

A Prayer to the Porcelain God

by Hugh Barlow

Mark Anthony stares at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Twining tendrils of smoke hang thick in the room. A few stools down sits a mousy woman who has ALMOST everything right. She is just a bit too short. Her eyes are just a bit too big, a bit too far apart, and are just a shade off from being green. They are almost a muddy brown. Her ears are a bit too large, her lips a bit too full. Her dirty blonde hair is a bit too stringy and does not really cover her ears well. Her breasts? Well, they are far too big for her slender frame. In short, while not ugly, by no stretch of the imagination would she be considered beautiful. Mark fingers the golden emblem of his god while he waves two fingers in the air to get the bar-tender's attention. The tender comes, and Mark yells out over the noise of the crowd,

“ANOTHER JACK FOR ME, AND ONE OF WHATEVER THE LADY IS HAVING.”

The tender nods without saying a word, pours two fingers into Mark's glass, and mixes up another fruity concoction for the target of Mark's attentions. The bartender passes the drink on to the woman, and points to Mark when she asks who it is from. After a minute or so, the woman moves down and sits next to him.

“Thanks for the drink.” she purrs as she leans forward to speak into his ear, “I'm Diana.” and she puts out her hand in greeting.

Mark clasps her hand gently and simply says, “Mark.”

In her cleavage, Mark is able to discern a golden heart with the image of an arrow piercing it. A bow is super-imposed over both.

“I see you are a devotee of Cupid.” Mark states.

“I notice that you are a follower of Bacchus.” Diana winks.

Mark fingers the little gold plated toilet seat that hangs from the chain around his neck. It is one of several symbols that Mark uses to inform strangers of his affiliation. In choosing this symbol, Mark shows that he is less a traditionalist than the conservative lyre symbol would imply. Both have a similar shape, but the toilet seat is more associated with “praying to the porcelain god” than actually praying to Bacchus. Mark hopes this will convey more of the “Party spirit” that is part of his life than the other aspects of Bacchanalia. He glances toward the hallway that leads to the private rooms at the back of the meeting house. Mark raises his eyebrows a bit and inclines his head toward the back of the room.

“Wanna go somewhere where we can talk in private?” he asks.
“Sure.” Diana responds.

Mark again signals the bartender and yells, “A FIFTH AND A PITCHER.”

A short time later, the bartender hands him a flask and a pitcher filled with Diana's drink. Mark again motions toward the back to Diana after paying the tab. Diana leads as they walk to the desk at the entrance of the hallway. She insists on paying for the room. Mark takes this as a good sign. It means that she is not a temple prostitute or slave, but is merely a follower of Cupid/Eros. He may get out of this encounter spending less than he had expected.

As they walk down the dim hallway, Mark spies a huddled form on the floor. The sound of retching and the smell of alcohol laced vomit

are overpowering, and he and Diana gingerly step around the growing puddle.

“I'm glad our room is on the second floor.” Diana disseminates. “The worst of the drunks can't climb the stairs.”

The comment makes Mark a little uncomfortable, but he decides to press on despite his discomfort. He does not plan to make the relationship permanent, so it really doesn't matter what Diana thinks about his past-time. As they walk along, Mark admires Diana's form from behind. He is a bit startled when Diana stops and inserts a key into the door. He was distracted by the scenery, and had lost track of where he was going. The door opens to show a spacious room with a low table. Couches line one wall, and near the open window and facing it is a love seat. On the wall opposite the couches is a day bed that could be used for sitting or for sleeping. It is large enough to accommodate two comfortably. Mark flips the switch near the door, turning on the “Do not disturb” sign, and locks the door. He places the tray with the pitcher, the flask, and his glass on the low table. Diana places her glass next to his, and motions to him to join her on the love seat. They sit making the kind of small talk that two strangers who are interested in each other make, and after a short time, Diana begins to remove Mark's clothing and leads him toward the day bed. As they rest, after their communion, there is a commotion outside the window.

“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!” comes the cry from outside. “Turn away from your false gods and follow the one TRUE God!”

Looking out of the window and down, Mark sees a lone figure in a pool of light across the street from the meeting house. Spotlit is a man of indiscriminate age. Mark can see that he is wearing an expensive business suit and a scarlet colored silk tie with a white cross emblazoned in it.

“Gods damned Christians!” Mark acerbically spits. “No WAY would I become a slave to ANY man, not even a god. Those stupid silk ties they wear denote their bondage to their god, did you know that?” Mark looks back at Diana. “Ties used to be a symbol of slavery in Rome during the ancient days.” he continues.

“I did not know that.” Diana replies disinterestedly.

“Yeah,” Mark resumes, “It used to be that the slaves in ancient Rome would wear a tie to symbolized the noose of a rope. This way, you could tell who was a freeman, and who was a slave. The Christians adopted this symbolism to show that they were slaves to their god. The habit gradually fell out of favor with the rest of Roman society because of this co-opting of symbolism. The true slaves did not want to be mistakenly identified as Christians. Gods, how I wish it were still legal to feed those fanatics to the lions!” Mark's veins pulse purple on his neck and forehead. ‘Why would anyone want to give up his god to follow some religious fanatic?’ Mark nearly spat. “Give up all this fun for WHAT? What do they get out of the suffering?”

Diana motions to Mark to sit next to her on the love seat. She slowly begins to smooth his dark hair and to softly croon, “There, there. Settle down. You don't have to listen to those nuts, you know.”

“I know, yeah, I know. It just bugs me that they consider their god to be better than mine.”

A commotion outside draws Mark to the window again. A Centurion has arrived with his ceremonial spear and horse hair plume. He is brocaded in a scarlet tunic as a sign of his office. Having braced the Christian and pinned him to the wall, the Centurion begins the process of binding his hands behind his back.

“May you ROT in HADES!” Mark shouts out the window to the Christian as he is being arrested. “Gods,” Mark looks back to Diana and says, “He is likely to just get a slap on the wrist by the magistrate and a fine for disorderly conduct. What has happened to our society?”

Diana rises from the love seat and joins Mark as the disorderly protester is frog marched away. “Well, I for one would never be like one of them.” Diana informs Mark. “I like being a follower of Eros too much. No way would I give up all of this! I have considered converting to following my namesake, however.”

Mark starts at that. “The goddess Diana? Isn't she also known as Artemis?”

“Yes, replies Diana simply.”

“Lord Bacchus, Dionysus, help me!” thinks Mark in a short prayer. *“Artemis is the huntress and the goddess of childbirth... maybe I should have used protection instead of assuming that a follower of Cupid would want to protect herself! I'll bet she's an Artemisian using Cupid as camouflage. What do I do now?”* Mark stares at Diana with the startled look of a deer caught in a spotlight.

A telling smile crosses Diana's face.

