

The Story of Diocles

262.a.d.

**If you ever drop in to Split,
do not drop your eyes at the pavement
for there you will find only
what was dropped by one's hand,
rather look up
at the thousand-year old buildings
constructed by man's hand.**

**Many buildings have outlived their constructors,
and only the Emperor Diocletian's palace,
beautiful, monumental and complete,
remained as a proof of his love for his people
and his people for him.**

**This invaluable monument has been preserved
until present days to reveal
the story of Dalmatia.**

**To be a Dalmatian in distant Nicomedia
meant to die of nostalgia for your native land.**

**To be a great ruler meant abdicating from the throne, after many years of ruling,
just to be able to watch the blueness
of the sky and sea,
to feel the Mistral and scent the fragrance
of broom flower in the air.**

Salona

The story actually began at Salona on the shores of the Adriatic Sea where there lived a modest family of the scribe Iovius. Iovius and his wife Dioclea had a son Diocles. In those days a governmental job was the most reliable one, and the old man Iuve had one, too, so they sent their son to serve in the emperor's army.

- *Clea, your son hasn't come home yet again, and you know how late it is. I keep saying he should be back home by midnight when there's no moonlight, and it's already two o'clock.*

- *Why don't you tell him yourself? Wait till he comes then make him sit down and talk to him as a man. When did you last talk to him? You know very well that his Greek friends are here, so they probably went fishing to the estuary.*

- *Why does it have to be at two in the morning?*

- *How should I know, Iuve? Ask him when he comes. You know this is his last day before his departure to Nicomedia. I only hope they haven't gone boar hunting again.*

At the same time somewhere at the river estuary three young men and a girl were sitting in the beauty of the night filled with infinite silence unaware that what they were talking about would change this area and their lives making them immortal.

Zotikos and Filotas spent every summer at Diocles and Driada's and, having learnt masonry they used to say that a summer villa should be built in this climate.

- *Clever as you are, Dio, you ought to become a great man, raise the money and build a little house for us and our families to be able to come and be your guests once we get old,*

- *Zotikos said, while Driada, having thrown back her golden hair prophetically added,*

- *Dio will become an emperor the day he kills a killer-boar.*

- *If you ever become an emperor, - continued Filotas, Zorzi and I will make all the designs for your villa free of charge, won't we, Zorzi?*

- *Certainly, Phill, you're talking like a man, and, as for the boar we'll put it on the grill.*

- *You may mock me as much as you like, but my words will come true and you'll meet here in twenty years. Only, I won't be here.*

- *Don't talk like that, Dea, - Diocles said quietly, - we'll all meet here in twenty years and enjoy ourselves like we do tonight.*

Journey to Nicomedia

The following morning brought parting. His father shook his hand firmly, and his mother - like every mother - let a tear drop down her cheek, while her hands wished to hold him back. Driada stood silently knowing they were parting for good. The ship slowly set off from the shore; the same feeling of sorrow present with those remaining and of adventure with those departing. Dio knew where he was heading - he would return with the shield gained in the life battle - the challenge prevailed over homesickness.

The days on the ship became long and Nicomedia seemed beyond reach. When the wish already began to fade, with the sunset there appeared the contours of Emperor Numerian's city. Warmth flooded every pore of his body, and the big red sun that was setting as though embracing him by its beauty, whispering to him tender verse his Driada used to tell him in now faraway Salona.

- *Dio, do you think we'll ever see each other again? - Driada's words still echoed - Nicomedia is far away. Think of me sometimes and may Jove protect you.*

The new day brought the new events, and the youth longed for absorbing the life gifts. Dio started the search of the unknown, for changes, even for the worse. These were the necessities of his age.

While the ship was slowly approaching the shore Dio thought for himself: *Good night, Dalmatia, sleep in your dream until I return and build on your land an everlasting monument. Good morning, Nicomedia, the city of challenge, the city of my dreams come true.*

Upon disembarking the scribes were making lists and Dio was queuing patiently. In his thoughts he again wondered off, so the scribe's voice caught him by surprise:

- *Name.*
- *Diocles.*
- *Place of birth.*
- *Salona.*
- *Your father's name?*
- *Iovius.*
- *The sun of Jupiter? You don't intend to become an emperor, do you?*

A tiny smile appeared on Diocles' face:

- *Who knows?*

The scribe sighed and shook his head:

- *Next.*

Name.

