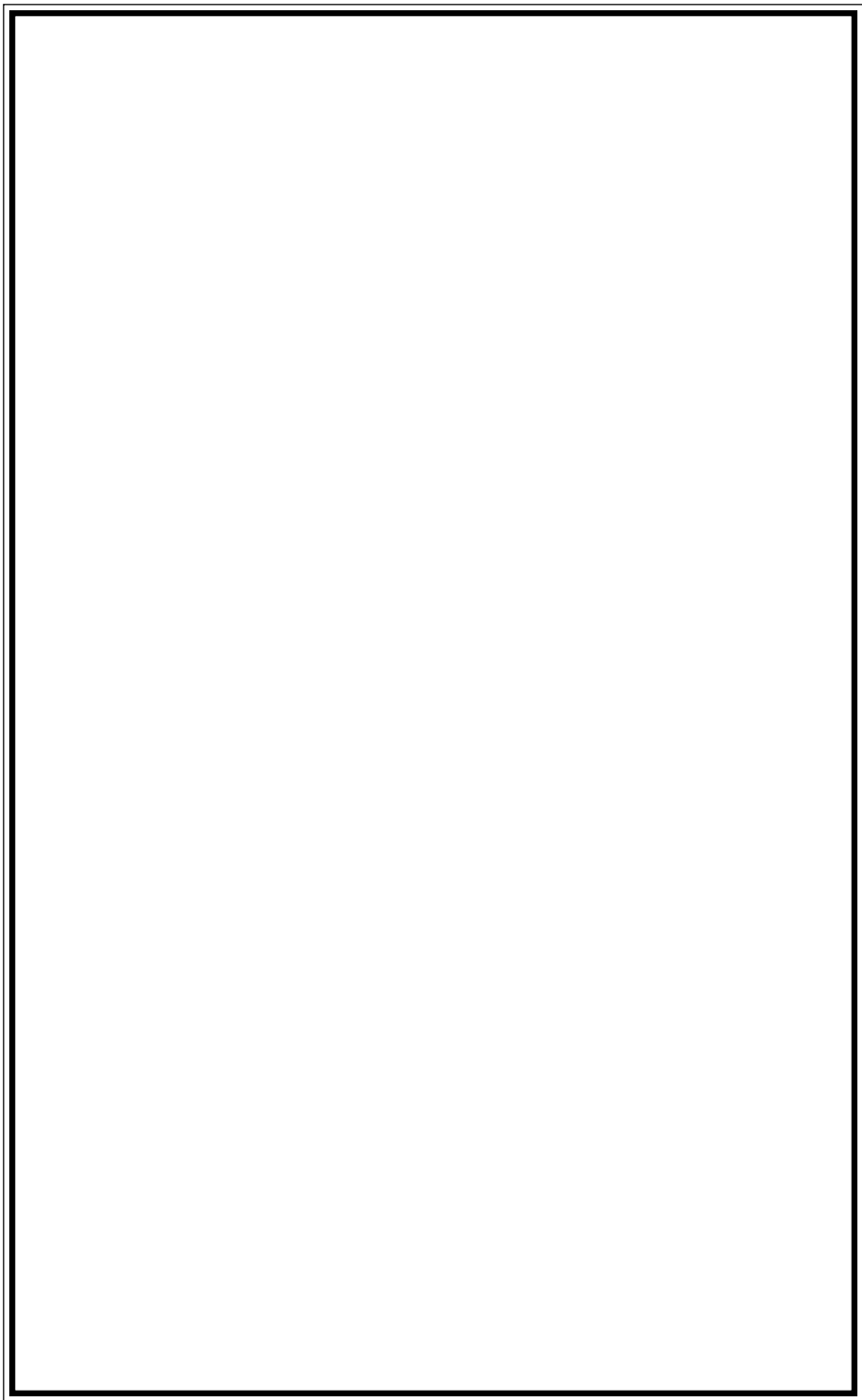




*The Life of Saint*  
**Pelagia**  
*the Harlot*

*by*  
James the Deacon



# THE LIFE OF ST. PELAGIA THE HARLOT

## THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE

<sup>1</sup>We ought ever to return great thanks to our Lord who desireth not that sinners should perish in death, but would have all men turn in penitence to life. Hear therefore the miracle that was wrought in our time [*circa* A.D. 450]. It seemed good to me, James the sinner, to write to you, holy brethren, that ye might come to know of it, either by listening or reading, and might lay hold on so mighty a consolation for your souls. For God the merciful, who will have no man perish, hath decreed that sins may be atoned for in this world, since in that which is to come there shall be a just Judgment, wherein every man shall receive according to his works. Now, therefore, give me silence, and look on me with all the intent of your hearts, for my story is of a rich repentance.

