

Homo Sum — Volume 02 eBook

Homo Sum — Volume 02 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER V.

Thanks to the senator's potion Stephanus soon fell asleep. Paulus sat near him and did not stir; he held his breath, and painfully suppressed even an impulse to cough, so as not to disturb the sick man's light slumbers.

An hour after midnight the old man awoke, and after he had lain meditating for some time with his eyes open, he said thoughtfully: "You called yourself and us all egotistic, and I certainly am so. I have often said so to myself; not for the first time to day, but for weeks past, since Hermas came back from Alexandria, and seems to have forgotten how to laugh. He is not happy, and when I ask myself what is to become of him when I am dead, and if he turns from the Lord and seeks the pleasures of the world, my heart sickens. I meant it for the best when I brought him with me up to the Holy Mountain, but that was not the only motive—it seemed to me too hard to part altogether from the child. My God! the young of brutes are secure of their mother's faithful love, and his never asked for him when she fled from my house with her seducer. I thought he should at least not lose his father, and that if he grew up far away from the world he would be spared all the sorrow that it had so profusely heaped upon me, I would have brought him up fit for Heaven, and yet through a life devoid of suffering. And now—and now? If he is miserable it will be through me, and added to all my other troubles comes this grief."

"You have sought out the way for him," interrupted Paulus, "and the rest will be sure to come; he loves you and will certainly not leave you so long as you are suffering."

"Certainly not?" asked the sick man sadly. "And what weapons has he to fight through life with?"

"You gave him the Saviour for a guide; that is enough," said Paulus soothingly. "There is no smooth road from earth to Heaven, and none can win salvation for another."

Stephanus was silent for a long time, then he said: "It is not even allowed to a father to earn the wretched experience of life for his son, or to a teacher for his pupil. We may point out the goal, but the way thither is by a different road for each of us."

"And we may thank God for that," cried Paulus. "For Hermas has been started on the road which you and I had first to find for ourselves."

"You and I," repeated the sick man thoughtfully. "Yes, each of us has sought his own way, but has enquired only which was his own way, and has never concerned himself about that of the other. Self! self!—How many years we have dwelt close together, and I have never felt impelled to ask you what you could recall to mind about your youth, and how you were led to grace. I learnt by accident that you were an Alexandrian, and had been a heathen, and had suffered much for the faith, and with that I was satisfied."

Indeed you do not seem very ready to speak of those long past days. Our neighbor should be as dear to us as our self, and who is nearer to me than you? Aye, self and selfishness! There are many gulfs on the road towards God.”

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“I have not much to tell,” said Paulus. “But a man never forgets what he once has been. We may cast the old man from us, and believe we have shaken ourselves free, when lo! it is there again and greets us as an old acquaintance. If a frog only once comes down from his tree he hops back into the pond again.”

“It is true, memory can never die!” cried the sick man. “I can not sleep any more; tell me about your early life and how you became a Christian. When two men have journeyed by the same road, and the moment of parting is at hand, they are fain to ask each other’s name and where they came from.”

Paulus gazed for some time into space, and then he began: “The companions of my youth called me Menander, the son of Herophilus. Besides that, I know for certain very little of my youth, for as I have already told you, I have long since ceased to allow myself to think of the world. He who abandons a thing, but clings to the idea of the thing, continues—”

“That sounds like Plato,” said Stephanus with a smile.

“All that heathen farrago comes back to me today,” cried Paulus. “I used to know it well, and I have often thought that his face must have resembled that of the Saviour.”

“But only as a beautiful song might resemble the voice of an angel,” said Stephanus somewhat drily. “He who plunges into the depths of philosophic systems—”

“That never was quite my case,” said Paulus. “I did indeed go through the whole educational course; Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic and Music—”

“And Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy,” added Stephanus.

“Those were left to the learned many years since,” continued Paulus, “and I was never very eager for learning. In the school of Rhetoric I remained far behind my fellows, and if Plato was dear to me I owe it to Paedonomus of Athens, a worthy man whom my father engaged to teach us.”

“They say he had been a great merchant,” interrupted Stephanus. “Can it be that you were the son of that rich Herophilus, whose business in Antioch was conducted by the worthy Jew Urbib?”

“Yes indeed,” replied Paulus, looking down at the ground in some confusion. “Our mode of life was almost royal, and the multitude of our slaves quite sinful. When I look back on all the vain trifles that my father had to care for, I feel quite giddy. Twenty sea-going ships in the harbor of Eunostus, and eighty Nile-boats on Lake Mareotis belonged to him. His profits on the manufacture of papyrus might have maintained a cityfull of poor. But we needed our revenues for other things. Our Cyraenian horses stood in marble stalls, and the great hall, in which my father’s friends were wont to meet, was like a



temple. But you see how the world takes possession of us, when we begin to think about it! Rather let us leave the past in peace. You want me to tell you more of myself? Well; my childhood passed like that of a thousand other rich citizens' sons, only my mother, indeed, was exceptionally beautiful and sweet, and of angelic goodness."

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“Every child thinks his own mother the best of mothers,” murmured the sick man.

“Mine certainly was the best to me,” cried Paulus. “And yet she was a heathen. When my father hurt me with severe words of blame, she always had a kind word and loving glance for me. There was little enough, indeed, to praise in me. Learning was utterly distasteful to me, and even if I had done better at school, it would hardly have counted for much to my credit, for my brother Apollonius, who was about a year younger than I, learned all the most difficult things as if they were mere child’s play, and in dialectic exercises there soon was no rhetorician in Alexandria who could compete with him. No system was unknown to him, and though no one ever knew of his troubling himself particularly to study, he nevertheless was master of many departments of learning. There were but two things in which I could beat him—in music, and in all athletic exercises; while he was studying and disputing I was winning garlands in the palaestra. But at that time the best master of rhetoric and argument was the best man, and my father, who himself could shine in the senate as an ardent and elegant orator, looked upon me as a half idiotic ne’er-do-weel, until one day a learned client of our house presented him with a pebble on which was carved an epigram to this effect: ‘He who would see the noblest gifts of the Greek race, should visit the house of Herophilus, for there he might admire strength and vigor of body in Menander, and the same qualities of mind in Apollonius.’ These lines, which were written in the form of a lute, passed from mouth to mouth, and gratified my father’s ambition; from that time he had words of praise for me when my quadriga won the race in the Hippodrome, or when I came home crowned from the wrestling-ring, or the singing match. My whole life was spent in the baths and the palaestra, or in gay feasting.”

“I know it all,” exclaimed Stephanus interrupting him, “and the memory of it all often disturbs me. Did you find it easy to banish these images from your mind?”

“At first I had a hard fight,” sighed Paulus. “But for some time now, since I have passed my fortieth year, the temptations of the world torment me less often. Only I must keep out of the way of the carriers who bring fish from the fishing towns on the sea, and from Raithu to the oasis.”

Stephanus looked enquiringly at the speaker, and Paulus went on: “Yes, it is very strange. I may see men or women—the sea yonder or the mountain here, without ever thinking of Alexandria, but only of sacred things; but when the savor of fish rises up to my nostrils I see the market and fish stalls and the oysters—”

“Those of Kanopus are famous,” interrupted Steplianus, “they make little pasties there —“Paulus passed the back of his hand over his bearded lips, exclaiming, “At the shop of the fat cook—Philemon—in the street of Herakleotis.” But he broke off, and cried with an impulse of shame, “It were better that I should cease telling of my past life. The day does not dawn yet, and you must try to sleep.”



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“I cannot sleep,” sighed Stephanus; “if you love me go on with your story.”

“But do not interrupt me again then,” said Paulus, and he went on: “With all this gay life I was not happy—by no means. When I was alone sometimes, and no longer sitting in the crowd of merry boon-companions and complaisant wenches, emptying the wine cup and crowned with poplar, I often felt as if I were walking on the brink of a dark abyss as if every thing in myself and around me were utterly hollow and empty. I could stand gazing for hours at the sea, and as the waves rose only to sink again and vanish, I often reflected that I was like them, and that the future of my frivolous present must be a mere empty nothing. Our gods were of little account with us. My mother sacrificed now in one temple, and now in another, according to the needs of the moment; my father took part in the high festivals, but he laughed at the belief of the multitude, and my brother talked of the ‘Primaeval Unity,’ and dealt with all sorts of demons, and magic formulas. He accepted the doctrine of Iamblichus, Ablavius, and the other Neoplatonic philosophers, which to my poor understanding seemed either superhumanly profound or else debasingly foolish; nevertheless my memory retains many of his sayings, which I have learned to understand here in my loneliness. It is vain to seek reason outside ourselves; the highest to which we can attain is for reason to behold itself in us! As often as the world sinks into nothingness in my soul, and I live in God only, and have Him, and comprehend Him, and feel Him only—then that doctrine recurs to me. How all these fools sought and listened everywhere for the truth which was being proclaimed in their very ears! There were Christians everywhere about me, and at that time they had no need to conceal themselves, but I had nothing to do with them. Twice only did they cross my path; once I was not a little annoyed when, on the Hippodrome, a Christian’s horses which had been blessed by a Nazarite, beat mine; and on another occasion it seemed strange to me when I myself received the blessing of an old Christian dock-laborer, having pulled his son out of the water.

“Years went on; my parents died. My mother’s last glance was directed at me, for I had always been her favorite child. They said too that I was like her, I and my sister Arsinoe, who, soon after my father’s death, married the Prefect Pompey. At the division of the property I gave up to my brother the manufactories and the management of the business, nay even the house in the city, though, as the elder brother, I had a right to it, and I took in exchange the land near the Kanopic gate, and filled the stables there with splendid horses, and the lofts with not less noble wine. This I needed, because I gave up the days to baths and contests in the arena, and the nights to feasting, sometimes at my own house, sometimes at a friend’s, and sometimes in the taverns of Kanopus, where the fairest Greek girls seasoned the feasts with singing and dancing.



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“What have these details of the vainest worldly pleasure to do with my conversion, you will ask. But listen a while. When Saul went forth to seek his father’s asses he found a crown.

“One day we had gone out in our gilded boats, and the Lesbian girl Archidike had made ready a feast for us in her house, a feast such as could scarcely be offered even in Rome.

“Since the taking of our city by Diocletian, after the insurrection of Achilleus, the Imperial troops who came to Alexandria behaved insolently enough. Between some of my friends, and certain of the young officers of Roman patrician families, there had been a good deal of rough banter for some months past, as to their horses, women—I know not what; and it happened that we met these very gentry at the house of Archidike.

“Sharp speeches were made, which the soldiers replied to after their fashion, and at last they came to insulting words, and as the wine heated us and them, to loud threats.

“The Romans left the house of entertainment before we did. Crowned with garlands, singing, and utterly careless, we followed soon after them, and had almost reached the quay, when a noisy troop rushed out of a side street, and fell upon us with naked weapons. The moon was high in the heavens, and I could recognize some of our adversaries. I threw myself on a tall tribune, throttled him, and, as he fell, I fell with him in the dust. I am but dimly conscious of what followed, for sword-strokes were showered upon me, and all grew black before my eyes. I only know what I thought then, face to face with death.”