- *Maximianus.*
- *Place of birth.*
- *Sirmium.*
- *Your father's name*
- *Heraclius.*

The scribe looked at him in surprise.

- *All emperors today. Do you also intend to become an emperor?*

Max straightened and said:

- *I know it.*

Dio turned to Max. He liked this little performance:

- *I'm Dio.*

- *Max, - Maximianus answered briefly.*

- *You're from Sirmium, aren't you?*

- *Yes, and you're from Salona.*

- *How did you guess?*

- *Only people from the coast speak so softly.*

They shook hands without unaware that this handshake united them forever, thus uniting the sea with the planes, the olives with the corn. The scribe gave them a tired look:

- *Move on, you're going to be trained for the emperor's body guard. If you survive, you might become the emperors.*

Numerian

The days of training brought new experience to Dio and Max. The moment they met tortoise-necked and short-hared Flavius Aper they realised not only that the training was going to be hard, but that they were not facing a man but an aper, a boar, who had no understanding for human weaknesses. The impossible tasks he was putting to men spoke about his perverseness and tending to an order in which only a chosen race is valuable enough to survive, and all the others are a burden to humanity and to the emperor.

After endless night alerts under full equipment the men completely lost their humanity, they turned into numbers realising the insignificance of one's life. Music, poetry and love did not exist any more. Everything was subordinated to one and only goal - completion of the training. And that day finally came. Numerian chose the two commanding officers for the emperor's guard: Diocletianus and Maximianus.

They had climbed their first step, and Dio asked himself if being a commanding officer he now had to train his soldiers in the same way as Flavio did, whether this training pushed back a man in him and created a commander.

As Numerian's guard commander Dio acted in the way contrary to what he had expected. He realised that no training could change a man. Mild in nature and well accepted by his friends, he was the favourite among his soldiers. He was the one who kept balance in relationship with Numerian, who, during the first months, was heckling him, and later, having understood his good nature and greatness accepted him as a son and listened to Diocles' advice with much attention. Yet, Numerian was a dictator. His word was the law and he himself made even the smallest decisions. As time, however, changes people, Numerian felt he became softer with Diocletian.

- *Dio, you're making decisions instead of myself again, - he used to say.*

- *Your highness, the decisions are always yours, but you have to give people bread and games, let them celebrate, let the slaves rest during the oncoming holidays. Although he thought that the slaves were the slaves, citizens the citizens and the emperor the emperor he agreed and accepted Diocles' suggestion. This completely outraged the old boar, now the city prefect, Flavius Aper, who had already been fed up with Numerian's soft ruling.*

- *Numerian is no more the emperor I used to serve faithfully. I must unite people in one goal: to assassinate the emperor and impose the rule over Nicomedia.*

The Fulfilment of Prophecies

The ghostly night of November 19th, 284 started with rain and thunder. Numerian was sitting by the fireplace. An owl hooted in the woods and unpleasant shudder went through his body. Men-boars were approaching the emperor's rooms, silently moving through cold corridors. Dio was inspecting the guard:

- *Is everything in order?*
- *Everything's in order, - an answer came.*
- *It's almost midnight, - Dio said and went to bring the change.*

Flavius, hidden in the corridor shade laughed ominously: *Now is the moment.*

The bloodthirsty boars jumped at the guards, without managing to catch them by surprise and defeat them without any resistance.

In the guardhouse Dio heard clanging of weapons coming from the emperor's chambers. Having realised that Numerian was in danger he gathered the soldiers and hurried to help him.

Flavius' men were waiting for them ready, but their loyalty and love for the emperor were stronger than any weapons. Everything calmed down.

Dio opened Numerian's chamber door. Flavius Aper - killer boar was standing by the fireplace, his spear against Numerian's heart.