## THE LIFE

<sup>2</sup>The most venerable bishop of Antioch convened all such bishops as were his near neighbors to confer with him on a certain question: whence it came about that eight bishops assembled, among whom was the saintly man of God, my own bishop, Nonnus, a man marvellous great and a mighty monk of the monastery called Tabenna: but by reason of his rare and gracious way of life, he had been reft from the monastery and ordained a bishop. Come together as we were in the aforementioned city, the bishop thereof appointed us our lodging in the basilica of the blessed Julian the Martyr. We entered, and followed to where the other bishops sat, in front of the door of the basilica.

<sup>3</sup>And as we sat, certain of the bishops besought my master Nonnus that they might have some instruction from his lips: and straightway the good bishop began to speak to the weal and health of all that heard him. And as we sat marvelling at the holy learning of him, lo! on a sudden she that was first of the actresses of Antioch passed by: first of the dancers was she, and riding on an ass: and with all fantastic graces did she ride, so decked that naught could be seen upon her but

gold and pearls and precious stones: the very nakedness of her feet was hidden under gold and pearls: and with her was a splendid train of young men and maidens clad in robes of price, with torques of gold about their necks. Some went before and some came after her: but of the beauty and the loveliness of her there could be no wearying for a world of men. Passing through our midst, she filled the air with the fragrance of musk and of all scents that are sweetest. And when the bishops saw her so shamelessly ride by, bare of head and shoulder and limb, in pomp so splendid, and not so much as a veil upon her head or about her shoulders, they groaned, and in silence turned away their heads as from great and grievous sin.

<sup>4</sup> But the most blessed Nonnus did long and most intently regard her: and after she had passed by still he gazed and still his eyes went after her. Then, turning his head, he looked upon the bishops sitting round him. “Did not,” said he, “the sight of her great beauty delight you?”

<sup>5</sup> They answered him nothing. And he sank his face upon his knees, and the holy book that he held in his good hands, and his tears fell down upon his breast, and sighing heavily he said again to the bishops, “Did not the sight of her great beauty delight you?”

<sup>6</sup> But again they answered him nothing. Then said he, “Verily, it greatly delighted me, and well pleased was I with her beauty: whom God shall set in presence of His high and terrible seat, in judgment of ourselves and our episcopate.”

<sup>7</sup> And again he spoke to the bishops. “What think you, beloved? How many hours hath this woman spent in her chamber, bathing and adorning herself with all solicitude and all her mind on the stage, that there may be no stain or flaw in all that body’s beauty and its wearing, that she may be a joy to all men’s eyes, nor disappoint those paltry lovers of hers who are but for a day and tomorrow are not? And we who have in heaven a Father Almighty, an immortal Lover, with the promise of riches eternal and rewards beyond all reckoning, since eye hath not seen nor ear hath heard nor hath it ascended into the heart of man to conceive the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him—but what need is there of further speech? With such a promise, the vision of the Bridegroom, that great and splendid and ineffable

face, whereon the Cherubim dare not look, we adorn not, we care not so much as to wash the filth from our miserable souls, but leave them lying in their squalor.”

<sup>8</sup> And with that, he laid hold on me, deacon and sinner, and we made our way to the hospice, where a cell had been given us. And going into his own chamber, he flung himself on the paved floor, his face to the ground; and beating his breast he began to weep, saying, “Lord Christ, have mercy on a sinful man and an unworthy, for a single day’s adorning of a harlot is far beyond the adorning of my soul. With what countenance shall I look upon Thee? Or with what words shall I justify myself in Thy sight? I shall not hide my heart from Thee, Thou knowest its secrets. Woe is me, worthless and sinful that I am, for I stand at Thy altar, and offer not the fair soul that Thou askest. She hath promised to please men, and hath kept her word: I have promised to please Thee, and through my sloth have lied. Naked am I in heaven and in earth, for I have not done Thy bidding. My hope is not in any good thing that I have done, but my hope is in Thy pity, whereto I trust my salvation.” Such was his prayer and such his lamenting: and vehemently did we keep the feast that day.