“Well—?” asked Stephanus.

“I thought,” said Paulus reddening, “of my fighting-quails at Alexandria, and whether they had had any water. Then my dull heavy unconsciousness increased; for weeks I lay in that state, for I was hacked like sausage-meat; I had twelve wounds, not counting the slighter ones, and any one else would have died of any one of them. You have often wondered at my scars.”

“And whom did the Lord choose then to be the means of your salvation?”

“When I recovered my senses,” continued Paulus, “I was lying in a large, clean room behind a curtain of light material; I could not raise myself, but just as if I had been sleeping so many minutes instead of days, I thought again directly of my quails. In their last fight my best cock had severely handled handsome Nikander’s, and yet he wanted to dispute the stakes with me, but I would assert my rights! At least the quails should fight again, and if Nikander should refuse I would force him to fight me with his fists in the Palaestra, and give him a blue reminder of his debt on the eye. My hands were still

weak, and yet I clenched them as I thought of the vexatious affair. 'I will punish him,' I muttered to myself.

"Then I heard the door of the room open, and I saw three men respectfully approaching a fourth. He greeted them with dignity, but yet with friendliness, and rolled up a scroll which he had been reading, I would have called out, but I could not open my parched lips, and yet I saw and heard all that was going on around me in the room.



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“It all seemed strange enough to me then; even the man’s mode of greeting was unusual. I soon perceived that he who sat in the chair was a judge, and that the others had come as complainants; they were all three old and poor, but some good men had left them the use and interest of a piece of land. During seed-time one of them, a fine old man with long white hair, had been ill, and he had not been able to help in the harvest either; ‘and now they want to withhold his portion of the corn,’ thought I; but it was quite otherwise. The two men who were in health had taken a third part of the produce to the house of the sick man, and he obstinately refused to accept the corn because he had helped neither to sow nor to reap it, and he demanded of the judge that he should signify to the other two that he had no right to receive goods which he had not earned.

“The judge had so far kept silence. But he now raised his sagacious and kindly face and asked the old man, ‘Did you pray for your companions and for the increase of their labors?’

“‘I did,’ replied the other.

“‘Then by your intercession you helped them,’ the judge decided, ‘and the third part of the produce is yours and you must keep it.’

“The old man bowed, the three men shook hands, and in a few minutes the judge was alone in the room again.

“I did not know what had come over me; the complaint of the men and the decision of the judge seemed to me senseless, and yet both the one and the other touched my heart. I went to sleep again, and when I awoke refreshed the next morning the judge came up to me and gave me medicine, not only for my body but also for my soul, which certainly was not less in need of it than my poor wounded limbs.”

“Who was the judge?” asked Stephanus.

“Eusebius, the Presbyter of Kanopus. Some Christians had found me half dead on the road, and had carried me into his house, for the widow Theodora, his sister, was the deaconess of the town. The two had nursed me as if I were their dearest brother. It was not till I grew stronger that they showed me the cross and the crown of thorns of Him who for my sake also had taken upon Him such far more cruel suffering than mine, and they taught me to love His wounds, and to bear my own with submission. In the dry wood of despair soon budded green shoots of hope, and instead of annihilation at the end of this life they showed me Heaven and all its joys.

“I became a new man, and before me there lay in the future an eternal and blessed existence; after this life I now learned to look forward to eternity. The gates of Heaven were wide open before me, and I was baptized at Kanopus.



“In Alexandria they had mourned for me as dead, and my sister Arsinoe, as heiress to my property, had already moved into my country-house with her husband, the prefect. I willingly left her there, and now lived again in the city, in order to support the brethren, as the persecutions had begun again.



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“This was easy for me, as through my brother-in-law I could visit all the prisons; at last I was obliged to confess the faith, and I suffered much on the rack and in the porphyry quarries; but every pain was dear to me, for it seemed to bring me nearer to the goal of my longings, and if I find ought to complain of up here on the Holy Mountain, it is only that the Lord deems me unworthy to suffer harder things, when his beloved and only Son took such bitter torments on himself for me and for every wretched sinner.”

“Ah! saintly man!” murmured Stephanus, devoutly kissing Paulus’ sheep-skin; but Paulus pulled it from him, exclaiming hastily:

“Cease, pray cease—he who approaches me with honors now in this life throws a rock in my way to the life of the blessed. Now I will go to the spring and fetch you some fresh water.”

When Paulus returned with the water-jar he found Hermas, who had come to wish his father good-morning before he went down to the oasis to fetch some new medicine from the senator.

CHAPTER VI.

Sirona was sitting at the open window of her bedroom, having her hair arranged by a black woman that her husband had bought in Rome. She sighed, while the slave lightly touched the shining tresses here and there with perfumed oil which she had poured into the palm of her hand; then she firmly grasped the long thick waving mass of golden hair and was parting it to make a plait, when Sirona stopped her, saying, “Give me the mirror.”

For some minutes she looked with a melancholy gaze at the image in the polished metal, then she sighed again; she picked up the little greyhound that lay at her feet, and placing it in her lap, showed the animal its image in the mirror.

“There, poor lambe,” she said, “if we two, inside these four walls, want to see anything like a pleasing sight we must look at ourselves.”

Then she went on, turning to the slave. “How the poor little beast trembles! I believe it longs to be back again at Arelas, and is afraid we shall linger too long under this burning sky. Give me my sandals.”

The black woman reached her mistress two little slippers with gilt ornaments on the slight straps, but Sirona flung her hair off her face with the back of her hand, exclaiming, “The old ones, not these. Wooden shoes even would do here.”

And with these words she pointed to the court-yard under the window, which was in fact as ill contrived, as though gilt sandals had never yet trodden it. It was surrounded by

buildings; on one side was a wall with a gateway, and on the others buildings which formed a sharply bent horseshoe.

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Opposite the wing in which Sirona and her husband had found a home stood the much higher house of Petrus, and both had attached to them, in the background of the courtyard, sheds constructed of rough reddish brown stones, and covered with a thatch of palm-branches; in these the agricultural implements were stored, and the senator's slaves lived. In front lay a heap of black charcoal, which was made on the spot by burning the wood of the thorny *sajala* species of acacia; and there too lay a goodly row of well smoothed mill-stones, which were shaped in the quarry, and exported to Egypt. At this early hour the whole unlovely domain lay in deep shadow, and was crowded with fowls and pigeons. Sirona's window alone was touched by the morning sun. If she could have known what a charm the golden light shed over her figure, on her rose and white face, and her shining hair, she would have welcomed the day-star, instead of complaining that it had too early waked her from sleep—her best comfort in her solitude.

Besides a few adjoining rooms she was mistress of a larger room, the dwelling room, which look out upon the street.

She shaded her eyes with her hand, exclaiming, "Oh! the wearisome sun. It looks at us the first thing in the morning through the window; as if the day were not long enough. The beds must be put in the front room; I insist upon it."

The slave shook her head, and stammered an answer, "Phoebicius will not have it so."

Sirona's eyes flashed angrily, and her voice, which was particularly sweet, trembled slightly as she asked, "What is wrong with him again?"

"He says," replied the slave, "that the senator's son, Polykarp, goes oftener past your window than altogether pleases him, and it seems to him, that you occupy yourself more than is necessary with his little brothers and sisters, and the other children up there."

"Is he still in there?" asked Sirona with glowing cheeks, and she pointed threateningly to the dwelling-room.

"The master is out," stuttered the old woman. "He went out before sunrise. You are not to wait for breakfast, he will not return till late."

The Gaulish lady made no answer, but her head fell, and the deepest melancholy overspread her features. The greyhound seemed to feel for the troubles of his mistress, for he fawned upon her, as if to kiss her. The solitary woman pressed the little creature, which had come with her from her home, closely to her bosom; for an unwonted sense of wretchedness weighed upon her heart, and she felt as lonely, friendless, and abandoned, as if she were driving alone—alone—over a wide and shoreless sea. She shuddered, as if she were cold—for she thought of her husband, the man who here in the desert should have been all in all to her, but whose presence filled her with aversion,

whose indifference had ceased to wound her, and whose tenderness she feared far more than his wild irritability—she had never loved him.

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She had grown up free from care among a number of brothers and sisters. Her father had been the chief accountant of the decurions' college in his native town, and he had lived opposite the circus, where, being of a stern temper, he had never permitted his daughters to look on at the games; but he could not prevent their seeing the crowd streaming into the amphitheatre, or hearing their shouts of delight, and their eager cries of approbation.

Sirona thus grew up in the presence of other people's pleasure, and in a constantly revived and never satisfied longing to share it; she had, indeed, no time for unnecessary occupations, for her mother died before she was fully grown up, and she was compelled to take charge of the eight younger children. This she did in all fidelity, but in her hours of leisure she loved to listen to the stories told her by the wives of officials, who had seen, and could praise, the splendors of Rome the golden.

She knew that she was fair, for she need only go outside the house to hear it said; but though she longed to see the capital, it was not for the sake of being admired, but because there was there so much that was splendid to see and to admire. So, when the Centurion Phoebicius, the commandant of the garrison of her native town, was transferred to Rome, and when he desired to take the seventeen-years-old girl with him to the imperial city, as his wife—she was more than forty years younger than he—she followed him full of hope and eager anticipation.

Not long after their marriage she started for Rome by sea from Massilia, accompanied by an old relative; and he went by land at the head of his cohorts.

She reached their destination long before her husband, and without waiting for him, but constantly in the society of her old duenna, she gave herself up with the freedom and eagerness of her fresh youth to the delights of seeing and admiring.

It did not escape her, while she did so, that she attracted all eyes wherever she went, and however much this flattered and pleased her at first, it spoilt many of her pleasures, when the Romans, young and old, began to follow and court her. At last Phoebicius arrived, and when he found his house crowded with his wife's admirers he behaved to Sirona as though she had long since betrayed his honor.

Nevertheless he dragged her from pleasure to pleasure, and from one spectacle to another, for it gratified him to show himself in public with his beautiful young wife. She certainly was not free from frivolity, but she had learnt early from her strict father, as being the guide of her younger sisters, to distinguish clearly right from wrong, and the pure from the unclean; and she soon discovered that the joys of the capital, which had seemed at first to be gay flowers with bright colors, and redolent with intoxicating perfume, bloomed on the surface of a foul bog.



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She at first had contemplated all that was beautiful, pleasant, and characteristic with delight; but her husband took pleasure only in things which revolted her as being common and abominable. He watched her every glance, and yet he pointed nothing out to her, but what was hurtful to the feelings of a pure woman. Pleasure became her torment, for the sweetest wine is repulsive when it has been tasted by impure lips. After every feast and spectacle he loaded her with outrageous reproaches, and when at last, weary of such treatment, she refused to quit the house, he obliged her nevertheless to accompany him as often as the Legate Quintillus desired it. The legate was his superior-officer, and he sent her every day some present or flowers.

