a little shadow across his mind; but still, men and women, knowing his bringing-up, and awed perhaps by his instinctive purity, put their best side forward for Linus. So that he remained innocent, and thought others so. And when sometimes an old friend of his uncle's said a grave word to him, or warned him against some of those with whom he spent his days, Linus said lightly that he judged no one, and indeed that he had seen nothing to judge.

One evening he found himself at a banquet at the house of a rich man whom for some reason he did not wholly trust. He had hesitated to go, but had put the thought aside, saying to himself that he must not be suspicious. The company had assembled, all being men, and were listening from an open gallery to a concert of lutes and viols, the players being skilfully concealed among the trees of the garden. It was twilight, and the blue sky, with a few bright stars, died into a line of pure green, the sharp tops of the cypresses showing very black against it, and the towers of a neighbouring house looking gravely over.

Somehow Linus did not wholly like the music; it seemed to him as though some bright and yet dangerous beast was walking in the dark alleys of the garden, his eyes sparkling; the music, after a low descant, rose in a delicious wail of sorrow and sank again, and Linus felt something wild and passionate stir in his heart and rise in yearning for he knew not what. He looked round at the guests who sat or stood in little groups, and he felt again that he had not been wise to come. There were several persons there who were not well spoken of, luxurious and effeminate men, whom Linus knew only by repute; but at that moment his host came up and spoke so gently and courteously to Linus, asking him whether he was pleased with the unseen music, that Linus grew ashamed of his secret thoughts.

Presently the banquet was ready, and the guests went in little groups into a large vaulted hall, kept deliciously cool by a fountain, that poured into a marble trough like an altar at the end, with a white statue above it of a boy looking earnestly at the water. At the other end the great doors were open to the garden, and the breeze, heavily laden with the scent of flowers, came wandering in and stirred the flames of the lamps which stood on high stone brackets along the walls. Each side of the room was supported by an arcade of stone built out upon the wall.

Linus lingered behind a little, looking out into the garden, where he heard the soft talk and laughter of the musicians who were dispersing, and in a moment found himself the last to go in, except for a tall thin man, whom Linus knew only by sight and name, and who had the reputation of eccentricity in the town; he was a secret, silent man, tall and lean, with bright dark eyes. He was seen everywhere, but lived alone in a melancholy tower, where he was said to study much and observe the courses of the stars, and it was hinted by some people that he was versed in magical books, though he passed for a Christian. He spoke but little in company, and watched others quietly and gravely, with something of a smile, as one might watch a child at play. But as he belonged to an ancient family, and had a certain fame, he was a welcome guest at many houses.

This man, whose name was Dion, came up to Linus, and with a courteous gesture asked if he might have the honour to place himself next to him—"We have many friends in common," he added; and Linus, who loved to make a new friend, assented; and so they went in together, and took their places side by side about the middle of the great table; on the other side of Linus sat a man, with an uneasy smile, whom he did not know, to whom Linus bowed; at first the conversation was low and fitful; the table was abundantly furnished, and the servants were deft and assiduous; Linus was soon satisfied with meat and drink, which were circulated almost too plentifully; so that he contented himself with refusing the constant proffer of food, kept his full cup untasted, and found pleasure in the talk of Dion, who told him some curious legends.

Soon the talk became louder and more insistent, and frequent laughter broke out in all directions, but Linus felt more and more in a kind of pleasant solitude with his new friend. After a pause in the talk, in which their thoughts seemed to grapple together, Linus took courage, and said that he was surprised to meet Dion in this company. "Yes," said Dion, with a slight smile, "and I confess that I was even more surprised to meet you here; and, moreover, I saw when you came in that you were surprised to be here yourself. You thought that you had travelled a long way from where you began."

At those words, which seemed as though his inmost thoughts had been read, and still more at the glance which accompanied them, Linus felt a strange sensation, almost of fear; and in the silence that followed he heard higher up the table the end of a tale told that seemed to him to be both evil and shameful, and the laugh that followed it brought a blush from his heart to his cheek. "Yes," said Dion, gravely, as though answering a question, "you are right to hate that story, and you feel, I do not doubt, as if it would be well for you to rise and fly such contact. But it would not be well; we must be in the world, but not of it; and if a man can but be sure of keeping his heart clear and bright, he does better to mix with the world; we need not forget that the Master Himself was accused of loving the company of publicans and sinners more than that of the scrupulous Pharisees." These words gave Linus a kind of courage and filled him with wonder, and he looked up at Dion, who was regarding him with dark eyes.

"Yes," went on Dion, "the only thing is that a man should not be deceived by these shows, but should be able to look through and behind them. This room seems bright and solid enough to us; the laughter is loud; it is all very real and true to us; but I think that you have the power to see further; look in my eyes for a moment and tell me what you see."

Linus looked at Dion's eyes, and all at once he seemed to stand in a lonely and misty place; it seemed like a hill swept with clouds; it was but for a moment, and then the bright room and the table came back; but it swam before his eyes.

"This is very strange," said Linus. "I do not think that I ever felt this before."