<sup>9</sup> But on the day following, which was a Sunday, after we had finished Nocturne, the good bishop Nonnus spoke to me. “I tell thee, brother deacon, I had a dream and am mightily disturbed by it, for I cannot make sense of it.” And then he told me how he had seen in his sleep a black dove, standing at the horn of the altar, stained and soiled with filth: “it kept flying round me, and I could hardly bear the stink and squalor of it. But still it kept about me, till the prayer for the catechumens was ended. And then, after the deacon had pronounced the *Procedite*<sup>†</sup>, it was no more seen. But after the liturgy of the faithful was ended, and the congregation dismissed, and I crossing the threshold of the House of God, again came that dove in all its squalor, and

<sup>†</sup> In the Divine Liturgy, catechumens (those who were undergoing instruction in the Christian faith) were allowed only in the first part of the worship service, the Liturgy of the Word. Before the second part, the Liturgy of the Faithful (the Eucharist), they had to leave the sanctuary. This was announced by the deacon, who pronounced the *Procedite*: “As many as are catechumens, depart! Catechumens, depart! As many as are catechumens, depart! Let no catechumen remain! As many as are of the faithful, again and again in peace, let us pray to the Lord.”

again it flew about me. But I stretched out my hand and caught it and plunged it into the stoup of holy water in the porch of the church: and it left all the filth that had clung to it in the water and rose out of the water as white as snow: and flying upwards was borne into the high air and vanished from my sight.” He finished telling me his dream, Nonnus, God’s good bishop, and then took me with him and we came to the greater church with the other bishops and greeted the bishop of the city.

<sup>10</sup> And going in, he spoke to all the clergy of the church, sitting there in their stalls: and after celebration and the reading of the Holy Gospel, the same bishop of the city, handing the Holy Gospel to the blessed Nonnus, begged him to speak to the people. And he spoke to them the wisdom of God that dwelt in him, with no alloy of artifice or of philosophy, naught unfitting, naught of human vanity: but full of the Holy Ghost, he reasoned with and admonished the people, speaking from his heart of the judgment to come and the eternal blessedness that is in store. And so stirred were all the people by the words which the Holy Ghost spake through him that the pavement of the church was wet with their tears.

<sup>11</sup> Now it befell, by the guiding of the Divine compassion, that to this very church should come the harlot of whom he had spoken to us: and for a marvel, she to whom never had come a thought of her sins and who never had been inside a church door was suddenly stricken with the fear of God, as the good Nonnus reasoned with the people: and despairing of herself she fell to sorrowing, her tears falling in streams, and she in no way able to check her weeping. There and then she gave orders to two of her youths, saying, “Stay in this place: and when the good bishop Nonnus comes out, follow him and ask where he lodges and come and tell me.” The young men did as their lady had bidden them: they followed us and came to the basilica of the Blessed Julian the Martyr, where was our hospice or cell. And then they went back to their lady and said, “He is lodging in the basilica of the Blessed Julian the Martyr.” Upon this, she straightway sent a diptych by the same two, on which these words were written:

<sup>12</sup> “To Christ’s holy disciple, the devil’s disciple and a woman that is a sinner. I have heard of thy God, that He bowed the heavens and

came down to earth, not for the good men's sake, but that He might save sinners, and that He was so humble that He drew near to publicans, and He on whom the Cherubim dare not look kept company with sinners. And thou my lord, who art a great saint, although thou hast not looked with the eyes of the flesh on the Lord Christ Himself, who showed Himself to that Samaritan woman, and her a harlot, at the well, yet art thou a worshipper of Him, for I have heard the talk of the Christians. If indeed thou art a true disciple of this Christ, spurn me not, desiring through thee to see the Savior, that through thee I may come at the sight of His holy face."

<sup>13</sup> Then the good bishop Nonnus wrote back to her: "Whatsoever thou art is known unto God, thyself, and what thy purpose is, and thy desire. But this I surely say to thee, seek not to tempt my weakness, for I am a man that is a sinner, serving God. If in very deed thou hast a desire after divine things and a longing for goodness and faith, and dost wish to see me, there are other bishops with me: come, and thou shalt see me in their presence: for thou shalt not see me alone."

<sup>14</sup> She read it, this harlot, and filled with joy came hurrying to the basilica of the Blessed Julian, and sent word to us that she was come. On hearing it, the good Nonnus called to him all the bishops who were in the place, and bade her come to him. She came in where the bishops were assembled, and flung herself on the pavement and caught the feet of the blessed Nonnus, saying, "My lord, I pray thee to follow thy master the Lord Christ, and shed on me thy kindness and make me a Christian. My lord, I am a sea of wickedness and an abyss of evil. I ask to be baptised."

<sup>15</sup> Hardly could the good bishop Nonnus prevail on her to rise from his feet: but when she had risen, "The canons of the Church," he said, "provide that no harlot shall be baptised, unless she produce certain to go surety for her that she will not fall back into her old sins."

