

Homo Sum — Volume 03 eBook

Homo Sum — Volume 03 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER X.

Within a few minutes after Hermas had flung himself out of window into the roadway, Phoebicius walked into his sleeping-room. Sirona had had time to throw herself on to her couch; she was terribly frightened, and had turned her face to the wall. Did he actually know that some one had been with her? And who could have betrayed her, and have called him home? Or could he have come home by accident sooner than usual?

It was dark in the room, and he could not see her face, and yet she kept her eyes shut as if asleep, for every fraction of a minute in which she could still escape seeing him in his fury seemed a reprieve; and yet her heart beat so violently that it seemed to her that he must hear it, when he approached the bed with a soft step that was peculiar to him. She heard him walk up and down, and at last go into the kitchen that adjoined the sleeping-room. In a few moments she perceived through her half-closed eyes, that he, had brought in a light; he had lighted a lamp at the hearth, and now searched both the rooms.

As yet he had not spoken to her, nor opened his lips to utter a word.

Now he was in the sitting-room, and now—involuntarily she drew herself into a heap, and pulled the coverlet over her head—now he laughed aloud, so loud and scornfully, that she felt her hands and feet turn cold, and a rushing crimson mist floated before her eyes. Then the light came back into the bed-room, and came nearer and nearer. She felt her head pushed by his hard hand, and with a feeble scream she flung off the coverlet and sat up.

Still he did not speak a word, but what she saw was quite enough to smother the last spark of her courage and hope, for her husband's eyes showed only the whites, his sallow features were ashy-pale, and on his brow the branded mark of Mithras stood out more clearly than ever. In his right hand he held the lamp, in his left Hermas' sheepskin.

As his haggard eye met hers he held the anchorite's matted garment so close to her face, that it touched her. Then he threw it violently on the floor, and asked in a low, husky voice, "What is that?"

She was silent. He went up to the little table near her bed; on it stood her night-draught in a pretty colored glass, that Polykarp had brought her from Alexandria as a token, and with the back of his hand he swept it from the table, so that it fell on the dais, and flew with a crash into a thousand fragments. She screamed, the greyhound sprang up and barked at the Gaul. He seized the little beast's collar, and flung it so violently across the room, that it uttered a pitiful cry of pain. The dog had belonged to Sirona since she was quite a girl, it had come with her to Rome, and from thence to the oasis; it clung to her

with affection, and she to it, for lambe liked no one to caress and stroke her so much as her mistress. She was so much alone,

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and the greyhound was always with her, and not only entertained her by such tricks as any other dog might have learned, but was to her a beloved, dumb, but by no means deaf, companion from her early home, who would prick its ears when she spoke the name of her dear little sisters in distant Arelas, from whom she had not heard for years; or it would look sadly in her face, and kiss her white hands, when longing forced tears into her eyes.

In her solitary, idle, childless existence lambe was much, very much, to her, and now as she saw her faithful companion and friend creep ill-treated and whining up to her bed—as the supple animal tried in vain to spring up and take refuge in her lap, and held out to his mistress his trembling, perhaps broken, little paw, fear vanished from the miserable young woman's heart—she sprang from her couch, took the little dog in her arms, and exclaimed with a glance, which flashed with anything rather than fear or repentance: “You do not touch the poor little beast again, if you take my advice.”

“I will drown it to-morrow morning,” replied Phoebicius with perfect indifference, but with an evil smile on his flaccid lips. “So many two-legged lovers make themselves free to my house, that I do not see why I should share your affections with a quadruped into the bargain. How came this sheepskin here?” Sirona vouchsafed no answer to this last question, but she exclaimed in great excitement, “By God—by your God—by the mighty Rock, and by all the gods! if you do the little beast a harm, it will be the last day I stop in your house.”

“Hear her!” said the centurion, “and where do you propose to travel to? The desert is wide and there is room and to spare to starve in it, and for your bones to bleach there. How grieved your lovers would be—for their sakes I will take care before drowning the dog to lock in its mistress.”

“Only try to touch me,” screamed Sirona beside herself, and springing to the window. “If you lay a finger on me, I will call for help, and Dorothea and her husband will protect me against you.”

“Hardly,” answered Phoebicius drily. “It would suit you no doubt to find yourself under the same roof as that great boy who brings you colored glass, and throws roses into your window, and perhaps has strewed the road with them by which he found his way to you to-day. But there are nevertheless laws which protect the Roman citizen from criminals and impudent seducers. You were always a great deal too much in the house over there, and you have exchanged your games with the little screaming beggars for one with the grownup child, the rose-thrower-the fop, who, for your sake, and not to be recognized, covers up his purple coat with a sheepskin! Do you think, you can teach me anything about lovesick night-wanderers and women?”