Then Dion said, "Look at the wall there opposite to us, between the arches, and tell me what you see."

The wall between the arches was a plain wall of stone that gave, Linus knew, upon the street; he looked for a moment at the wall and the joints of the masonry. "I see nothing," he said, "but the wall and the jointed stones."

"Look again," said Dion.

Linus looked again, and suddenly the wall became blurred, as though a smoke passed over it; then the stones seemed to him to melt into a kind of mist, which moved this way and that; all at once the mists drew up, rolling off in ragged fringes, and showed him a dark room within, plainly furnished with tall presses; in the centre of the room was a table at which a man sat writing in a book, a large volume, writing busily, his hand moving swiftly and noiselessly over

the paper. At the far end of the room was an archway which seemed to lead into a corridor; but the man never raised his head. He was an old man with grey hair, clad in a cloudy kind of gown; his face seemed stern and sad; over his head played a curious radiance, as though from some unseen source, which brightened into two clear centres or points of light over his brows.

While he still wrote, some one whom Linus could not see very distinctly came quietly into the room through the archway, carrying in his arms another volume like the one in which the man was writing; the writer never raised his head, but Linus saw that he was finishing the last page of the book; as he finished he pushed it aside with something of impatience in his gesture; the other laid the new volume before him, and the man began at once to write, as though eager to make up for the moment's interruption; the other took up the finished book, clasped it, and went silently out.

"This is a very strange thing," said Linus faltering. "Who would have supposed there was a room in there? I had thought it gave upon the street."

"There are hidden rooms everywhere," said Dion; "but I see that you are not satisfied; you may go in and look closer; you cannot interrupt him who writes; he has no eyes but for his task— and no one here will notice you."

Linus looked round; it seemed to him indeed as though by some strange attraction the party had been drawn into two groups right and left of him, and that he and Dion were left alone; the merriment was louder and wilder, and frequent peals of laughter indicated to him the telling of some tale—wicked it seemed to him from the glistening eyes and disordered looks of some of the guests; but the laughter seemed to come to him far off as through a veil of water. So he rose from his place and went into the room.

It was very plain and severe; the presses round the room seemed to contain volumes like that in which the man was writing. It was lit with a low radiance of its own, very pure and white. He looked into the door that led into the corridor; it seemed to be brighter in there. He stood waiting, undecided. He looked first at the man who wrote; his hand moved with great rapidity, and his face seemed furrowed and grave; and Linus felt a fear of him, which was increased by the curious light which seemed to well in fountains from his brow, lighting the grey hair, the book, and the strong white hands. He looked back and could see the room he had left. The talk fell on his ear with a dreadful clearness, and the laughter sounded not cheerful, but intolerably hateful and evil; he could see Dion, and in his own place there sat some one half turned away from him, whom he did not recognise, though the form seemed somehow familiar.

While he waited, doubtful as to what he should do, he heard a movement close beside him; and turning saw the messenger who had brought the book, a tall serene-looking man, young of feature, but with a look of age and wisdom about his face. He seemed in some way familiar to him, and this was increased by the half-smiling look which met his own. Then the messenger said in a low distinct tone, but as though sparing of his words, as a man will talk in the presence of one who is at work, and as though answering a question, "Yes, you may look—the book is open to all." And as he said the words he made a little gesture with his hand as though to indicate that he might draw nearer. Linus at once without hesitation went and stood beside the writer and looked upon the book.

For a moment he did not understand, it seemed a record of some talk or other. Then in a moment he saw words which made his cheeks burn, and in another moment it flashed upon him that this was a record of all that was said in the room he had left. The strangeness of the thought scarcely crossed his mind, for he was lost in a kind of terror, a horror of the thought that what was said so lightly and thoughtlessly should be so strictly preserved; he stood for a moment, his

eyes fastened on the paper on which the sad syllables shaped themselves, and with his terror there mixed a kind of wild pity for the unhappy people who were talking thus, thinking that each word died as it fell from their lips, and little knew that the record was thus intently made.

He looked up, and at the other side of the writer stood the young man who had bidden him take his place, who made a gesture, laying his finger on his lips as if for silence, while there rang through the hall without the wild laughter which greeted the end of the story—then he motioned him away. As they went softly away together a few paces, Linus looked at him as though to make sure that what he had seen was true; the other gave a mournful motion of the head, saying softly, “Yes! every word;” and added, as if to himself, “every idle word.”

Linus stood for a moment as if irresolute; he had an intense longing to go back to the room he had left and tell the guests what he had seen, to silence by any means in his power the talk, and yet half aware that he would not be believed, when the other led him quickly across the room, and pointed to the door that led to the corridor, laying his hand lightly on his arm. Not knowing what he did, and still lost in his miserable doubt, Linus obeyed the gentle touch. They passed through the door and entered a long silent vaulted corridor, with plain round arches; on one side there were presses which Linus knew in himself were full of similar records on the right were doors, but all closed. They went on to the end; it was all lit with a solemn holy light, the source of which Linus could not see, and the place seemed to grow brighter as they advanced, brighter and cooler—for the air of the room they had left was hot and still.