<sup>16</sup> But on hearing such a judgment from the bishop, she flung herself again on the pavement and caught the feet of the good Nonnus, and washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair, crying, "Thou shalt answer to God for my soul and on thee shall I charge all the evil of my deeds, if thou dost delay to baptise me in my foul sin. No portion mayst thou find in God's house among the saints, if thou

makest me not a stranger to my sin. Mayst thou deny God and worship idols, if thou dost not this day have me born again, bride to Christ, and offer me to God.”

<sup>17</sup> Then all the bishops and clergy, who were there gathered, seeing her that was so great a sinner uttering such words in her desire after God, said in wonderment that they had never seen such faith and desire for salvation as in this harlot. And straightway they sent me, deacon and sinner, to the bishop of the city to explain the matter and beg his sanctity to send back one of his deaconesses with me. And when he heard me, he rejoiced mightily, saying, “Verily, father revered, such work as this awaited thee: I know that thou wilt be as my mouth.” And he sent with me the lady Romana, chief of the deaconesses.

<sup>18</sup> Coming in, she found her still at the feet of the good bishop Nonnus, and hardly could he persuade her to rise from his feet, saying, “Daughter, arise, that thou mayst be shriven.” And then he said to her, “Confess all thy sins.”

<sup>19</sup> She made answer, “If I were to search my whole heart I could find in myself no good thing. I know my sins, that they are heavier than the sands of the sea: the waters of it are too scant for the mass of my sin. But I trust in thy God, that He will loosen the load of my wrongdoing, and will look upon me.”

<sup>20</sup> Then said the good bishop Nonnus, “Tell me thy name.” She answered, “My own name was Pelagia, that my father and mother gave me: but the townsfolk of Antioch call me Margarita, because of the pearls wherewith they did jewel my sins. For I was the devil’s jewel and his armory.” Then the good bishop Nonnus again asked her, “Thine own name is Pelagia?” She answered, “Yea, lord.”

<sup>21</sup> And thereupon the good bishop exorcised and baptised her, and set upon her the sign of the Cross, and gave her the Body of Christ. Her godmother was the holy lady Romana, chief of the deaconesses: and she took her and went to the place for the catechumens, for so long as we should remain there. Then said to me the good bishop Nonnus, “I tell thee, brother deacon, let us rejoice today with the angels of God, and take oil beyond our custom in our food, and drink wine with joy of heart, for the salvation of this girl.”

<sup>22</sup> But as we were at our meal, there came suddenly the sound of shouting as of a man to whom violence is done: it was the devil crying out, “Woe is me, for the things I suffer from this decrepit old man! Might not the thirty thousand Saracens have been enough for thee, that thou didst wrest from me and baptise, and offer to thy God? Might not Heliopolis have been enough for thee, that was mine and all the people in it worshipping me, and thou didst wrest it from me, and offer it to thy God? And now thou hast stolen my greatest hope, and no longer can I endure thy machinations. O the evil this accursed wretch hath wrought upon me! Cursed be the day in which thou wast born! Rivers of tears are flooding my poor house, for my hope is lost!”

<sup>23</sup> All this did the devil shout aloud, lamenting up and down outside the gate, and all men heard him. And again he would come and cry out to the girl, “Hast thou done this to me, my lady Pelagia, and dost thou follow my own Judas? For he, crowned with glory and honor and appointed an apostle, betrayed his Master, so hast thou done to me.”

<sup>24</sup> Then said to her the good bishop Nonnus, “Sign thyself with the Cross of Christ and renounce him.” So she signed herself in the name of Christ, and breathed upon the demon, and straightway he was no more seen.

<sup>25</sup> Two days after, when she was asleep with her godmother the holy lady Romana in her chamber, the devil appeared by night and wakened Pelagia, God’s handmaid, and said, “Tell me, my lady Margarita, wert thou not rich in silver and gold? Did I not deck thee with gold and precious stones? Tell me, did I do aught to displease thee? Tell me, that I might make thee amends, but make me not a mock to the Christians.” Then Pelagia crossed herself and breathed upon the demon and said, “My God, who snatched me from thy jaws and brought me to His heavenly couch, Himself shall fight thee for me.” And straightway the devil vanished.