Up to this time she had borne with him, and had tried to excuse him, and to think herself answerable for much of what she endured. But at last— about ten months after her marriage—something occurred between her and Phoebicius—something which stood like a wall of brass between him and her; and as this something had led to his banishment to the remote oasis, and to his degradation to the rank of captain of a miserable maniple, instead of his obtaining his hoped for promotion, he began to torment her systematically while she tried to protect herself by icy coldness, so that at last it came to this, that the husband, for whom she felt nothing but contempt, had no more influence on her life, than some physical pain which a sick man is doomed to endure all through his existence.

In his presence she was silent, defiant, and repellent, but as soon as he quitted her, her innate, warm-hearted kindness and child-like merriment woke up to new life, and their fairest blossoms opened out in the senator's house among the little troop who amply repaid her love with theirs.

Phoebicius belonged to the worshippers of Mithras, and he often fasted in his honor to the point of exhaustion, while on the other hand he frequently drank with his boon companions, at the feasts of the god, till he was in a state of insensibility.

Here even, in Mount Sinai, he had prepared a grotto for the feast of Mithras, had gathered together a few companions in his faith, and when it happened that he remained out all day and all night, and came home paler even than usual, she well knew where he had been. Just now she vividly pictured to herself the person of this man with his eyes, that now were dull with sleep and now glowed with rage, and she asked herself whether it were indeed possible that of her own free will she had chosen to become his wife. Her bosom heaved with quicker breathing as she remembered the ignominy he had subjected her to in Rome, and she clenched her small hands. At this instant the little dog sprang from her lap and flew barking to the window-sill; she was easily startled, and she drew on her morning-gown, which had slipped from her white shoulders; then she fastened the straps of her sandals, and went to look down into the court-yard.

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A smile played upon her lips as she perceived young Hermas, who had already been for some time leaning motionless against the wall of the house opposite, and devouring with his gaze the figure of the beautiful young woman. She had a facile and volatile nature. Like the eye which retains no impression of the disabling darkness so soon as the rays of light have fallen on it, no gloom of suffering touched her so deeply that the lightest breath of a new pleasure could not blow her troubles to the winds. Many rivers are quite different in color at their source and at their mouth, and so it was often with her tears; she began to weep for sorrow, and then found it difficult to dry her eyes for sheer overflow of mirth. It would have been so easy for Phoebicius to make her lot a fair one! for she had a most susceptible heart, and was grateful for the smallest proofs of love, but between him and her every bond was broken.

The form and face of Hermas took her fancy; she thought he looked of noble birth in spite of his poor clothing, and when she observed that his checks were glowing, and that the hand in which he held the medicine phial trembled, she understood that he was watching her, and that the sight of her had stirred his youthful blood. A woman—still more a woman who is pleased to please—forgives any sin that is committed for her beauty's sake, and Sirona's voice had a friendly ring in it as she bid Hermas good-morning and asked him how his father was, and whether the senator's medicine had been of service. The youth's answers were short and confused, but his looks betrayed that he would fain have said quite other things than those which his indocile tongue allowed him to reiterate timidly.

"Dame Dorothea was telling me last evening," she said kindly, "that Petrus had every hope of your father's recovery, but that he is still very weak. Perhaps some good wine would be of service to him—not to-day, but to-morrow or the day after. Only come to me if you need it; we have some old Falerman in the loft, and white Mareotis wine, which is particularly good and wholesome."

Hermas thanked her, and as she still urged him to apply to her in all confidence, he took courage and succeeded in stammering rather than saying,—“You are as good as you are beautiful.”

The words were hardly spoken when the topmost stone of an elaborately constructed pile near the slaves' house fell down with a loud clatter. Sirona started and drew back from the window, the grey-hound set up a loud barking, and Hermas struck his forehead with his hand as if he were roused from a dream.

In a few instants he had knocked at the senator's door; hardly had he entered the house when Miriam's slight form passed across behind the pile of stones, and vanished swiftly and silently into the slaves' quarters. These were by this time deserted by their inhabitants, who were busy in the field, the house, or the quarries; they consisted of a few ill-lighted rooms with bare, unfinished walls.



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The shepherdess went into the smallest, where, on a bed of palm-sticks, lay the slave that she had wounded, and who turned over as with a hasty hand she promptly laid a fresh, but ill-folded bandage, all askew on the deep wound in his bend. As soon as this task was fulfilled she left the room again, placed herself behind the half open door which led into the court-yard, and, pressing, her brow against the stone door-post, looked first at the senator's house, and then at Sirona's window, while her breath came faster and faster.

A new and violent emotion was stirring her young soul; not many minutes since she had squatted peacefully on the ground by the side of the wounded man, with her head resting on her hand, and thinking of her goats on the mountain. Then she had heard a slight sound in the court, which any one else would not have noticed; but she not only perceived it, but knew with perfect certainty with whom it originated. She could never fail to recognize Hermas' foot-step, and it had an irresistible effect upon her. She raised her head quickly from her hand, and her elbow from the knee on which it was resting, sprang to her feet, and went out into the yard. She was hidden by the mill-stones, but she could see Hermas lost in admiration. She followed the direction of his eyes and saw the same image which had fascinated his gaze—Sirona's lovely form, flooded with sunlight. She looked as if formed out of snow, and roses, and gold, like the angel at the sepulchre in the new picture in the church. Yes, just like the angel, and the thought flew through her mind how brown and black she was herself, and that he had called her a she-devil. A sense of deep pain came over her, she felt as though paralyzed in body and soul; but soon she shook off the spell, and her heart began to beat violently; she had to bite her lip hard with her white teeth to keep herself from crying out with rage and anguish.

How she wished that she could swing herself up to the window on which Hermas' gaze was fixed, and clutch Sirona's golden hair and tear her down to the ground, and suck the very blood from her red lips like a vampire, till she lay at her feet as pale as the corpse of a man dead of thirst in the desert. Then she saw the light mantle slip from Sirona's shoulders, and observed Hermas start and press his hand to his heart.

Then another impulse seized her. It was to call to her and warn her of his presence; for even women who hate each other hold out the hand of fellowship in the spirit, when the sanctity of woman's modesty is threatened with danger. She blushed for Sirona, and had actually opened her lips to call, when the greyhound barked and the dialogue began. Not a word escaped her sharp ears, and when he told Sirona that she was as good as she was beautiful she felt seized with giddiness; then the topmost stone, by which she had tried to steady herself, lost its balance, its fall interrupted their conversation, and Miriam returned to the sick man.



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Now she was standing at the door, waiting for Hermas. Long, long did she wait; at last he appeared with Dorothea, and she could see that he glanced up again at Sirona; but a spiteful smile passed over her lips, for the window was empty and the fair form that he had hoped to see again had vanished.

Sirona was now sitting at her loom in the front room, whither she had been tempted by the sound of approaching hoofs. Polykarp had ridden by on his father's fine horse, had greeted her as he passed, and had dropped a rose on the roadway. Half an hour later the old black slave came to Sirona, who was throwing the shuttle through the warp with a skilful hand.

"Mistress," cried the negress with a hideous grin; the lonely woman paused in her work, and as she looked up enquiringly the old woman gave her a rose. Sirona took the flower, blew away the road-side dust that had clung to it, rearranged the tumbled delicate petals with her finger-tips, and said, while she seemed to give the best part of her attention to this occupation, "For the future let roses be when you find them. You know Phoebicius, and if any one sees it, it will be talked about."

The black woman turned away, shrugging her shoulders; but Sirona thought, "Polykarp is a handsome and charming man, and has finer and more expressive eyes than any other here, if he were not always talking of his plans, and drawings, and figures, and mere stupid grave things that I do not care for!"

CHAPTER VII.

The next day, after the sun had passed the meridian and it was beginning to grow cool, Hermas and Paulus yielded to Stephanus' wish, as he began to feel stronger, and carried him out into the air. The anchorites sat near each other on a low block of stone, which Hermas had made into a soft couch for his father by heaping up a high pile of fresh herbs. They looked after the youth, who had taken his bow and arrows, as he went up the mountain to hunt a wild goat; for Petrus had prescribed a strengthening diet for the sick man. Not a word was spoken by either of them till the hunter had disappeared. Then Stephanus said, "How much he has altered since I have been ill. It is not so very long since I last saw him by the broad light of day, and he seems meantime to have grown from a boy into a man. How self-possessed his gait is."

Paulus, looking down at the ground, muttered some words of assent. He remembered the discus-throwing and thought to himself, "The Palaestra certainly sticks in his mind, and he has been bathing too; and yesterday, when he came up from the oasis, he strode in like a young athlete."

That friendship only is indeed genuine when two friends, without speaking a word to each other, can nevertheless find happiness in being together. Stephanus and Paulus

were silent, and yet a tacit intercourse subsisted between them as they sat gazing towards the west, where the sun was near its setting.

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Far below them gleamed the narrow, dark blue-green streak of the Red Sea, bounded by the bare mountains of the coast, which shone in a shimmer of golden light. Close beside them rose the toothed crown of the great mountain which, so soon as the day-star had sunk behind it, appeared edged with a riband of glowing rubies. The flaming glow flooded the western horizon, filmy veils of mist floated across the hilly coast-line, the silver clouds against the pure sky changed their hue to the tender blush of a newly opened rose, and the undulating shore floated in the translucent violet of the amethyst. There not a breath of air was stirring, not a sound broke the solemn stillness of the evening. Not till the sea was taking a darker and still darker hue, till the glow on the mountain peaks and in the west had begun to die away, and the night to spread its shades over the heights and hollows, did Stephanus unclasp his folded hands and softly speak his companion's name. Paulus started and said, speaking like a man who is aroused from a dream and who is suddenly conscious of having heard some one speak, "You are right; it is growing dark and cool and you must go back into the cave."

Stephanus offered no opposition and let himself be led back to his bed; while Paulus was spreading the sheepskin over the sick man he sighed deeply.

"What disturbs your soul?" asked the older man. "It is—it was—what good can it do me!" cried Paulus in strong excitement. "There we sat, witnesses of the most glorious marvels of the Most High, and I, in shameless idolatry, seemed to see before me the chariot of Helios with its glorious winged-horses, snorting fire as they went, and Helios himself in the guise of Hermas, with gleaming golden hair, and the dancing Hours, and the golden gates of the night. Accursed rabble of demons!—"

At this point the anchorite was interrupted, for Hermas entered the cave, and laying a young steinbock, that he had killed, before the two men, exclaimed, "fine fellow, and he cost me no more than one arrow. I will light a fire at once and roast the best pieces. There are plenty of bucks still on our mountain, and I know where to find them."

In about an hour, father and son were eating the pieces of meat, which had been cooked on a spit. Paulus declined to sup with them, for after he had scourged himself in despair and remorse for the throwing of the discus, he had vowed a strict fast.

