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Quo Vadis

Henryk Sienkiewicz · *1895—1896 · Jeremiah Curtin (1896)*

In Nero's Rome a patrician desires a Christian hostage, and the empire's pleasure meets a people who will not offer incense. Curtin's 1896 English, the text hosted here, follows Vinicius, Lygia, Petronius, and the apostles through fire, the arena, and a question on the road: Quo vadis, Domine? The book is a historical romance of costly faith, not a tract.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When a city is mad with power and blood, can love learn to serve a crucified Lord—and will the shepherd turn back when the flock is under the knife?

"If thou desert my people, I am going to Rome to be crucified a second time."

The Lord's voice, to Peter · Chapter LXIX

Vinicius's desire is schooled into a love that will suffer with Lygia and her people. Peter, leaving a city of martyrdom, meets the Lord going the other way, and returns. The book does not hide Nero's horror. It answers it with a God whom the wretched can love, and with a church that grows from the arena's groans.

KEY CHARACTERS

Marcus Vinicius
A young patrician whose desire for Lygia is slowly turned into a costly love

Lygia (Callina)
A Ligian hostage, a Christian, whose refusal to be a prize is the book's first resistance

Petronius
The arbiter elegantiarum, witty, weary, loyal to his nephew, and unconverted to the end

Ursus
Lygia's servant, a man of huge strength, who will not worship Caesar and will die, if he must, for his lady

Peter
The apostle, a fisherman in Rome, who turns back on the road

Paul of Tarsus
The other apostle, teacher and fellow-laborer in the persecution

Nero
The emperor, artist and tyrant, whose court is a theatre of cruelty

Poppaea
The empress, a rival and a danger in the palace intrigue

Chilo Chilonides
A wretched informer whose late remorse is one of the book's hard mercies

THE QUESTION ON THE ROAD

> *"Quo vadis, Domine?"*
> **Peter** · Chapter LXIX

> *"If thou desert my people, I am going to Rome to be crucified a second time."*
> **The Lord's voice, to Peter** · Chapter LXIX

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Arbiter and the Soldier
CHAPTERS I—X

A worldly uncle, a passionate nephew, and a girl under a queen's roof.

- Petronius, Nero's arbiter of elegance, is weary and exquisite; his nephew Vinicius is a young tribune, used to taking what he wants
- Vinicius has seen Lygia, a Ligian hostage in the house of Aulus Plautius, and will have her
- Petronius helps, by court arts, to have the girl taken from that house to Caesar's palace
- The first collision is not only of two lovers: it is of a Roman habit of possession with a household already marked by a new faith

02
The Fisherman's People
CHAPTERS XI—XXX

A kidnapping fails, and the pursuer is drawn into a forbidden assembly.

- Lygia is taken from the palace with the help of the giant Ursus and the Christians
- Vinicius hunts her through the city, is wounded, and is tended in a poor quarter among the people he meant to master
- He hears the apostle Peter, and sees a life he cannot yet understand
- His love begins to change its name, slowly and with relapses, from seizure to service

03
The Fire
CHAPTERS XXXI—L

Rome burns, and a tyrant needs a blame.

- Fire takes the city; Nero's theatrical grief and later building plans become the talk of the streets
- The Christians are named as the incendiaries; a persecution is organized as spectacle
- Peter and Paul are in the city; the little church must decide whether to stay
- Vinicius, now more nearly one of them, seeks Lygia in the net that is closing

04
The Arena
CHAPTERS LI—LXVIII

The games, the beasts, and a strength that is not Caesar's.

- Christians are killed in the gardens and the circus for the city's entertainment
- Lygia is bound to a bull in the arena; Ursus wrestles the beast and frees her
- The crowd, moved, will not have them finished; Vinicius claims her before Caesar's face
- Petronius, still a pagan of taste and courage, works the court's remaining arts for their lives, and sees the end of his own

05
Quo Vadis?
CHAPTER LXIX AND AFTER

A question on the road, and a shepherd who turns back.

- Peter, persuaded to leave a city of death, meets a vision on the road
- He asks, Quo vadis, Domine? The answer: if thou desert my people, I am going to Rome to be crucified a second time
- The Apostle returns, saying, "I have seen the Lord," and goes again to teach and to baptize
- The book closes not on Nero's madness only, but on a people who have found a God they can love, and a love the old society could not give

> *"Quo vadis, Domine?"*
> **Peter** · Chapter LXIX

Faith under Persecution | Love schooled | Courage | The City and the Church | Mercy | Pride of Power

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is Jeremiah Curtin's 1896 translation from the Polish. Name the translator; do not assume later English versions.
2. The title-question is spoken in Latin in Chapter LXIX, and answered in English in this translation. The boy Nazarius echoes the question; Peter's reply is, "To Rome."
3. The arena and the fire are written at length. The map need not repeat every cruelty; the book's point is what the martyrs, and Peter's return, make of it.
4. Petronius is not converted, and he is not a mere foil. His loyalty, taste, and suicide are part of the old world's last dignity.
5. Vinicius's early conduct toward Lygia is possessive and violent. The romance is a conversion of that love, not an excuse for it.
6. Sienkiewicz's Rome is a historical novel with a Christian center. Watch how court satire and the apostolic chapters are kept in one book.

Quotations are verbatim from the Jeremiah Curtin (1896), Project Gutenberg #2853, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/quo-vadis/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.