<sup>26</sup> Now three days after the holy Pelagia had been baptised, she called to her the youth who had had charge of her house, and said to him, “Go to my tiring-room and make a list of everything that is there, gold or silver, or ornaments, or rich apparel, and bring them to me.” The boy did as his lady bade him, and brought her all her substance. Then she asked the holy bishop Nonnus to come to her, sending word through

her godmother, the lady Romana, and laid all her substance in his hands, saying, "These, my lord, are the riches wherewith Satan endowed me: I give them to thee to do with as thou wilt, and what seems good to thee, that do: for it is the riches of the Lord Christ that I am fain of now." The bishop straightway summoned the senior treasurer of the church, and in her presence handed over to him all her substance, saying, "I adjure thee, by the indivisible Trinity, that naught of this shall go to the episcopal treasury or to the church, but rather be allotted to the widows and orphans and the poor, so that what was gotten together by ill may be dispersed to good, and the wealth of a sinner become the treasury of righteousness. But if, in contempt of thine oath, aught of this be stolen, let a curse enter either by thee or by some other, whosoever he be, into his house, and let his portion be with those who said, 'Crucify Him; crucify Him.'" But she for her part called together all her young men and her maids, and gave them all their freedom: and with her own hand she gave them golden torques, saying, "Haste ye to set yourselves free from this worthless and sinful world, so that as we were together in this life, so might we abide together without sorrow in that life which is most blessed."

<sup>27</sup> But on the eighth day, when she must lay aside her white robes, she rose by night, without our knowledge, and laid aside the robe of her baptism, and put on the tunic and cloak of the good bishop Nonnus: and from that day she was no more seen in the city of Antioch. The holy Romana used to weep for her with bitter tears, but the good Nonnus would comfort her, saying, "Weep not, daughter, but rejoice rather with great joy, for Pelagia hath chosen the better part, even as Mary, whom the Lord put before Martha in the Gospel." But she went to Jerusalem and built herself a cell in the Mount of Olives, where our Lord prayed.

<sup>28</sup> And after some time the bishop of the city called all the bishops together, to dismiss them each to his own place. And after a space of three or four years I, James the deacon, took a great longing to set out to Jerusalem that I might there venerate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I asked my bishop if he would give me leave to go. And while giving me leave, he said to me, "I tell thee, brother deacon, when thou dost reach Jerusalem, inquire there for a certain brother

Pelagius, a monk and a eunuch, who has lived these many years shut up and in solitude, if so be thou mightst visit him: for thou mightst well profit by him.” And all the time he spoke of God’s handmaid Pelagia, but I knew it not.

<sup>29</sup> So then, I arrived in Jerusalem, and I venerated the holy resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ: and the next day I made inquiry for this servant of God. And I made my way and found him in the Mount of Olives, where the Lord prayed, in a little cell closed in on every side, and it had a little window in the wall. And I knocked on the shutter of the little window, and straightway she opened to me, and she knew me: but I knew her not. And how could I know her, when she whom I had aforetime seen in beauty beyond all telling was wasted and haggard with fasting? Her eyes were trenches in her face.

<sup>30</sup> “Brother,” said she to me, “whence art thou come?” And I answered, “I was sent to thee by the bidding of Nonnus the bishop.” Then said she, “Let him pray for me, for he is a saint of God.” And therewith she closed the shutter on the window, and began to sing Tierce. And indeed I myself prayed close to the wall of her cell, and went away, much lightened by the angelic vision. And I came back to Jerusalem, and began to go here and there among the monasteries, visiting the brethren.

<sup>31</sup> There was much talk among the monasteries of the fame of the holy Pelagius: and so I made up my mind to go back yet another time to visit him, and be quickened by his salutary speech. But when I had come again to his cell, and knocked, and even made bold to call upon him by name there was no answer. I came again and waited a second day, and again a third, now and then calling, “Pelagius!” but I heard no one. So I said to myself, “Either there is no one here, or the monk who was here has gone away.” And then, moved by some prompting from God, I said to myself, “Let me make sure that he is not perhaps dead”: and I opened the shutter of the window, and looked in, and I saw him dead. And I closed the shutter and carefully filled it up with clay, and came hurrying to Jerusalem and told the news that the good monk Pelagius who had wrought marvels was at peace.

<sup>32</sup> Then the good fathers came with the brethren of the divers monasteries, and the door of the cell was opened: and they carried out

the holy little body, reckoning it as precious as gold and jewels. And when the good fathers set about anointing the body with myrrh, they found that it was a woman. They would fain have hidden the miracle, but they could not: and they cried aloud with a shout, “Glory to Thee, Lord Christ, who hast many treasures hidden on the earth, and not men only, but women also.” It was told abroad to all the people, and all the convents of virgins came, some from Jericho and some from the Jordan where the Lord was baptised, with candles and torches and hymns: and so the holy relics of her were buried, and the good fathers carried her to her grave.

<sup>33</sup> This is the story of a harlot, this the life of a desperate sinner: and may God grant that we find with her His mercy in the day of judgment: for to Him is the glory and honor, dominion and power, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