"And now," cried Hermas, when his father declared himself satisfied, after seeming to relish greatly the strong meat from which he had so long abstained, "and now the best is to come! In this flask I have some strengthening wine, and when it is empty it will be filled afresh." Stephanus took the wooden beaker that his son offered him, drank a little, and then said, while he smacked his tongue to relish the after-taste of the noble juice, "That is something choice!—Syrian wine! only taste it, Paulus."



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Paulus took the beaker in his hand, inhaled the fragrance of the golden fluid, and then murmured, but without putting it to his lips, "That is not Syrian; it is Egyptian, I know it well. I should take it to be Mareotic."

"So Sirona called it," cried Hermas, "and you know it by the mere smell! She said it was particularly good for the sick."

"That it is," Paulus agreed; but Stephanus asked in surprise, "Sirona? who is she?"

The cave was but dimly lighted by the fire that had been made at the opening, so that the two anchorites could not perceive that Hermas reddened all over as he replied, "Sirona? The Gaulish woman Sirona? Do you not know her? She is the wife of the centurion down in the oasis."

"How do you come to know her?" asked his father.

"She lives in Petrus' house," replied the lad, "and as she had heard of your wound—"

"Take her my thanks when you go there to-morrow morning," said Stephanus. To her and to her husband too. Is he a Gaul?"

"I believe so—nay, certainly," answered Hermas, "they call him the lion, and he is no doubt a Gaul?"

When the lad had left the cave the old man laid himself down to rest, and Paulus kept watch by him on his son's bed. But Stephanus could not sleep, and when his friend approached him to give him some medicine, he said, "The wife of a Gaul has done me a kindness, and yet the wine would have pleased me better if it had not come from a Gaul."

Paulus looked at him enquiringly, and though total darkness reigned in the cave, Stephanus felt his gaze and said, "I owe no man a grudge and I love my neighbor. Great injuries have been done me, but I have forgiven—from the bottom of my heart forgiven. Only one man lives to whom I wish evil, and he is a Gaul."

"Forgive him too," said Paulus, "and do not let evil thoughts disturb your sleep."

"I am not tired," said the sick man, "and if you had gone through such things as I have, it would trouble your rest at night too."

"I know, I know," said Paulus soothingly. "It was a Gaul that persuaded your wretched wife into quitting your house and her child."

"And I loved, oh! how I loved Glycera!" groaned the old man. "She lived like a princess and I fulfilled her every wish before it was uttered. She herself has said a hundred



times that I was too kind and too yielding, and that there was nothing left for her to wish. Then the Gaul came to our house, a man as acrid as sour wine, but with a fluent tongue and sparkling eyes. How he entangled Glyceria I know not, nor do I want to know; he shall atone for it in hell. For the poor lost woman I pray day and night. A spell was on her, and she left her heart behind in my house, for her child was there and she loved Hermas so fondly; indeed she was deeply devoted to me. Think what the spell must be that can annihilate a mother's love! Wretch, hapless wretch that I am! Did you ever love a woman, Paulus?"



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“You ought to be asleep,” said Paulus in a warning tone. “Who ever lived nearly half a century without feeling love! Now I will not speak another word, and you must take this drink that Petrus has sent for you.” The senator’s medicine was potent, for the sick man fell asleep and did not wake till broad day lighted up the cave.

Paulus was still sitting on his bed, and after they had prayed together, he gave him the jar which Hermas had filled with fresh water before going down to the oasis.

“I feel quite strong,” said the old man. “The medicine is good; I have slept well and dreamed sweetly; but you look pale and as if you had not slept.”

“I,” said Paulus, “I lay down there on the bed. Now let me go out in the air for a moment.” With these words he went out of the cave.

As soon as he was out of sight of Stephanus he drew a deep breath, stretched his limbs, and rubbed his burning eyes; he felt as if there was sand gathered under their lids, for he had forbidden them to close for three days and nights. At the same time he was consumed by a violent thirst, for neither food nor drink had touched his lips for the same length of time. His hands were beginning to tremble, but the weakness and pain that he experienced filled him with silent joy, and he would willingly have retired into his cave and have indulged, not for the first time, in the ecstatic pain of hanging on the cross, and bleeding from five wounds, in imitation of the Saviour.

But Stephanus was calling him, and without hesitation he returned to him and replied to his questions; indeed it was easier to him to speak than to listen, for in his ears there was a roaring, moaning, singing, and piping, and he felt as if drunk with strong wine.

“If only Hermas does not forget to thank the Gaul!” exclaimed Stephanus.

“Thank—aye, we should always be thankful!” replied his companion, closing his eyes.

“I dreamed of Glycera,” the old man began again. You said yesterday that love had stirred your heart too, and yet you never were married. You are silent? Answer me something.”

“I—who called me?” murmured Paulus, staring at the questioner with a fixed gaze.

Stephanus was startled to see that his companion trembled in every limb, he raised himself and held out to him the flask with Sirona’s wine, which the other, incapable of controlling himself, snatched eagerly from his hand, and emptied with frantic thirst. The fiery liquor revived his failing strength, brought the color to his cheeks, and lent a strange lustre to his eyes. “How much good that has done me!” he cried with a deep sigh and pressing his hands on his breast.



Stephanus was perfectly reassured and repeated his question, but he almost repented of his curiosity, for his friend's voice had an utterly strange ring in it, as he answered:

“No, I was never married—never, but I have loved for all that, and I will tell you the story from beginning to end; but you must not interrupt me, no not once. I am in a strange mood—perhaps it is the wine. I had not drunk any for so long; I had fasted since—since but it does not matter. Be silent, quite silent, and let me tell my story.”



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Paulus sat down on Hermas' bed; he threw himself far back, leaned the back of his head against the rocky wall of the cavern, through whose doorway the daylight poured, and began thus, while he gazed fixedly into vacancy, "What she was like?—who can, describe her? She was tall and large like Hera, and yet not proud, and her noble Greek face was lovely rather than handsome.

"She could no longer have been very young, but she had eyes like those of a gentle child. I never knew her other than very pale; her narrow forehead shone like ivory under her soft brown hair; her beautiful hands were as white as her forehead—hands that moved as if they themselves were living and inspired creatures with a soul and language of their own. When she folded them devoutly together it seemed as if they were putting up a mute prayer. She was pliant in form as a young palm-tree when it bends, and withal she had a noble dignity, even on the occasion when I first saw her.

"It was a hideous spot, the revolting prison-hall of Rhyakotis. She wore only a threadbare robe that had once been costly, and a foul old woman followed her about—as a greedy rat might pursue an imprisoned dove—and loaded her with abusive language. She answered not a word, but large heavy tears flowed slowly over her pale cheeks and down on to her hands, which she kept crossed on her bosom. Grief and anguish spoke from her eyes, but no vehement passion deformed the regularity of her features. She knew how to endure even ignominy with grace, and what words the raging old woman poured out upon her!

"I had long since been baptized, and all the prisons were open to me, the rich Menander, the brother-in-law of the prefect—those prisons in which under Maximin so many Christians were destined to be turned from the true faith.

"But she did not belong to us. Her eye met mine, and I signed my forehead with the cross, but she did not respond to the sacred sign. The guards led away the old woman, and she drew back into a dark corner, sat down, and covered her face with her hands. A wondrous sympathy for the hapless woman had taken possession of my soul; I felt as if she belonged to me, and I to her, and I believed in her, even when the turnkey had told me in coarse language that she had lived with a Roman at the old woman's, and had defrauded her of a large sum of money. The next day I went again to the prison, for her sake and my own; there I found her again in the same corner that she had shrunk into the day before; by her stood her prison fare untouched, a jar of water and a piece of bread.

"As I went up to her, I saw how she broke a small bit off the thin cake for herself, and then called a little Christian boy who had come into the prison with his mother, and gave him the remainder. The child thanked her prettily, and she drew him to her, and kissed him with passionate tenderness, though he was sickly and ugly.

“No one who can love children so well is wholly lost,’ said I to myself, and I offered to help her as far as lay in my power.



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“She looked at me not without distrust, and said that nothing had happened to her, but what she deserved, and she would bear it. Before I could enquire of her any further, we were interrupted by the Christian prisoners, who crowded around the worthy Ammonius, who was exhorting and comforting them with edifying discourse. She listened attentively to the old man, and on the following day I found her in conversation with the mother of the boy to whom she had given her bread.

“One morning, I had gone there with some fruit to offer as a treat to the prisoners, and particularly to her. She took an apple, and said, rising as she spoke, ‘I would now ask another favor of you. You are a Christian, send me a priest, that he may baptize me, if he does not think me unworthy, for I am burdened with sins so heavily as no other woman can be.’ Her large, sweet, childlike eyes filled again with big silent tears, and I spoke to her from my heart, and showed her as well as I could the grace of the Redeemer. Shortly after, Ammonius secretly baptized her, and she begged to be given the name of Magdalen, and so it was, and after that she took me wholly into her confidence.

“She had left her husband and her child for the sake of a diabolical seducer, whom she had followed to Alexandria, and who there had abandoned her. Alone and friendless, in want and guilt, she remained behind with a hard-hearted and covetous hostess, who had brought her before the judge, and so into prison. What an abyss of the deepest anguish of soul I could discover in this woman, who was worthy of a better lot! What is highest and best in a woman? Her love, her mother’s heart, her honor; and Magdalen had squandered and ruined all these by her own guilt. The blow of overwhelming fate may be easily borne, but woe to him, whose life is ruined by his own sin! She was a sinner, she felt it with anguish of repentance, and she steadily refused my offers to purchase her freedom.

“She was greedy of punishment, as a man in a fever is greedy of the bitter potion, which cools his blood. And, by the crucified Lord! I have found more noble humanity among sinners, than in many just men in priestly garb. Through the presence of Magdalen, the prison recovered its sanctity in my eyes. Before this I had frequently quitted it full of deep contempt, for among the imprisoned Christians, there were too often lazy vagabond’s, who had loudly confessed the Saviour only to be fed by the gifts of the brethren; there I had seen accursed criminals, who hoped by a martyr’s death to win back the redemption that they had forfeited; there I had heard the woeful cries of the faint-hearted, who feared death as much as they feared treason to the most High. There were things to be seen there that might harrow the soul, but also examples of the sublimest greatness. Men have I seen there, aye, and women, who went to their death in calm and silent bliss, and whose end was, indeed, noble—more noble than that of the much-lauded Codrus or Decius Mus.



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“Among all the prisoners there was neither man nor woman who was more calmly self-possessed, more devoutly resigned, than Magdalen. The words, ‘There is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine that need no repentance,’ strengthened her greatly, and she repented—yea and verily, she did. And for my part, God is my witness that not an impulse as from man to woman drew me to her, and yet I could not leave her, and I passed the day by her side, and at night she haunted my soul, and it would have seemed to me fairer than all in life besides to have been allowed to die with her.

“It was at the time of the fourth decree of persecution, a few months before the promulgation of the first edict of toleration.

“He that sacrifices, it is said, shall go unpunished, and he that refuses, shall by some means or other be brought to it, but those who continue stiff-necked shall suffer death. For a long time much consideration had been shown to the prisoners, but now they were alarmed by having the edict read to them anew. Many hid themselves groaning and lamenting, others prayed aloud, and most awaited what might happen with pale lips and painful breathing.

