

## **The Tale About the Robber Flavian**

In the land of Egypt there was once a band of robbers and the senior member was the terrible and powerful leader named Flavian.

For a long time these bandits devastated the country and finally they plotted to perform one very bold deed. Far from the city there stood a rich convent on a tall cliff. It had really been an old Roman castle, built there for defence, and which was even now inaccessible. The robbers were very anxious to capture it and for several days they walked round the hill, searching and deliberating how they were going to attack it by night. But in the end they saw they couldn't do anything. The convent stood on a steep cliff and besides that, it was enclosed by a high, old stone wall. Only one road, excavated out of the cliff, led to a solitary entrance that was usually locked with a strong iron gate. Flavian was furious because he was unable to carry out his project and finally he decided to do it by cunning.

“Do you know what?” he said to his comrades, “I'll get dressed in a monk's habit and hood and will go in broad daylight to the convent. The nuns are stupid and will accept me. At night I'll get up and open the gate. You come by and I'll let you in. Then we'll slaughter the nuns and not only will we take all their possessions, but the convent will be safe from all sorts of attacks.”

The robbers all liked Flavian's suggestion and they vowed that they would be near the gate that night. So Flavian, having dressed as a monk and not forgetting to hide his sword beneath his habit, departed for the convent.

Having arrived at the gate, he knocked. After some time there peeped through the window above the gate two nuns. Seeing a long-bearded monk, they opened the gate. Flavian, assuming a thin, pious

voice, greeted them in Christ's name and the nuns—whom God alone knew when they had last seen a man's face—knelt before him and began to kiss his hand, begging for his blessing.

“God bless you, my sisters, God bless you!” said Flavian, but in his soul he was laughing so hard he almost burst.

The nuns quickly withdrew and spread the news throughout the whole convent: some kind of very pious and holy monk had arrived—no doubt some kind of hermit—from the city of Thebes and was asking if he could spend the night in the small cell that was near the gate. Immediately the abbess and all the older nuns appeared to view this extraordinary guest. When they met together in the courtyard, they found Flavian kneeling before the door of the convent chapel as though in prayer. They had to wait a long time before he finished his pious silence.

After greetings and blessings the abbess questioned the godly monk: “Where are you from? Are you really from Thebes?”

“Yes,” replied Flavian, without pausing to think.

“And who is now the head of the convent there?”

Flavian didn't even know what she was talking about so he only blinked his eyes and kept silent.

“Ah, no doubt you are a hermit? You have lived by yourself in the wilderness.”

“Yes,” replied Flavian.

“Ah, that is a holy way of life. It's a high service before God,” sighed the abbess. “I myself wanted to take that road, to equal the example of Mary of Egypt. But what to do? It was God's will that I should remain here. God laid on me another yoke, and so I obeyed him.” And she began in detail to make the words of the Evangelist—“My yoke is easy and my burden is light”—clear, meanwhile endeavouring to draw out from her audience the understanding that when God wants it, then Man

ought to renounce the joys of a blessed wilderness life consisting of a diet of edible roots, locusts and plain water and instead live as the abbess of a rich convent.

Speaking in great detail and slowly straining her words, she piously turned her eyes heavenward from time to time and then, turning to the godly monk, began to ask, “Isn’t that so, holy father?” and without waiting for a reply, continued talking.

“Was it the devil who appointed this dreadful old woman to me?” thought Flavian to himself, whose stomach had long ago started to rumble. As leader of the band of robbers he was more used to eating whatever he wanted than to roots, locusts and plain water.

But some other nuns, quicker and more practical, were already long busy in the kitchen and scarcely had the abbess finished her speech than they came into the courtyard and begged the holy father to come to the dining room.

“That’s a good idea!” thought Flavian to himself, but he didn’t stop playing the comedy. He crossed himself, sighed and before all their questions and speeches strove to keep silent in order not to reveal how little he remembered of the holy writ, monastic life and Christian beliefs. But for the simple, sincere women’s hearts all the signs didn’t mean anything. Every word, every movement of Flavian strengthened in them the thought that this was a very holy man, a great hermit and a saint of God. Flavian sat at the table, the nuns having had their meal beforehand, while the abbess continued to talk, explaining some other verse from the holy writ. He set out heartily to eat and greedily devoured some fish fried in oil. Then he started to take as a tidbit some dried cheese with onions, sliced and served on a dainty plate—a beloved appetizer in Egypt in those days, and even now. He had not finished eating when one of the youngest sisters brought a pail of water and began with devotion to

wash Flavian's feet. Another sister was already waiting with a clean towel to wipe his washed feet and a third held a pair of nicely woven bast slippers.

Suddenly there arose some whispering and commotion amongst the young sisters. The abbess gazed at them sharply and they were silenced. But in a moment, once more they began to whisper about something.

"What's the matter, sisters?" sternly but patiently the abbess inquired.

"Mother Superior," said one sister, "we wondered if this holy father could help our poor Mitrodora."

"Who is this Mitrodora and what is wrong with her?" asked Flavian.