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"I see through it all! Not one step do you set henceforth across Petrus' threshold. There is the open window—scream—scream as loud as you will, and let all the people know of your disgrace. I have the greatest mind to carry this sheepskin to the judge, the first thing in the morning. I shall go now, and set the room behind the kitchen in order for you; there is no window there through which men in sheepskin can get in to my house. You shall live there till you are tamed, and kiss my feet, and confess what has been going on here to-night. I shall learn nothing from the senator's slaves, that I very well know; for you have turned all their heads too—they grin with delight when they see you. All friends are made welcome by you, even when they wear nothing but sheepskin. But they may do what they please—I have the right keeper for you in my own hand. I am going at once—you may scream if you like, but I should myself prefer that you should keep quiet. As to the dog, we have not yet heard the last of the matter; for the present I will keep him here. If you are quiet and come to your senses, he may live for aught I care; but if you are refractory, a rope and a stone can soon be found, and the stream runs close below. You know I never jest—least of all just now."

Sirona's whole frame was in the most violent agitation. Her breath came quickly, her limbs trembled, but she could not find words to answer him.

Phoebicius saw what was passing in her mind, and he went on, "You may snort proudly now; but an hour will come when you will crawl up to me like your lame dog, and pray for mercy. I have another idea—you will want a couch in the dark room, and it must be soft, or I shall be blamed; I will spread out the sheepskin for you. You see I know how to value your adorer's offerings."

The Gaul laughed loud, seized the hermit's garment, and went with the lamp into the dark room behind the kitchen, in which vessels and utensils of various sorts were kept. These he set on one side to turn it into a sleeping-room for his wife, of whose guilt he was fully convinced.

Who the man was for whose sake she had dishonored him, he knew not, for Miriam had said nothing more than, "Go home, your wife is laughing with her lover."

While her husband was still threatening and storming, Sirona had said to herself, that she would rather die than live any longer with this man. That she herself was not free from fault never occurred to her mind. He who is punished more severely than he deserves, easily overlooks his own fault in his feeling of the judge's injustice.

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Phoebicius was right; neither Petrus nor Dorothea had it in their power to protect her against him, a Roman citizen. If she could not contrive to help her self she was a prisoner, and without air, light, and freedom she could not live. During his last speech her resolution had been quickly matured, and hardly had he turned his back and crossed the threshold, than she hurried up to her bed, wrapped the trembling greyhound in the coverlet, took it in her arms like a child, and ran into the sitting-room with her light burden; the shutters were still open of the window through which Hermas had fled into the open. With the help of a stool she took the same way, let herself slip down from the sill into the street, and hastened on without aim or goal—inspired only by the wish to escape durance in the dark room, and to burst every bond that tied her to her hated mate—up the church-hill and along the road which lead over the mountain to the sea.

Phoebicius gave her a long start, for after having arranged her prison he remained some time in the little room behind the kitchen, not in order to give her time, collect his thoughts or to reflect on his future action, but simply because he felt utterly exhausted.

The centurion was nearly sixty years of age, and his frame, originally a powerful one, was now broken by every sort of dissipation, and could no longer resist the effects of the strain and excitement of this night.

The lean, wiry, and very active man did not usually fall into these fits of total enervation excepting in the daytime, for after sundown a wonderful change would come over the gray-headed veteran, who nevertheless still displayed much youthful energy in the exercise of his official duties. At night his drooping eyelids, that almost veiled his eyes, opened more wildly, his flaccid hanging under-lip closed firmly, his long neck and narrow elongated head were held erect, and when, at a later hour, he went out to drinking-bouts or to the service in honor of Mithras, he might often still be taken for a fine, indomitable young man.

But when he was drunk he was no longer gay, but wild, braggart, and noisy. It frequently happened that before he left the carouse, while he was still in the midst of his boon-companions, the syncope would come upon him which had so often alarmed Sirona, and from which he could never feel perfectly safe even when he was on duty at the head of his soldiers.

The vehement big man in such moments offered a terrible image of helpless impotence; the paleness of death would overspread his features, his back was as if it were broken, and he lost his control over every limb. His eyes only continued to move, and now and then a shudder shook his frame. His people said that when he was in this condition, the centurion's ghastly demon had entered into him, and he himself believed in this evil spirit, and dreaded it; nay, he had attempted to be released through heathen spells, and even through Christian exorcisms. Now he sat in the dark room on the sheepfell, which in scorn of his wife he had spread on a hard wooden bench. His hands and feet turned cold, his eyes glowed, and the power to move even a finger had wholly deserted him;

only his lips twitched, and his inward eye, looking back on the past with preternaturally sharpened vision, saw, far away and beyond, the last frightful hour.