“Magdalen remained perfectly calm. The names of the Christian prisoners were called out, and the imperial soldiers led them all together to one spot. Neither my name nor hers was called, for I did not belong to the prisoners, and she had not been apprehended for the faith’s sake. The officer was rolling up his list, when Magdalen rose and stepped modestly forward, saying with quiet dignity, ‘I too am a Christian.’

“If there be an angel who wears the form and features of man, his face must resemble hers, as she looked in that hour. The Roman, a worthy man, looked at her with a benevolent, but searching gaze. I do not find your name here,’ he said aloud, shaking his head and pointing to the roll; and he added in a lower voice, ‘Nor do I intend to find it.’

“She went closer up to him, and said out loud, Grant me my place among the believers, and write down, that Magdalen, the Christian, refuses to sacrifice.’

“My soul was deeply moved, and with joyful eagerness I cried out, ‘Put down my name too, and write, that Menander, the son of Herophilus, also refuses.’ The Roman did his duty.

“Time has not blotted out from my memory a single moment of that day. There stood the altar, and near it the heathen priest on one side, and on the other the emperor’s officer. We were taken up two by two; Magdalen and I were the last. One word now—one little word—would give us life and freedom, another the rack and death. Out of thirty of us only four had found courage to refuse to sacrifice, but the feeble hearted broke out into lamentations, and beat their foreheads, and prayed that the Lord might

strengthen the courage of the others. An unutterably pure and lofty joy filled my soul, and I felt, as if we were out of

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the body floating on ambient clouds. Softly and calmly we refused to sacrifice, thanked the imperial official, who warned us kindly, and in the same hour and place we fell into the hands of the torturers. She gazed only up to heaven, and I only at her, but in the midst of the most frightful torments I saw before me the Saviour beckoning to me, surrounded by angels that soared on soft airs, whose presence filled my eyes with the purest light, and my ears with heavenly music. She bore the utmost torture without flinching, only once she called out the name of her son Hermas; then I turned to look at her, and saw her gazing up to Heaven with wide open eyes and trembling lips—living, but already with the Lord—on the rack, and yet in bliss. My stronger body clung to the earth; she found deliverance at the first blow of the torturer.

“I myself closed her eyes, the sweetest eyes in which Heaven was ever mirrored, I drew a ring from her dear, white, blood-stained hand, and here under the rough sheepskin I have it yet; and I pray, I pray, I pray—oh! my heart! My God if it might be—if this is the end—!”

Paulus put his hand to his head, and sank exhausted on the bed, in a deep swoon. The sick man had followed his story with breathless interest. Some time since he had risen from his bed, and, unobserved by his companion, had sunk on his knees; he now dragged himself, all hot and trembling, to the side of the senseless man, tore the sheep’s fell from his breast, and with hasty movement sought the ring; he found it, and fixing on it passionate eyes, as though he would melt it with their fire, he pressed it again and again to his lips, to his heart, to his lips again; buried his face in his hands and wept bitterly.

It was not till Hermas returned from the oasis that Stephanus thought of his exhausted and fainting friend, and with his son’s assistance restored him to consciousness. Paulus did not refuse to take some food and drink, and in the cool of the evening, when he was refreshed and invigorated, he sat again by the side of Stephanus, and understood from the old man that Magdalen was certainly his wife.

“Now I know,” said Paulus, pointing to Hermas, “how it is that from the first I felt such a love for the lad there.”

The old man softly pressed his hand, for he felt himself tied to his friend by a new and tender bond, and it was with silent ecstasy that he received the assurance that the wife he had always loved, the mother of his child, had died a Christian and a martyr, and had found before him the road to Heaven.

The old man slept as peacefully as a child the following night, and when, next morning, messengers came from Raithu to propose to Paulus that he should leave the Holy Mountain, and go with them to become their elder and ruler, Stephanus said, “Follow

this high call with all confidence, for you deserve it. I really no longer have need of you, for I shall get well now without any further nursing.”



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But Paulus, far more disturbed than rejoiced, begged of the messengers a delay of seven days for reflection, and after wandering restlessly from one holy spot to another, at last went down into the oasis, there to pray in the church.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a delicious refreshing evening; the full moon rose calmly in the dark blue vault of the night-sky, and poured a flood of light down on the cool earth. But its rays did not give a strong enough light to pierce the misty veil that hung over the giant mass of the Holy Mountain; the city of the oasis on the contrary was fully illuminated; the broad roadway of the high-street looked to the wanderer who descended from the height above like a shining path of white marble, and the freshly plastered walls of the new church gleamed as white as in the light of day. The shadows of the houses and palm-trees lay like dark strips of carpet across the road, which was nearly empty in spite of the evening coolness, which usually tempted the citizens out into the air.

The voices of men and women sounded out through the open windows of the church; then the door opened and the Pharanite Christians, who had been partaking of the Supper—the bread and the cup passed from hand to hand —came out into the moonlight. The elders and deacons, the readers and singers, the acolytes and the assembled priesthood of the place followed the Bishop Agapitus, and the laymen came behind Obedianus, the head-man of the oasis, and the Senator Petrus; with Petrus came his wife, his grown up children and numerous slaves.

The church was empty when the door-keeper, who was extinguishing the lights, observed a man in a dark corner of an antechamber through which a spring of water softly plashed and trickled, and which was intended for penitents. The man was prostrate on the ground and absorbed in prayer, and he did not raise himself till the porter called him, and threw the light of his little lamp full in his face.

He began to address him with hard words, but when he recognized in the belated worshipper the anchorite Paulus of Alexandria he changed his key, and said, in a soft and almost submissive tone of entreaty, "You have surely prayed enough, pious man. The congregation have left the church, and I must close it on account of our beautiful new vessels and the heathen robbers. I know that the brethren of Raithu have chosen you to be their elder, and that his high honor was announced to you by their messengers, for they came to see our church too and greatly admired it. Are you going at once to settle with them or shall you keep the high-feast with us?"

"That you shall hear to-morrow," answered Paulus, who had risen from his knees, and was leaning against a pillar of the narrow, bare, penitential chamber. "In this house dwells One of whom I would fain take counsel, and I beg of you to leave me here alone.

If you will, you can lock the door, and fetch me out later, before you go to rest for the night.”



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“That cannot be,” said the man considering, “for my wife is ill, and my house is a long way from here at the end of the town by the little gate, and I must take the key this very evening to the Senator Petrus, because his son, the architect Antonius, wants to begin the building of the new altar the first thing to-morrow morning. The workmen are to be here by sunrise, and if—”

“Show me the key,” interrupted Paulus. “To what untold blessing may this little instrument close or open the issues! Do you know, man, that I think there is a way for us both out of the difficulty! You go to your sick wife, and I will take the key to the senator as soon as I have finished my devotions.”

The door-keeper considered for a few minutes, and then acceded to the request of the future presbyter of Raithu, while at the same time he begged him not to linger too late.

As he went by the senator’s house he smelt the savor of roast meat; he was a poor man and thought to himself, “They fast in there just when it pleases them, but as for us, we fast when it pleases us least.”

The good smell, which provoked this lament, rose from a roast sheep, which was being prepared as a feast-supper for the senator and the assembled members of his household; even the slaves shared in the late evening meal.

Petrus and Dame Dorothea sat in the Greek fashion, side by side in a half reclining position on a simple couch, and before them stood a table which no one shared with them, but close to which was the seat for the grown up children of the house. The slaves squatted on the ground nearer to the door, and crowded into two circles, each surrounding a steaming dish, out of which they helped themselves to the brown stew of lentils with the palm of the hand. A round, grey-looking cake of bread lay near each, and was not to be broken till the steward Jethro had cut and apportioned the sheep. The juicy pieces of the back and thighs of the animal were offered to Petrus and his family to choose from, but the carver laid a slice for each slave on his cake—a larger for the men and a smaller for the women. Many looked with envy on the more succulent piece that had fallen to a neighbor’s share, but not even those that had fared worst dared to complain, for a slave was allowed to speak only when his master addressed him, and Petrus forbid even his children to discuss their food whether to praise it or to find fault.

In the midst of the underlings sat Miriam; she never ate much, and all meat was repulsive to her, so she pushed the cut from the ribs that was given to her over to an old garden-woman, who sat opposite, and who had often given her a fruit or a little honey, for Miriam loved sweet things. Petrus spoke not a word to-day to his slaves, and very little even to his family; Dorothea marked the deep lines between his grave eyes, not without anxiety, and noted how he pinched his lips, when, forgetful of the food before him, he sat lost in meditation.



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The meal was ended, but still he did not move, nor did he observe the enquiring glances which were turned on him by many eyes; no one dared to rise before the master gave the signal.

Miriam followed all his movements with more impatience than any of the others who were present; she rocked restlessly backwards and forwards, crumbled the bread that she had left with her slender fingers, and her breath now came fast and faster, and now seemed to stop entirely. She had heard the court-yard gate open, and had recognized Hermas' step.

"He wants to speak to the master, in a moment he will come in, and find me among these—" thought she, and she involuntarily stroked her hand over her rough hair to smooth it, and threw a glance at the other slaves, in which hatred and contempt were equally marked.

But Hermas came not. Not for an instant did she think that her ear had deceived her—was he waiting now at the door for the conclusion of the meal? Was his late visit intended for the Gaulish lady, to whom she had seen him go yesterday again with the wine jar?

Sirona's husband, Phoebicius, as Miriam well knew, was upon the mountain, and offering sacrifice by moonlight to Mithras with his fellow heathen in a cave which she had long known. She had seen the Gaul quit the court during the time of evening-prayer with a few soldiers, two of whom carried after him a huge coffer, out of which rose the handle of a mighty cauldron, and a skin full of water, and various vessels. She knew that these men would pass the whole night in the grotto of Mithras, and there greet "the young god"—the rising sun—with strange ceremonies; for the inquisitive shepherdess had more than once listened, when she had led her goats up the mountain before the break of day, and her ear had detected that the worshippers of Mithras were performing their nocturnal solemnities. Now it flashed across her mind, that Sirona was alone, and that the late visit of Hermas probably concerned her, and not the senator.

She started, there was quite a pain in her heart, and, as usual, when any violent emotion agitated her mind, she involuntarily sprang to her feet prompted by the force of her passion, and had almost reached the door, when the senator's voice brought her to a pause, and recalled her to the consciousness of the impropriety of her behavior.

The sick man still lay with his inflamed wound and fever down in the court, and she knew that she should escape blame if in answer to her master's stern questioning she said that the patient needed her, but she had never told a lie, and her pride forbade her even now to speak an untruth. The other slaves stared with astonishment, as she replied, "I wanted to get out; the supper is so long."