"She is an unfortunate orphan, the unluckiest person in God's world. She is blind, deaf and dumb, a vessel locked on all sides by God himself. Her mother, a peasant, wanted to throw her away in the wilderness to die, but we took her in and are keeping her with us. Maybe God, not without reason placed His hand on her, releasing her into the world.

"Maybe her misfortune is indistinct only to us, revealing God's grace, exactly like the man blind from birth, in the Bible—do you remember, holy father?—of whom Jesus said, "Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents, but that the words of God should be manifest in him (John 9:3)."

"Well know everything is possible," replied Flavian. "But from my point of view I can only tell you that I am in no wise a doctor and am unworthy, no doubt, that through me should be revealed the glory of God."

"Blessed are the meek," repeated the abbess from the holy writ, "for they shall inherit the earth. And he who neglects his own soul, he shall truly find it (Mark 8:35)." And turning to the sisters she ordered them to bring the unfortunate Mitrodora.

“What next!” muttered Flavian to himself. “These fools themselves have made me holy and now they ask me to perform a miracle for them! Well, what can I do? I must carry on with the comedy as long as I can. And if it doesn’t work out, then certainly I’ll say ‘I didn’t merit it and that’s that.’”

Here they led out the unfortunate girl. She looked altogether like a wild animal. Her small face was swarthy and pretty enough but it had the look of dullness and fear that is often seen in the blind.

They placed her before Flavian. He extended his hands and blessed her, whispering something as though praying. But Mitrodora stood motionless, not understanding where she was or what was happening to her.

“No, I am certainly not a doctor,” remarked Flavian, turning from the girl. The abbess made a sign to the sisters to take her away. But at that moment the sister who had washed Flavian’s feet got the idea to wash Mitrodora’s face with water. Being an Egyptian, she grew up in the belief that water that was used in washing a sacred object is the best cure for all kinds of sicknesses. She not only washed the face of the poor cripple with this water but gave her some to drink. And at that moment a miracle took place: the young girl saw, heard and spoke as though protected by a higher power. She threw herself at Flavian’s feet and began to weep and kiss them, blessing him as her own miraculous saviour.

But at that moment another still greater miracle occurred. Amongst the nuns not one was surprised at what happened before their very eyes. They believed so sincerely in the holiness of their guest that the miracle performed by him seemed to them somehow altogether natural, such that it could not have been otherwise. But not so for Flavian. The unexpected miracle was for him like a clap of thunder. Frightened to the very depths of his soul, he trembled and covered his eyes with the palms of his hands so as not to look at Mitrodora. It seemed to him that suddenly before him there opened

up a very deep abyss, and with an unearthly cry he threw himself on his knees before the miraculously cured girl, raised her up and, weeping hard, could not say anything except, “I am a worthless good-for-nothing!”

Then turning to the abbess and nuns, while still on his knees, he uttered these words: “Listen sisters! I am not a monk, not a hermit. I am a robber—the leader of bandits—Flavian by name. I came here with the purpose of opening your gate this night and delivering all of you to my comrades to be slaughtered.”

It was now the turn of the nuns to be frightened. They started to cry out aloud with their weak voices, as if a flock of little birds had begun to squeal when suddenly covered with a hunter’s net. Only one—the youngest, who was the one who had washed Flavian’s feet then the face of Mitrodora—spoke up bravely: “This can’t be the truth!”

“You don’t believe me?” Flavian turned to her. “Well, here is one proof!” And he took from beneath his monk’s cassock his huge sword and placed it on the table. Then turning to the nuns he continued, “Well now, don’t be afraid, sisters. That which occurred here with God’s permission has destroyed my evil will. I heard the voice of God, which calls me onto a different road. This night I gave you further evidence of who I am, who I was until now and what I wish to be from now on.”

When night fell and it became quite dark, the abbess and three of the oldest sisters together with Flavian stood near the locked gate waiting to see what would happen. They didn’t have long to wait. From the courtyard there sounded steps and heavy knocking was heard at the gate.

“Who is knocking?” asked Flavian.

“It’s us, Flavian, your comrades,” replied the voices.

“What do you want?”

“Open up, Flavian. We’ve come to fulfill your commands.”

“Your Flavian no longer exists, brothers,” he replied. “God has set His mark on him and has broken his resistance.”

“Why are you talking such rubbish, Flavian?” yelled one of the bandits. “Open the gate. In half an hour we’ll slaughter these women and there’ll be peace.”

“No, my brothers, that won’t be,” replied Flavian. “From today on, I am no longer Flavian the robber but the keeper of this convent. I advise you to give up your trade and apply yourselves to your redemption.”

But the robbers wouldn’t listen to him any longer. “The man has gone out of his mind!” they grumbled. “He landed among some women and suddenly has become soft like a woman. Let’s get out of here!” And spitting, roaring and cursing, they vanished from the gate and didn’t show themselves again.

Flavian gave his sword to be made into a cross. Living near the convent as a guard and servant, in his spare time he preached before that cross on prayer, regretting his old, evil days, up to his own death.