- *Die, emperor, - the infuriated boar roared pressing his spear into Numerian's body.*

The emperor's head dropped and everyone became breathless for a moment. A storm broke in Dio and a cry of a wounded beast came from his lips. He pulled the spear out of Numerian's heart, pressed it deep into Flavio's chest, grabbed the Boar and threw him out of the window into the rainy night.

The soldiers gathered watching Aper's body pierced by the spear lying on the muddy ground in front of the palace. Blood melted in the rain and disappeared in the earth.

- *The mud belongs to mud, - was all that Dio said.*

It was after midnight. Max came in with his soldiers.

He realised at first glance what had happened, and said:

- *The emperor's dead, long live the emperor, - firmly shaking Dio's hand. The soldiers repeated all together:*

- *The emperor's dead, long live the emperor!*

Driada's prophet came true.

The Return Home

Twenty years had passed since he sat with Driada, Zotikos and Filotas on the shore of Salona. He longed to see his mother and father. Letters were scarce, and he did not write often either. The ship was entering the port and he thought his heart was going to jump out of his chest out of excitement. He caught himself saying:

- *Dalmatia.*

He got off the ship, knelt down and kissed the ground:

- *I am returning as an emperor just as I then promised, but in my soul I am still your Dio. My dear land, I returned to build a palace over you and worthy of you.*

He embraced his father and kissed his mother.

- *Guess who has come to meet you?*

- *Who, mother?*

- *Zorzi and Phill.*

- *What about Dea?*

- *She died, poor thing. You know how pale and thin she was - her lungs betrayed her.*

- *She knew what she was saying, said Dio remembering her words told so many years ago.*

At that moment Phill and Zorzi came down from the hill waving and shouting:

- *When shall we start building, Dio? We keep our promise.*

- *Today, my friends, today,* answered Dio.

He always enjoyed long walks along the shore, particularly after a busy day and long conversations with the workers. He could already see the palace in all its beauty, the wonderful cryptoporticus – the stroll alongside the palace that would allow him a clear view of his sea and the islands and the passage through the cellar to the door allowing an escape by a boat from everyday imperial duties.

Dressed rather simply for an emperor, he set by the sea, beared his torso enjoying the summer evening warmth. Giving in to the beauty of the moment, his eyes closed, he could hear some female voices:

- *Rea, are you going to the feast tonight? They're giving it in honour of the emperor's return.*

- *We're all going. They say a lot of money will be spent on food and drinks. Prisca, are you going, too?*

- *I'd rather not, but my folks have been forcing me. I never liked squandering the money. I don't see why the emperor needs a palace besides Salona. I could never understand this insatiable desire for more.*

Without opening his eyes, Dio said:

- *Perhaps the emperor thinks Dalmatia deserves a monument for all times.*

- *And who are you to make such a judgement?*

- *Just a simple passenger through life,* - Dio answered, slowly opening his eyes.

Before him there stood a female creature that no Roman sculptor could have made more beautiful.

- *Has the one just passing thorough life got a name?*

- *Dio,* - he said standing up hurriedly.

- *Prisca,* - she returned.

Is the simple passenger through life going to the party tonight?

- I hate parties, but just like yourself, I'm being forced to go. To tell you the truth I'd rather stay here with you.

- Then do so. You don't have to go anywhere if you don't feel like it.

- I've been trying ever to achieve that. Alas, without any success yet.

- Prisca, let's go, Rea hurried her.

- See you at the reception.

- See you, - answered Dio.

He watched her go away for quite a while, a smile covering his face. Is this more than just an attraction? - he wondered.

Being invited to the reception was a matter of prestige. It was as if the glare of colours, tastes and richness waited for that moment to come showing the barren souls through the materialistic reality.

Dio was standing aside and watching this faultlessly staged performance when he noticed Prisca who was wearing a light but simple gown and a discrete flower in her hair.

- I can't hide my pleasure of seeing you, - he said having touched her shoulder.

Prisca turned around: *Why, you're dressed as an emperor!*

Smiling, Max exclaimed from the background:

- My dear lady, he is the emperor!

Prisca blushed, and Dio prevented her effort to make a bow saying:

- Will you be my companion tonight, and not only tonight. You cannot imagine how little difference there is between a simple passenger through life and an emperor.