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Petrus glanced at the window, and perceiving how high the moon stood, he shook his head as if in wonder at his own conduct, then without blaming her he offered a thanksgiving, gave the slaves the signal to leave the room, and after receiving a kiss of “good-night” from each of his children—from among whom Polykarp, the sculptor, alone was missing—he withdrew to his own room. But he did not remain alone there for long: so soon as Dorothea had discussed the requirements of the house for the next day with Marthana and the steward, and had been through the sleeping-room of her younger children, casting a loving glance on the peaceful sleepers, arranging here a coverlet, and there a pillow—she entered her husband’s room and called his name.

Petrus stood still and looked round, and his grave eyes were full of grateful tenderness as they met those of his wife. Dorothea knew the soft and loving heart within the stern exterior, and nodded to him with sympathetic understanding: but before she could speak, he said, “Come in, come nearer to me; there is a heavy matter in hand, and you cannot escape your share of the burden.”

“Give me my share!” cried she eagerly. “The slim girl of former years has grown a broad-shouldered old woman, so that it may be easier to her to help her lord to bear the many burdens of life. But I am seriously anxious—even before we went to church something unsatisfactory had happened to you, and not merely in the council-meeting. There must be something not right with one of the children.”

“What eyes you have!” exclaimed Petrus.

“Dim, grey eyes,” said Dorothea, “and not even particularly keen. But when anything concerns you and the children I could see it in the dark. You are dissatisfied with Polykarp; yesterday, before he set out for Raithu, you looked at him so—so—what shall I say? I can quite imagine what it is all about, but I believe you are giving yourself groundless anxiety. He is young, and so lovely a woman as Sirona—”

Up to this point Petrus had listened to his wife in silence. Now he clasped his hands, and interrupted her, “Things certainly are not going on quite right—but I ought to be used to it. What I meant to have confided to you in a quiet hour, you tell me as if you knew all about it!”

“And why not?” asked Dorothea. “When you graft a scion on to a tree, and they have grown well together, the grafted branch feels the bite of the saw that divides the stock, or the blessing of the spring that feeds the roots, just as if the pain or the boon were its own. And you are the tree and I am the graft, and the magic power of marriage has made us one. Your pulses are my pulses, your thoughts have become mine, and so I always know before you tell me what it is that stirs your soul.”



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Dorothea's kind eyes moistened as she spoke, and Petrus warmly clasped her hands in his as he said, "And if the gnarled old trunk bears from time to time some sweet fruit, he may thank the graft for it. I cannot believe that the anchorites up yonder are peculiarly pleasing to the Lord because they live in solitude. Man comes to his perfect humanity only through his wife and child, and he who has them not, can never learn the most glorious heights and the darkest depths of life and feeling. If a man may stake his whole existence and powers for anything, surely it is for his own house."

"And you have honestly done so for ours!" cried Dorothea.

"For ours," repeated Petrus, giving the words the strongest accent of his deep voice. Two are stronger than one, and it is long since we ceased to say 'I' in discussing any question concerning the house or the children; and both have been touched by to-day's events."

"The senate will not support you in constructing the road?"

"No, the bishop gave the casting-vote. I need not tell you how we stand towards each other, and I will not blame him; for he is a just man, but in many things we can never meet half-way. You know that he was in his youth a soldier, and his very piety is rough—I might almost say warlike. If we had yielded to his views, and if our head man Obedianus had not supported me, we should not have had a single picture in the church, and it would have looked like a barn rather than a house of prayer. We never have understood each other, and since I opposed his wish of making Polykarp a priest, and sent the boy to learn of the sculptor Thalassius—for even as a child he drew better than many masters in these wretched days that produce no great artists—since then, I say, he speaks of me as if I were a heathen—"

"And yet he esteems you highly, that I know," interrupted Dame Dorothea.

"I fully return his good opinion," replied Petrus, "and it is no ordinary matter that estranges. He thinks that he only holds the true faith, and ought to fight for it; he calls all artistic work a heathen abomination; he never felt the purifying influence of the beautiful, and regards all pictures and statues as tending to idolatry. Still he allows himself to admire Polykarp's figures of angels and the Good Shepherd, but the lions put the old warrior in a rage. 'Accursed idols and works of the devil,' are what he calls them."

"But there were lions even in the temple of Solomon," cried Dorothea.

"I urged that, and also that in the schools of the catechists, and in the educational history of animals which we possess and teach from, the Saviour himself is compared to a lion, and that Mark, the evangelist, who brought the doctrine of the gospel to

Alexandria, is represented with a lion. But he withstood me more and more violently, saying that Polykarp's works were to adorn no sacred place, but the Caesareum,

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and that to him is nothing but a heathen edifice, and the noble works of the Greeks that are preserved there he calls revolting images by which Satan ensnares the souls of Christian men. The other senators can understand his hard words, but they cannot follow mine; and so they vote with him, and my motion to construct the roadway was thrown over, because it did not become a Christian assembly to promote idolatry, and to smooth a way for the devil.”

“I can see that you must have answered them sharply!”

“Indeed I believe so,” answered Petrus, looking down. “Many painful things were no doubt said, and it was I that suffered for them. Agapitus, who was looking at the deacons’ reports, was especially dissatisfied with the account that I laid before them; they blamed us severely because you gave away as much bread to heathen households as to Christians. It is no doubt true, but—”

But,” cried Dorothea eagerly, “hunger is just as painful to the unbaptized, and their Christian neighbors do not help them, and yet they too are our flesh and blood. I should ill fulfil my office if I were to let them starve, because the highest comfort is lacking to them.”

“And yet,” said Petrus, “the council decided that, for the future, you must apply at the most a fourth part of the grain allotted to their use. You need not fear for them; for the future some of our own produce may go to them out of what we have hitherto sold. You need not withdraw even a loaf from any one of your proteges, but certainly may now be laid by the plans for the road. Indeed there is no hurry for its completion, for Polykarp will now hardly be able to go on with his lions here among us. Poor fellow! with what delight he formed the clay models, and how wonderfully he succeeded in reproducing the air and aspect of the majestic beasts. It is as if he were inspired by the spirit of the old Athenian masters. We must now consider whether in Alexandria—”

“Rather let us endeavor,” interrupted Dorothea, “to induce him at once to put aside his models, and to execute other more pious works. Agapitus has keen eyes, and the heathen work is only too dear to the lad’s heart.”

The senator’s brow grew dark at the last words, and he said, not without some excitement, “Everything that the heathen do is not to be condemned. Polykarp must be kept busy, constantly and earnestly occupied, for he has set his eyes where they should not be set. Sirona is the wife of another, and even in sport no man should try to win his neighbor’s wife. Do you think, the Gaulish woman is capable of forgetting her duty?”



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Dorothea hesitated, and after some reflection answered, "She is a beautiful and vain child—a perfect child; I mean in nature, and not in years, although she certainly might be the grandchild of her strange husband, for whom she feels neither love nor respect, nor, indeed, anything but utter aversion. I know not what, but something frightful must have come between them even in Rome, and I have given up all attempts to guide her heart back to him. In everything else she is soft and yielding, and often, when she is playing with the children, I cannot imagine where she finds her reckless gaiety. I wish she were a Christian, for she is very dear to me, why should I deny it? It is impossible to be sad when she is by, and she is devoted to me, and dreads my blame, and is always striving to win my approbation. Certainly she tries to please every one, even the children; but, so far as I can see, not more Polykarp than any one else, although he is such a fine young man. No, certainly not."

"And yet the boy gazes at her," said Petrus, "and Phoebicius has noticed it; he met me yesterday when I came home, and, in his sour, polite manner, requested me to advise my son, when he wished to offer a rose, not to throw it into his window, as he was not fond of flowers, and preferred to gather them himself for his wife."

The senator's wife turned pale, and then exclaimed shortly and positively, "We do not need a lodger, and much as I should miss his wife, the best plan will be for you to request him to find another dwelling."

"Say no more, wife," Petrus said, sternly, and interrupting her with a wave of his hand. "Shall we make Sirona pay, for it because our son has committed a folly for her sake? You yourself said, that her intercourse with the children, and her respect for you, preserve her from evil, and now shall we show her the door? By no means. The Gauls may remain in my house so long as nothing occurs that compels me to send them out of it. My father was a Greek, but through my mother I have Amalekite blood in my veins, and I should dishonor myself, if I drove from my threshold any, with whom I had once broken bread under my roof. Polykarp shall be warned, and shall learn what he owes to us, to himself, and to the laws of God. I know how to value his noble gifts, and I am his friend, but I am also his master, and I will find means of preventing my son from introducing the light conduct of the capital beneath his father's roof."

The last words were spoken with weight and decision, like the blows of a hammer, and stern resolve sparkled in the senator's eyes. Nevertheless, his wife went fearlessly up to him, and said, laying her hand on his arm, "It is, indeed, well that a man can keep his eyes set on what is just, when we women should follow the hasty impulse of our heart. Even in wrestling, men only fight with lawful and recognized means, while fighting women use their teeth and nails. You men understand better how to



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prevent injustice than we do, and that you have once more proved to me, but, in carrying justice out, you are not our superiors. The Gauls may remain in our house, and do you take Polykarp severely to task, but in the first instance as his friend. Or would it not be better if you left it to me? He was so happy in thinking of the competition of his lions, and in having to work for the great building in the capital, and now it is all over. I wish you had already broken that to him; but love stories are women's affairs, and you know how good the boy is to me. A mother's word sometimes has more effect than a father's blow, and it is in life as it is in war; the light forces of archers go first into the field, and the heavily armed division stays in the background to support them; then, if the enemy will not yield, it comes forward and decides the battle. First let me speak to the lad. It may be that he threw the rose into Sirona's window only in sport, for she plays with his brothers and sisters as if she herself were one of them. I will question him; for if it is so, it would be neither just nor prudent to blame him. Some caution is needed even in giving a warning; for many a one, who would never have thought of stealing, has become a thief through false suspicion. A young heart that is beginning to love, is like a wild boy who always would rather take the road he is warned to avoid, and when I was a girl, I myself first discovered how much I liked you, when the Senator Aman's wife—who wanted you for her own daughter—advised me to be on my guard with you. A man who has made such good use of his time, among all the temptations of the Greek Sodom, as Polykarp, and who has won such high praise from all his teachers and masters, cannot have been much injured by the light manners of the Alexandrians. It is in a man's early years that he takes the bent which he follows throughout his later life, and that he had done before he left our house. Nay—even if I did not know what a good fellow Polykarp is—I need only look at you to say, 'A child that was brought up by this father, could never turn out a bad man.'"

Petrus sadly shrugged his shoulders, as though he regarded his wife's flattering words as mere idle folly, and yet he smiled, as he asked, "Whose school of rhetoric did you go to? So be it then; speak to the lad when he returns from Raithu. How high the moon is already; come to rest —Antonius is to place the altar in the early dawn, and I wish to be present."

CHAPTER IX.