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"If," thought he, "after my mad run down to the oasis, which few younger men could have vied with, I had given the reins to my fury instead of restraining it, the demon would not have mastered me so easily. How that devil Miriam's eyes flashed as she told me that a man was betraying me. She certainly must have seen the wearer of the sheepskin, but I lost sight of her before I reached the oasis; I fancy she turned and went up the mountain. What indeed might not Sirona have done to her? That woman snares all hearts with her eyes as a bird-catcher snares birds with his flute. How the fine gentlemen ran after her in Rome! Did she dishonor me there, I wonder? She dismissed the Legate Quintillus, who was so anxious to please me—I may thank that fool of a woman that he became my enemy—but he was older even than I, and she likes young men best. She is like all the rest of them, and I of all men might have known it. It is the way of the world: to-day one gives a blow and to-morrow takes one."

A sad smile passed over his lips, then his features settled into a stern gravity, for various unwelcome images rose clearly before his mind, and would not be got rid of.

His conscience stood in inverse relation to the vigor of his body. When he was well, his too darkly stained past life troubled him little; but when he was unmanned by weakness, he was incapable of fighting the ghastly demon that forced upon his memory in painful vividness those very deeds which he would most willingly have forgotten. In such hours he must need remember his friend, his benefactor, and superior officer, the Tribune Servianus, whose fair young wife he had tempted with a thousand arts to forsake her husband and child, and fly with him into the wide world; and at this moment a bewildering illusion made him fancy that he was the Tribune Servianus, and yet at the same time himself. Every hour of pain, and the whole bitter anguish that his betrayed benefactor had suffered through his act when he had seduced Glycera, he himself now seemed to realize, and at the same time the enemy that had betrayed him, Servianus, was none other than himself, Phoebicius, the Gaul. He tried to protect himself and meditated revenge against the seducer, and still he could not altogether lose the sense of his own identity.

This whirl of mad imagining, which he vainly endeavored to make clear to himself, threatened to distract his reason, and he groaned aloud; the sound of his own voice brought him back to actuality.

He was Phoebicius again and not another, that he knew now, and yet he could not completely bring himself to comprehend the situation. The image of the lovely Glycera, who had followed him to Alexandria, and whom he had there abandoned, when he had squandered his last piece of money and her last costly jewels in the Greek city, no longer appeared to him alone, but always side by side with his wife Sirona.

Glycera had been a melancholy sweetheart, who had wept much, and laughed little after running away from her husband; he fancied he could hear her speaking soft words

of reproach, while Sirona defied him with loud threats, and dared to nod and signal to the senator's son Polykarp.

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The weary dreamer angrily shook himself, collected his thoughts, doubled his fist, and lifted it angrily; this movement was the first sign of returning physical energy; he stretched his limbs like a man awaking from sleep, rubbed his eyes, pressed his hands to his temples; by degrees full consciousness returned to him, and with it the recollection of all that had occurred in the last hour or two.

He hastily left the dark room, refreshed himself in the kitchen with a gulp of wine, and went up to the open window to gaze at the stars.

It was long past midnight; he was reminded of his companions now sacrificing on the mountain, and addressed a long prayer “to the crown,” “the invincible sun-god,” “the great light,” “the god begotten of the rock,” and to many other names of Mithras; for since he had belonged to the mystics of this divinity, he had become a zealous devotee, and could fast too with extraordinary constancy. He had already passed through several of the eighty trials, to which a man had to subject himself before he could attain to the highest grades of the initiated, and the weakness which had just now overpowered him, had attacked him for the first time, after he had for a whole week lain for hours in the snow, besides fasting severely, in order to attain the grade of “lion.”

Sirona’s rigorous mind was revolted by all these practices, and the decision with which she had always refused to take any part in them, had widened the breach which, without that, parted her from her husband. Phoebicius was, in his fashion, very much in earnest with all these things; for they alone saved him in some measure from himself, from dark memories, and from the fear of meeting the reward of his evil deeds in a future life, while Sirona found her best comfort in the remembrance of her early life, and so gathered courage to endure the miserable present cheerfully, and to hold fast to hope for better times.