Nicomedia

Dioclea and Prisca came to see their son and husband off. Iovius had been in bed for months so he could not gather enough strength to get up and say goodbye to his son. Difficult situation in Nicomedia made Dio go back. Barbarians were attacking from all directions. Phill and Zorzi spoke to Dio to clear some details about the palace.

- *The palace has to be a home in its full sense. To understand what I'm talking about always bear in mind that here in Dalmatia family is the most important thing. All my folks: mother, father, wife and other relatives must have a feeling of being united in this palace, and have their own privacy at the same time. Don't mix my relatives. Let each of them have his own little place in the palace and his bed. The table, however, must be shared.*

Turning to his mother, he said:

- *Mother, you'll take care about everything. Take care of father and let me know if his health worsens.*

Take care of yourself, Prisca. I'll be back soon.

Max was already waiting for him with hitched horses:

- *Let's go Dio.*

Dio threw his last glance at Prisca:

- *Let's go, Max.*

By the road *Via Egnatia*, through Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace they went to Nicomedia.

There was a prolonged war in Nicomedia, the old Iuve died and Prisca often travelled to see Diocles. Finally she joined him but not alone. Their daughter Valeria, by then a grown up girl, decided to live with her mother and father in Nicomedia.

- *How's the building progressing?* - Dio asked.

- *Phill and Zorzi have been working like hell. Granite's been coming from Egypt, and the stone from the islands, as usual. By the time we return everything will be just like you've planned. How's Max been doing?*

- *Max is well. Nothing's new in the west, he says. He keeps telling me it's high time we'd left over to younger men,* - answered Dio.

So we decided to do it on 1 May 305; you know me, I can't miss being on the slopes of Aspalatos in May where the Broom flower blossoms and where the palace is being built. In it we will capture the time, grow vegetables, catch fish and dip our feet in the seawater.

- *And who'll take care of the empire?*

- *There are younger men.*

And you, Valeria, you've grown up so much. Why have you run away from Dalmatia?

- *I wish to see a little of the world. You aren't sorry I've come, are you?*

- *How could I be sorry?*

At that moment entered Galerius, a brave and strong young man. He bowed to Prisca and Valeria and turned to Diocles:

- *A message from Maximilianus, my Emperor, he said, handing over a parchment.*

- *Read it!*

- *Dear Dio, - started Galerius, we have read your decree on limiting the prices so we now know what our value is. My dear daughter, Theodora is marrying Constantine and we are inviting you to the wedding. Of course, the date is 1 May. As you can see I have found my replacement. It's now your turn. As for your humanity and tolerance towards the Christian religion, it does not work in the field. You are asked to put the Christians down to the earth, possibly to the amphitheatre, and particularly your Domnius of Salona. We've been preparing a celebration for you here in Rome towards the end of this year, so you should do something by then.*

Hail to you and to your family,

Max.

- *And who's this Domnius? - Prisca asked.*

- *A Christian full of courage, daring and Dalmatian spite. This is why I've spared him, answered Dio and turned to Galerius:*

- *Galerius.*

- *Yes, My Emperor.*

You're going to Max's tomorrow. You know I've been treating you as a son. You'll take him the "Edict on Prohibition of Christian Religion". Let him, however, keep it in his drawer without enforcing it unless they jeopardise him. And let him leave Domnius alone.

- *May I join Galerius and visit uncle Max? - Valeria asked, - I'd like to see him so much.*

Prisca and Dio exchanged their glances.

- *You can go, said Dio thinking, perhaps I have found my replacement, too.*

When Galerius and Valeria left, he turned to Prisca and said: *All stays in the family, my darling Prisca.*

Returning for Good

On 20 December 303 the triumphant celebration of Diocles' reign 20th anniversary took place in Rome.

Two Augustuses and two Caesars in the box with their wives – it was a picture of family tetrarchy and harmony. Dio's wish had come true.

On one side Max and Eutropia with Theodora and Constantine, and on the other himself and Prisca with Valeria and Galerius.

He suddenly felt old and tired and the surrounding shouting mass made him sick.

Images of beheaded Christians; great Persian king's wives and children captured went before his eyes. Blood and death made part of his life, and he had tried to remain a simple passenger through life.