Miriam's ears had not betrayed her. While she was detained at supper, Hermas had opened the courtyard-gate; he came to bring the senator a noble young buck, that he had killed a few hours before, as a thank-offering for the medicine to which his father owed his recovery. It would no doubt have been soon enough the next morning, but he could find no rest up on the mountain, and did not—and indeed did not care to—conceal from himself the fact, that the wish to give expression to his gratitude attracted

him down into the oasis far less than the hope of seeing Sirona, and of hearing a word from her lips.



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Since their first meeting he had seen her several times, and had even been into her house, when she had given him the wine for his father, and when he had taken back the empty flask. Once, as she was filling the bottle which he held, out of the large jar, her white fingers had touched his, and her enquiry whether he were afraid of her, or if not, why his hands which looked so strong should tremble so violently, dwelt still in his mind. The nearer he approached Petrus's house the more vehemently his heart beat; he stood still in front of the gate-way, to take breath, and to collect himself a little, for he felt that, agitated as he was, he would find it difficult to utter any coherent words.

At last he laid his hand on the latch and entered the yard. The watch-dogs already knew him, and only barked once as he stepped over the threshold.

He brought a gift in his hand, and he wanted to take nothing away, and yet he appeared to himself just like a thief as he looked round, first at the main building lighted up by the moon, and then at the Gaul's dwelling-house, which, veiled in darkness, stood up as a vague silhouette, and threw a broad dark shadow on the granite flags of the pavement, which was trodden to shining smoothness. There was not a soul to be seen, and the reek of the roast sheep told him that Petrus and his household were assembled at supper.

"I might come inopportunistly on the feasters," said he to himself, as he threw the buck over from his left to his right shoulder, and looked up at Sirona's window, which he knew only too well.

It was not lighted up, but a whiter and paler something appeared within its dark stone frame, and this something, attracted his gaze with an irresistible spell; it moved, and Sirona's greyhound set up a sharp barking.

It was she—it must be she! Her form rose before his fancy in all its brilliant beauty, and the idea flashed through his mind that she must be alone, for he had met her husband and the old slave woman among the worshippers of Mithras on their way to the mountain. The pious youth, who so lately had punished his flesh with the scourge to banish seductive dream-figures, had in these few days become quite another man. He would not leave the mountain, for his father's sake, but he was quite determined no longer to avoid the way of the world; nay, rather to seek it. He had abandoned the care of his father to the kindly Paulus, and had wandered about among the rocks; there he had practised throwing the discus, he had hunted the wild goats and beasts of prey, and from time to time—but always with some timidity—he had gone down into the oasis to wander round the senator's house, and catch a glimpse of Sirona.

Now that he knew that she was alone, he was irresistibly drawn to her. What he desired of her, he himself could not have said; and nothing was clear to his mind beyond the wish to touch her fingers once more.



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Whether this were a sin or not, was all the same to him; the most harmless play was called a sin, and every thought of the world for which he longed, and he was fully resolved to take the sin upon himself, if only he might attain his end. Sin after all was nothing but a phantom terror with which they frighten children, and the worthy Petrus had assured him that he might be a man capable of great deeds. With a feeling that he was venturing on an unheard of act he went towards Sirona's window, and she at once recognized him as he stood in the moonlight.

"Hermas!" he heard her say softly. He was seized with such violent terror that he stood as if spellbound, the goat slipped from his shoulders, and he felt as if his heart had ceased to beat. And again the sweet woman's voice called, "Hermas, is it you? What brings you to us at such a late hour?"

He stammered an incoherent answer, and "I do not understand; come a little nearer." Involuntarily he stepped forward into the shadow of the house and close up to her window. She wore a white robe with wide, open sleeves, and her arms shone in the dim light as white as her garment. The greyhound barked again; she quieted it, and then asked Hermas how his father was, and whether he needed some more wine. He replied that she was very kind, angelically kind, but that the sick man was recovering fast, and that she had already given him far too much. Neither of them said anything that might not have been heard by everybody, and yet they whispered as if they were speaking of some forbidden thing.

"Wait a moment," said Sirona, and she disappeared within the room, she soon reappeared, and said solid and sadly, "I would ask you to come into the house but Phoebicius has locked the door. I am quite alone, hold the flask so that I may fill it through the open window."

With these words she leaned over with the large jar—she was strong, but the wine-jar seemed to her heavier than on other occasions, and she said with a sigh, "The amphora is too heavy for me."

He reached up to help her; again his fingers met hers, and again he felt the ecstatic thrill which had haunted his memory day and night ever since he first had felt it. At this instant there was a sudden noise in the house opposite; the slaves were coming out from supper. Sirona knew what was happening; she started and cried out, pointing to the senator's door, "For all the gods' sake! they are coming out, and if they see you here I am lost!"

Hermas looked hastily round the court, and listened to the increasing noise in the other house, then, perceiving that there was no possible escape from the senator's people, who were close upon him, he cried out to Sirona in a commanding tone, "Stand back," and flung himself up through the window into the Gaul's apartment. At the same moment the door opposite opened, and the slaves streamed out into the yard.



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In front of them all was Miriam, who looked all round the wide space-expectant; seeking something, and disappointed. He was not there, and yet she had heard him come in; and the gate had not opened and closed a second time, of that she was perfectly certain. Some of the slaves went to the stables, others went outside the gate into the street to enjoy the coolness of the evening; they sat in groups on the ground, looking up at the stars, chattering or singing. Only the shepherdess remained in the court-yard seeking him on all sides, as if she were hunting for some lost trinket. She searched even behind the millstones, and in the dark sheds in which the stone-workers' tools were kept.

Then she stood still a moment and clenched her hands; with a few light bounds she sprang into the shadow of the Gaul's house. Just in front of Sirona's window lay the steinbock; she hastily touched it with her slender naked toes, but quickly withdrew her foot with a shudder, for it had touched the beast's fresh wound, wet with its blood. She rapidly drew the conclusion that: he had killed it, and had thrown it down here, and that he could not be far off. Now she knew where he was in hiding-and she tried to laugh, for the pain she felt seemed too acute and burning for tears to allay or cool it. But she did not wholly lose her power of reflection. "They are in the dark," thought she, "and they would see me, if I crept under the window to listen; and yet I must know what they are doing there together."

She hastily turned her back on Sirona's house, slipped into the clear moonlight, and after standing there for a few minutes, went into the slaves' quarters. An instant after, she slipped out behind the millstones, and crept as cleverly and as silently as a snake along the ground under the darkened base of the centurion's house, and lay close under Sirona's window.

Her loudly beating heart made it difficult for even her sharp ears to hear, but though she could not gather all that he said, she distinguished the sound of his voice; he was no longer in Sirona's room, but in the room that looked out on the street.

Now she could venture to raise herself, and to look in at the open window; the door of communication between the two rooms was closed, but a streak of light showed her that in the farther room, which was the sitting-room, a lamp was burning.

She had already put up her hand in order to hoist herself up into the dark room, when a gay laugh from Sirona fell upon her ear. The image of her enemy rose up before her mind, brilliant and flooded with light as on that morning, when Hermas had stood just opposite, bewildered by her fascination. And now—now—he was actually lying at her feet, and saying sweet flattering words to her, and he would speak to her of love, and stretch out his arm to clasp her—but she had laughed.

Now she laughed again. Why was all so still again?



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Had she offered her rosy lips for a kiss? No doubt, no doubt. And Hermas did not wrench himself from her white arms, as he had torn himself from hers that noon by the spring-torn himself away never to return.

Cold drops stood on her brow, she buried her hands in her thick, black hair, and a loud cry escaped her—a cry like that of a tortured animal. A few minutes more and she had slipped through the stable and the gate by which they drove the cattle in; and no longer mistress of herself, was flying up the mountain to the grotto of Mithras to warn Phoebicius.

The anchorite Gelasius saw from afar the figure of the girl flying up the mountain in the moonlight, and her shadow flitting from stone to stone, and he threw himself on the ground, and signed a cross on his brow, for he thought he saw a goblin-form, one of the myriad gods of the heathen— an Oread pursued by a Satyr. Sirona had heard the girl's shriek.

“What was that?” she asked the youth, who stood before her in the full-dress uniform of a Roman officer, as handsome as the young god of war, though awkward and unsoldierly in his movements.

“An owl screamed—” replied Hermas. “My father must at last tell me from what house we are descended, and I will go to Byzantium, the new Rome, and say to the emperor, ‘Here am I, and I will fight for you among your warriors.’”

“I like you so!” exclaimed Sirona.

“If that is the truth,” cried Hermas, “prove it to me! Let me once press my lips to your shining gold hair. You are beautiful, as sweet as a flower—as gay and bright as a bird, and yet as hard as our mountain rock. If you do not grant me one kiss, I shall long till I am sick and weak before I can get away from here, and prove my strength in battle.”

“And if I yield,” laughed Sirona, “you will be wanting another and another kiss, and at last not get away at all. No, no, my friend—I am the wiser of us two. Now go into the dark room, I will look out and see whether the people are gone in again, and whether you can get off unseen from the street window, for you have been here much too long already. Do you hear? I command you.”

Hermas obeyed with a sigh; Sirona opened the shutter and looked out. The slaves were coming back into the court, and she called out a friendly word or two, which were answered with equal friendliness, for the Gaulish lady, who never overlooked even the humblest, was dear to them all. She took in the night-air with deep-drawn breaths, and looked up contentedly at the moon, for she was well content with herself.



When Hermas had swung himself up into her room, she had started back in alarm; he had seized her hand and pressed his burning lips to her arm, and she let him do it, for she was overcome with strange bewilderment.



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Then she heard Dame Dorothea calling out, “Directly, directly, I will only say good night first to the children.” These simple words, uttered in Dorothea’s voice, had a magical effect on the warm-hearted woman— badly used and suspected as she was, and yet so well formed for happiness, love and peace. When her husband had locked her in, taking even her slave with him, at first she had raved, wept, meditated revenge and flight, and at last, quite broken down, had seated herself by the window in silent thought of her beautiful home, her brothers and sisters, and the dark olive groves of Arelas.

Then Hermas appeared. It had not escaped her that the young anchorite passionately admired her, and she was not displeased, for she liked him, and the confusion with which he had been overcome at the sight of her flattered her and seemed to her doubly precious because she knew that the hermit in his sheepskin, on whom she had bestowed a gift of wine, was in fact a young man of distinguished rank. And how truly to be pitied was the poor boy, who had had his youth spoiled by a stern father. A woman easily bestows some tender feeling on the man that she pities; perhaps because she is grateful to him for the pleasure of feeling herself the stronger, and because through him and his suffering she finds gratification for the noblest happiness of a woman’s heart—that of giving tender and helpful care; women’s hands are softer than ours. In men’s hearts love is commonly extinguished when pity begins, while admiration acts like sunshine on the budding plant of a woman’s inclination, and pity is the glory which radiates from her heart.