They went through a door, and Linus found himself in a long large room, with arches open to the daylight. He looked through one of those, and saw a landscape unfamiliar to him and strangely beautiful. It was a great open flat country, full of lawns and thickets and winding streams. It seemed to be uninhabited, and had a quiet peace like a land in which the foot of man had never trodden; far away over the plain he saw a range of blue hills, very beautiful and still, like the hills a man may see in dreams. There were buildings there, for he saw towers and walls, the whole lit with a clear and pearly light, but it was all too distant for him to distinguish anything, and indeed would have been hardly visible but for the surpassing brightness of the air; the breeze that came in was fresh and fragrant, like the breeze of dawn; and far away to the left he saw what looked like the glint of light on a sea or some wide water, where the day seemed to be breaking, and coming up with a tranquil joy.

Linus’ heart was so lightened at this sweet place that he only dimly wondered what this strange country was that lay so near the city where he dwelt and yet in which he had never set foot. While he stood there he heard a faint noise of wings, and a bird such as he had never seen appeared flying; but beating its wings and stretching out its feet like a bird coming home, it alighted for a moment on the parapet, and seemed to Linus’ eye like a dove, with sparkling lights upon its head and neck, and with a patient eye; but this was only for a moment; as if it had finished its work, it rose again in the air, and in an instant was out of sight; but the next moment, another bird appeared; this was a black bird, strong and even clumsy, but it alighted in the same way on the balustrade, a little further off, and Linus could see its sparkling eye and strong claws. Then came a little bird like a wren, which went as noiselessly as it came; then several birds all at once. Linus was so much surprised at the sight of these birds that he had no eyes for anything else, till his guide touched him on the arm, and he looked up and saw that the room was not unoccupied.

There was a large table of some dark wood in the centre, and by it stood a man who seemed to be reading in a book which lay open on the table, following the lines with his finger; and Linus thought, though he could not see the face, that as he read he wept. And at the same time he knew

that this was the master of the house, though how he knew it he could hardly explain, except for the awed and reverent look in the face of his guide; in the presence of the former writer, whom they had just left, his guide had borne himself, he now reflected, as the son of a house might bear himself in the presence of an old and trusted servant, who was valued more for his honesty than for his courtesy.

But here all was different, and Linus too felt a silent awe stealing into his mind, he knew not why, at the sight of the still and gracious figure.

The messenger made a movement with his hand as though Linus were to go forward, so he stepped towards the table; and then he waited, but the man drew a little aside and put the book towards Linus, as though he were to look at it. Linus looked, and saw that it was one of the former books of records; and something of the same wistful sadness came over him at the thought of all the evil words and deeds that were here noted. But now there came a great and wonderful surprise; for, as the man ran his fingers along the lines, they became faint and blurred, and presently the page seemed clean, just as the water dies out of a cloth which is put before a hot fire; it seemed to Linus as though the writing vanished most speedily when one of the birds lit on the railing; and presently he was sure of this, for each time that a bird came on the ledge the man raised his head a little and seemed to consider—and all the while the dawn brightened over the sea.

Then Linus saw that the hand which moved over the page, a beautiful yet strong hand, was strangely scarred; and at this he caught his breath, for a thought too deep for utterance came into his heart; and then, as though the unasked question was answered, came a clear low voice which said, "These are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends."

And then, unbidden, but because he could not do otherwise, Linus knelt softly down; and the man, tenderly and gently, as a father might tell a child a secret by slow degrees, fearful that it might be too hard for the tender spirit, turned and looked at him, and Linus felt the eyes sink as it were into his soul, and it seemed to him at that moment that he had said without the need of speech all that had ever been in his heart; he felt himself in one instant understood and cared for, utterly and perfectly, so that he should have no need ever to fear or doubt again; and Linus said softly the only words that came into his mind, the words of one who had doubted and was strengthened, "My Lord and my God."

So he knelt for a moment, and then knew that he was to rise and go, and it seemed to him that the other looked back upon the book with somewhat of a sigh, as one who was content to work, but had waited long.

So Linus went back down the corridor and through the little room, where the man still sat writing, and stepped into the hall again.

The hall seemed very dark and fiery after the radiance of that other morning; the guests were as Linus had left them; Dion sat in his place; and just as Linus came to his own chair, it seemed to him that some one slipped quietly away; and Dion looked at him with a very tender and inquiring gaze. "Yes," said Linus, "I have seen." "And you understand?" said Dion. "Yes," said Linus, "in part—I understand enough."

When Linus looked round the hall again, he was surprised to find that what had distressed and almost terrified him before, the uproar, the evil mirth, the light-hearted wickedness moved him now more with a tender and wondering sorrow; and he asked Dion how it was. "Because," said Dion, "you have seen the end; and you know that though the way is dark and long, we shall arrive." "Yes," he went on, "we shall arrive; there is no doubting that; the Father's heart is wide, and He will bring His sons even from afar."