- *If this means to become a God, what should a man do to remain human?*

He suddenly stood up having decided to return home.

- *Let's go, Prisca,* - he just said.

He sighed with release when after a long drive far away from that "amphitheatre" he saw the palace.

He ran in through the northern gate and along Cardo Street to Peristyle where he sat on Protiron's pedestal and glanced at the mausoleum that had been waiting as a symbol of unavoidable yet mortal life.

Tired, he withdrew through Vestibule to Criptopoticus where, by his command, discrete music always played, and on the openings overlooking the sea the flowers decorated the palace. For a moment the beauty of the day, blueness of the sea and the remote fishermen singing brought back the peace he needed so much.

Prisca entered.

- *Prisca, will you please call the porters. My back aches so that I can't move. Let them take me to Thermae.*

Domnius

The years passed. Dio completely withdrew into solitude. Prisca kept informing him about the events. While he was going to Rome along Claudian Road, in the vicinity of the Hrisopolis City Domnius was attacked and beheaded by Max's people.

- There's been a rumor, - Prisca went on, - that by God's power and with his own hands he picked up his head from the ground and crossed the Sitiron River walking.

- My dear Prisca, faith, hope and love are everything in your life. The fact that I had shut myself out does not mean I'm not guilty to all these people. They kill on my behalf. My hands are covered with blood. I'm so far away from the world yet so close to bad conscience.

Whatever faith, it gives strength and opens the door to Gods' world. Will I meet Domnius in the world beyond?

Slowly, he put his hand on his forehead and continued:

- While I was building the palace I put Decumanus between myself and the army, my people and the whole world.

I had a tomb built for myself thinking I was building a home.

I've never wanted this palace to be a monument to only one emperor and one time.

People of my Dalmatia, I'm still strong enough to give you back what I have taken from you.

Goodbye

On 1 May 313 Peristile was waiting the announcement on free choice of religion. There were Christians in these parts for the first time. The trumpets marked the beginning of the ceremony. Emperor Diocletian's envoy came and read the edict which was approving freedom in choosing religion.

When the edict was read, the envoy announced the emperor: - *The Emperor Caesar Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus.*

There was silence. After so many years no one expected Dio would appear before the people.

The emperor's sedan chair with the tired old man was brought in to protiron. People shouted: - *Hail, Caesar!*

Dio slowly raised his hand to stop them and there was silence. His body might have betrayed him, yet his deep voice echoed in the Peristile.

- Aware that one day we'll be gone from this life we all try to leave something for those who will come. Each of us would like to build a palace, but all these palaces will lose any sense if younger ones do not find their purpose in them. Besides this palace, by today's edict we built a palace of unity opening widely our doors to travelers of good will, whatever their religion might be. Going to my Gods, I'm leaving you in peace with the request:

Don't change history destroying around you. Write history building around you and inside you.

Farewell, my Dalmatian people. Prisca's look followed the ship for a long time. Dio has gone forever just like he always wanted to. He left in May with the sent of blooming Broom flower, melted in the blueness of the sea he loved so much. There would be no burial ceremony, the mausoleum would remain empty forever, and the people would remember his words.

Dio's words told to her before his last journey still echoed in Prisca's ears:

- Prisca let there always be flowers and music along Criptoporticus, for I'll always hear it. Let there always be a bed in this palace for unexpected guests, and food and drink. For one day this unexpected guest might be me.

There followed another embrace and a farewell, a feeling of amphitheater predestination without any tears for the end.

Epilogue

The years brought changes, Christianity or, as Dio called it unity, crept into the palace. Over the Iron Gate there was built the church of Our Lady of the Belfry, inside the Golden Gate St. Martin's Church, and the belfry of St. Domnius exceeded in height the palace itself. Dio and Domnius found themselves in undivided unity. The palace stayed alive by accepting life changes inside its walls. Dates, years and centuries were engraved in it. Even nowadays when in May in the afternoon hours you pass the southern palace stroll, Dio's ghost is there. The good wind Mistral as if playing through the Criptoporticus windows' calling the passengers for whom, as Dio used to say there will always be a bed, some food and drink, music and presence of Gods.