Neither admiration nor pity, however, would have been needed to induce Sirona to call Hermas to her window; she felt so unhappy and lonely, that any one must have seemed welcome from whom she might look for a friendly and encouraging word to revive her deeply wounded self-respect. And there came the young anchorite, who forgot himself and everything else in her presence, whose looks, whose movement, whose very silence even seemed to do homage to her. And then his bold spring into her room, and his eager wooing—“This is love,” said she to herself. Her cheeks glowed, and when Hermas clasped her hand, and pressed her arm to his lips, she could not repulse him, till Dorothea’s voice reminded her of the worthy lady and of the children, and through them of her own far-off sisters.

The thought of these pure beings flowed over her troubled spirit like a purifying stream, and the question passed through her mind, “What should I be without these good folks over there, and is this great love-sick boy, who stood before Polykarp just lately looking like a school-boy, is he so worthy that I should for his sake give up the right of looking them boldly in the face?” And she pushed Hermas roughly away, just as he was venturing for the first time to apply his lips to her perfumed gold hair, and desired him to be less forward, and to release her hand.



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She spoke in a low voice, but with such decision, that the lad, who was accustomed to the habit of obedience, unresistingly allowed her to push him into the sitting-room. There was a lamp burning on the table, and on a bench by the wall of the room, which was lined with colored stucco, lay the helmet, the centurion's staff, and the other portions of the armor which Phoebicius had taken off before setting out for the feast of Mithras, in order to assume the vestments of one of the initiated of the grade of "Lion."

The lamp-light revealed Sirona's figure, and as she stood before him in all her beauty with glowing cheeks, the lad's heart began to beat high, and with increased boldness he opened his arms, and endeavored to draw her to him; but Sirona avoided him and went behind the table, and, leaning her hands on its polished surface while it protected her like a shield, she lectured him in wise and almost motherly words against his rash, intemperate, and unbecoming behavior.

Any one who was learned in the heart of woman might have smiled at such words from such lips and in such an hour; but Hermas blushed and cast down his eyes, and knew not what to answer. A great change had come over the Gaulish lady; she felt a great pride in her virtue, and in the victory she had won over herself, and while she sunned herself in the splendor of her own merits, she wished that Hermas too should feel and recognize them. She began to expatiate on all that she had to forego and to endure in the oasis, and she discoursed of virtue and the duties of a wife, and of the wickedness and audacity of men.

Hermas, she said, was no better than the rest, and because she had shown herself somewhat kind to him, he fancied already that he had a claim on her liking; but he was greatly mistaken, and if only the courtyard had been empty, she would long ago have shown him the door.

The young hermit was soon only half listening to all she said, for his attention had been riveted by the armor which lay before him, and which gave a new direction to his excited feelings. He involuntarily put out his hand towards the gleaming helmet, and interrupted the pretty preacher with the question, "May I try it on?"

Sirona laughed out loud and exclaimed, much amused and altogether diverted from her train of thought, "To be sure. You ought to be a soldier. How well it suits you! Take off your nasty sheepskin, and let us see how the anchorite looks as a centurion."

Hermas needed no second telling; he decked himself in the Gaul's armor with Sirona's help. We human beings must indeed be in a deplorable plight; otherwise how is it that from our earliest years we find such delight in disguising ourselves; that is to say, in sacrificing our own identity to the tastes of another whose aspect we borrow. The child shares this inexplicable pleasure with the sage, and the stern man who should condemn it would not therefore be the wiser, for he who wholly abjures folly is a fool all the more certainly the less he fancies himself one. Even dressing others has a peculiar charm,

especially for women; it is often a question which has the greater pleasure, the maid who dresses her mistress or the lady who wears the costly garment.



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Sirona was devoted to every sort of masquerading. If it had been needful to seek a reason why the senator's children and grandchildren were so fond of her, by no means last or least would have been the fact that she would willingly and cheerfully allow herself to be tricked out in colored kerchiefs, ribands, and flowers, and on her part could contrive the most fantastic costumes for them. So soon as she saw Hermas with the helmet on, the fancy seized her to carry through the travesty he had begun. She eagerly and in perfect innocence pulled the coat of armor straight, helped him to buckle the breastplate and to fasten on the sword, and as she performed the task, at which Hermas proved himself unskilful enough, her gay and pleasant laugh rang out again and again. When he sought to seize her hand, as he not seldom did, she hit him sharply on the fingers, and scolded him.

Hermas' embarrassment thawed before this pleasant sport, and soon he began to tell her how hateful the lonely life on the mountain was to him. He told her that Petrus himself had advised him to try his strength out in the world, and he confided to her that if his father got well, he meant to be a soldier, and do great deeds. She quite agreed with him, praised and encouraged him, then she criticised his slovenly deportment, showed him with comical gravity how a warrior ought to stand and walk, called herself his drill-master, and was delighted at the zeal with which he strove to imitate her.

In such play the hours passed quickly. Hermas was proud of himself in his soldierly garb, and was happy in her presence and in the hope of future triumphs; and Sirona was gay, as she had usually been only when playing with the children, so that even Miriam's wild cry, which the youth explained to be the scream of an owl, only for a moment reminded her of the danger in which she was placing herself. Petrus' slaves had long gone to rest before she began to weary of amusing herself with Hermas, and desired him to lay aside her husband's equipment, and to leave her. Hermas obeyed while she warily opened the shutters, and turning to him, said, "You cannot venture through the court-yard; you must go through this window into the open street. But there is some one coming down the road; let him pass first, it will not be long to wait, for he is walking quickly."

She carefully drew the shutters to, and laughed to see how clumsily Hermas set to work to unbuckle the greaves; but the gay laugh died upon her lips when the gate flew open, the greyhound and the senator's watch-dogs barked loudly, and she recognized her husband's voice as he ordered the dogs to be quiet.

"Fly-fly-for the gods' sake!" she cried in a trembling voice. With that ready presence of mind with which destiny arms the weakest woman in great and sudden danger, she extinguished the lamp, flung open the shutter, and pushed Hermas to the window. The boy did not stay to bid her farewell, but swung himself with a strong leap down into the road, and, followed by the barking of the dogs, which roused all the neighboring households, he flew up the street to the little church.



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He had not got more than half-way when he saw a man coming towards him; he sprang into the shadow of a house, but the belated walker accelerated his steps, and came straight up to him. He set off running again, but the other pursued him, and kept close at his heels till he had passed all the houses and began to go up the mountain-path. Hermas felt that he was outstripping his pursuer, and was making ready for a spring over a block of stone that encumbered the path, when he heard his name called behind him, and he stood still, for he recognized the voice of the man from whom he was flying as that of his good friend Paulus.

“You indeed” said the Alexandrian, panting for breath. “Yes, you are swifter than I. Years hang lead on our heels, but do you know what it is that lends them the swiftest wings? You have just learned it! It is a bad conscience; and pretty things will be told about you; the dogs have barked it all out loud enough to the night.”

“And so they may!” replied Hermas defiantly, and trying in vain to free himself from the strong grasp of the anchorite who held him firmly. “I have done nothing wrong.”

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife!” interrupted Paulus in a tone of stern severity. “You have been with the centurion’s pretty wife, and were taken by surprise. Where is your sheepskin?”

Hermas started, felt on his shoulder, and exclaimed, striking his fist against his forehead, “Merciful Heaven!—I have left it there! The raging Gaul will find it.”

“He did not actually see you there?” asked Paulus eagerly.

“No, certainly not,” groaned Hermas, “but the skin—”

“Well, well,” muttered Paulus. “Your sin is none the less, but something may be done in that case. Only think if it came to your father’s ears; it might cost him his life.”

“And that poor Sirona!” sighed Hermas.

“Leave me to settle that,” exclaimed Paulus. I will make everything straight with her. There, take sheepskin. You will not? Well, to be sure, the man who does not fear to commit adultery would make nothing of becoming his father’s murderer.—There, that is the way! fasten it together over your shoulders; you will need it, for you must quit this spot, and not for to-day and to-morrow only. You wanted to go out into the world, and now you will have the opportunity of showing whether you really are capable of walking on your own feet. First go to Raithu and greet the pious Nikon in my name, and tell him that I remain here on the mountain, for after long praying in the church I have found myself unworthy of the office of elder which they offered me. Then get yourself carried by some ship’s captain across the Red Sea, and wander up and down the Egyptian coast. The hordes of the Blemmyes have lately shown themselves there; keep your eye



on them, and when the wild bands are plotting some fresh outbreak you can warn the watch on the mountain-peaks; how to cross the sea and so outstrip them, it will be your business to find out. Do you feel bold enough and capable of accomplishing this task? Yes? So I expected! Now may the Lord guide you. I will take care of your father, and his blessing and your mother's will rest upon you if you sincerely repent, and if you now do your duty."



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“You shall learn that I am a man,” cried Hermas with sparkling eyes. “My bow and arrows are lying in your cave, I will fetch them and then— aye! you shall see whether you sent the right man on the errand. Greet my father, and once more give me your hand.”

Paulus grasped the boy’s right hand, drew him to him, and kissed his forehead with fatherly tenderness. Then he said, “In my cave, under the green stone, you will find six gold-pieces; take three of them with you on your journey. You will probably need them at any rate to pay your passage. Now be off, and get to Raithu in good time.”

Hermas hurried up the mountain, his head full of the important task that had been laid upon him; dazzling visions of the great deeds he was to accomplish eclipsed the image of the fair Sirona, and he was so accustomed to believe in the superior insight and kindness of Paulus that he feared no longer for Sirona now that his friend had made her affair his own.

The Alexandrian looked after him, and breathed a short prayer for him; then he went down again into the valley.

It was long past midnight, and the moon was sinking; it grew cooler and cooler, and since he had given his sheepskin to Hermas he had nothing on, but his thread-bare coat. Nevertheless he went slowly onwards, stopping every now and then, moving his arms, and speaking incoherent words in a low tone to himself.

He thought of Hermas and Sirona, of his own youth, and of how in Alexandria he himself had tapped at the shutters of the dark-haired Aso, and the fair Simaita.

“A child—a mere boy,” he murmured. “Who would have thought it? The Gaulish woman no doubt may be handsome, and as for him, it is a fact, that as he threw the discus I was myself surprised at his noble figure. And his eyes—aye, he has Magdalen’s eyes! If the Gaul had found him with his wife, and had run his sword through his heart, he would have gone unpunished by the earthly judge—however, his father is spared this sorrow. In this desert the old man thought that his darling could not be touched by the world and its pleasures. And now? These brambles I once thought lay dried up on the earth, and could never get up to the top of the palm-tree where the dates ripen, but a bird flew by, and picked up the berries, and carried them into its nest at the highest point of the tree.

“Who can point out the road that another will take, and say to-day, ‘To-morrow I shall find him thus and not otherwise.’

“We fools flee into the desert in order to forget the world, and the world pursues us and clings to our skirts. Where are the shears that are keen enough to cut the shadow from beneath our feet? What is the prayer that can effectually release us—born of the flesh



—from the burden of the flesh? My Redeemer, Thou Only One, who knowest it, teach it to me, the basest of the base.”

ETEXT EDITOR’S BOOKMARKS:

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He who wholly abjures folly is a fool
Some caution is needed even in giving a warning
Who can point out the road that another will take

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