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Author: Valerius Maximus, (fl. 14-37 AD)  
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Preface To This Article: Hudson

## The Story of Roman Charity

### **Preface:**

Other than writing the nine books of Memorable Doings and Sayings, (Factorum ac Dictorum Memorabilium), during the reign of Roman Emperor Tiberius, (14-37 AD), little is known of Roman Historian Valerius Maximus. His objective in writing these nine books was to preserve the morality and justice of Rome for future generations.

Since recorded so many centuries ago, the story of Roman Charity has become more myth than fact, and being the case, it would be easy to dismiss this incident as fiction if it were not for a fresco discovered in the ruins of Pompeii.

In the ruins of Pompeii, there was found a plaster fresco of a young woman breast feeding an older man in what appears to be a prison cell. Considering Pompeii was destroyed in 79 AD by the volcano Mount Vesuvius, and the story of Roman Charity was recorded between 14 and 37 AD, it is possible this could be the original painting of Roman Charity, or perhaps a copy of the original.

Below is first the English translation of Roman Charity, followed by the original Latin text. To have inspired so much art since the time of Rome, the story is surprisingly short and to the point. Only three paragraphs in Latin.

### **English Translation:**

A Praetor had handed over a woman of free birth found guilty at his tribunal of a capital crime to the Triumvir to be executed in prison. Received there, the head Warder had pity on her and did not strangle her immediately. He even allowed her daughter to visit her, but only after she had been thoroughly searched to make sure she was not bringing in any food, in the expectation that the prisoner would die of starvation.

But after a number of days had passed, he asked himself what could be sustaining her so long. Observing the daughter more closely, he noticed her putting out her breast and relieving her mother's hunger with the succour of her own milk.

This novel and remarkable spectacle was reported by him to the Triumvir, by the Triumvir to the Praetor, by the Praetor to the board of judges; as a result the woman's sentence was remitted.

Whither does Piety not penetrate, what does she not devise? In prison she found a new way to save her mother. For what so extraordinary, so unheard of, as for a mother to be nourished by her daughter's breasts? This might be thought to be against nature, if to love parents were not Nature's first law.

Let the same be predicated concerning the piety of Pero, whose father Myco was in a like sorry plight and equally under prison guard. A man in extreme old age, she put him like a baby to her breast and fed him.

Men's eyes are riveted in amazement when they see the painting of this act and renew the features of this long bygone incident in astonishment at the spectacle now before them, believing in those silent outlines of limbs they see living and breathing bodies. This must needs happen to the mind also, admonished to remember things long past as though they were recent by painting, which is considerably more effective than literary memorials.

Neither shall I wrap you in silence, Cimon, who did not hesitate to buy burial for your father with voluntary chains. For although later it was your fortune to turn out a very great citizen and general, you gained considerably more glory in the prison than in the senate house. Other virtues only earn much admiration, but piety also earns love and a great deal of it.

### **Original Latin Text:**

Sanguinis ingenui mulierem praetor apud tribunal suum capitali crimine damnatam triumuiro in carcere necandam tradidit. quo receptam is, qui custodiae praeerat, misericordia motus non protinus strangulauit: aditum quoque ad eam filiae, sed diligenter excussae, ne quid cibi inferret, dedit existimans futurum ut inedia consumeretur. cum autem plures iam dies intercederent, secum ipse quaerens quidnam esset quo tam diu sustentaretur, curiosius obseruata filia animaduertit illam exerto ubere famem matris lactis sui subsidio lenientem. quae tam admirabilis spectaculi nouitas ab ipso ad triumuirum, a triumuiro ad praetorem, a praetore ad consilium iudicum perlata remissionem poenae mulieri impetrauit. quo non penetrat aut quid non excogitat pietas, quae in carcere seruandae genetricis nouam rationem inuenit? quid enim tam inusitatum, quid tam inauditum quam matrem uberibus natae alitam? putarit aliquis hoc contra rerum naturam factum, nisi diligere parentis prima naturae lex esset.

Idem praedicatum de pietate Perus existimetur, quae patrem suum Mycona consili fortuna adfectum parique custodiae traditum iam ultimae senectutis uelut infantem pectori suo admotum aluit. haerent ac stupent hominum oculi, cum huius facti pictam imaginem uident, casusque antiqui condicionem praesentis spectaculi admiratione renouant, in illis mutis membrorum liniamentis uiua ac spirantia corpora intueri credentes. quod necesse est animo quoque euenire, aliquanto efficaciore pictura litterarum uetera pro recentibus admonito recordari.

Ne quidem, Cimo, silentio inuoluam, qui patri tuo sepulturam uoluntariis uinculis emere non dubitasti: nam etsi maximo tibi postea et ciui et duci euadere contigit, plus tamen aliquanto laudis in carcere quam in curia adsecutus es: ceterae enim uirtutes admirationis tantum modo multum, pietas uero etiam amoris plurimum meretur.