Phoebicius ended his prayer to-day—a prayer for strength to break his wife’s strong spirit, for a successful issue to his revenge on her seducer—ended it without haste, and with careful observance of all the prescribed forms. Then he took two strong ropes from the wall, pulled himself up, straight and proud, as if he were about to exhort his soldiers to courage before a battle, cleared his throat like an orator in the Forum before he begins his discourse, and entered the bedroom with a dignified demeanor. Not the smallest suspicion of the possibility of her escape troubled his sense of security, when, not finding Sirona in the sleeping-room, he went into the sitting-room to carry out the meditated punishment. Here again—no one.

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He paused in astonishment; but the thought that she could have fled appeared to him so insane, that he immediately and decisively dismissed it. No doubt she feared his wrath, and was hidden under her bed or behind the curtain which covered his clothes. "The dog," thought he, "is still cowering by her—" and he began to make a noise, half whistling and half hissing, which lambe could not bear, and which always provoked her to bark angrily—but in vain. All was still in the vacant room, still as death. He was now seriously anxious; at first deliberately, and then with rapid haste, he threw the light under every vessel, into every corner, behind every cloth, and rummaged in places that not even a child—nay hardly a frightened bird could have availed itself of for concealment. At last his right hand fairly dropped the ropes, and his left, in which he held the lamp, began to tremble. He found the shutters of the sleeping-room open; where Sirona had been sitting on the seat looking at the moon, before Hermas had come upon the scene. "Then she is not here!" he muttered, and setting the lamp on the little table, from which he had just now flung Polykarp's glass, he tore open the door, and hurried into the courtyard. That she could have swung herself out into the road, and have set out in the night for the open desert, had not yet entered into his mind. He shook the door that closed in the homestead, and found it locked; the watch-dogs roused themselves, and gave tongue, when Phoebicius turned to Petrus' house, and began to knock at the door with the brazen knocker, at first softly and then with growing anger; he considered it as certain that his wife had sought and found protection under the senator's roof. He could have shouted with rage and anguish, and yet he hardly thought of his wife and the danger of losing her, but only of Polykarp and the disgrace he had wrought upon him, and the reparation he would exact from him, and his parents, who had dared to tamper with his household rights—his, the imperial centurion's.

What was Sirona to him? In the flush of an hour of excitement he had linked her destiny to his.

At Arelas, about two years since, one of his comrades had joined their circle of boon-companions, and had related that he had been the witness of a remarkable scene. A number of young fellows had surrounded a boy and had unmercifully beaten him—he himself knew not wherefore. The little one had defended himself bravely, but was at last overcome by numbers. "Then suddenly," continued the soldier, "the door of a house near the circus opened, and a young girl with long golden hair flew out, and drove the boys to flight, and released the victim, her brother, from his tormentors. She looked like a lioness," cried the narrator, "Sirona she is called, and of all the pretty girls of Arelas, she is beyond a doubt the prettiest." This opinion was confirmed on all sides, and Phoebicius, who at that time had just been admitted to the grade of "lion" among the worshippers of Mithras, and liked very well to hear himself called "the lion," exclaimed, "I have long been seeking a lioness, and here it seems to me that I have found one. Phoebicius and Sirona—the two names sound very finely together."

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On the following day he asked Sirona of her father for his wife, and as he had to set out for Rome in a few days the wedding was promptly celebrated. She had never before quitted Arelas, and knew not what she was giving up, when she took leave of her father's house perhaps for ever. In Rome Phoebicius and his young wife met again; there many admired the beautiful woman, and made every effort to obtain her favor, but to him she was only a lightly won, and therefore a lightly valued, possession; nay, ere long no more than a burden, ornamental no doubt but troublesome to guard. When presently his handsome wife attracted the notice of the legate, he endeavored to gain profit and advancement through her, but Sirona had rebuffed Quintillus with such insulting disrespect, that his superior officer became the centurion's enemy, and contrived to procure his removal to the oasis, which was tantamount to banishment.

From that time he had regarded her too as his enemy, and firmly believed that she designedly showed herself most friendly to those who seemed most obnoxious to him, and among these he reckoned Polykarp.

Once more the knocker sounded on the senator's door; it opened, and Petrus himself stood before the raging Gaul, a lamp in his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

The unfortunate Paulus sat on a stone bench in front of the senator's door, and shivered; for, as dawn approached, the night-air grew cooler, and he was accustomed to the warmth of the sheepskin, which he had now given to Hermas. In his hand he held the key of the church, which he had promised the door-keeper to deliver to Petrus; but all was so still in the senator's house, that he shrank from rousing the sleepers.

"What a strange night this has been!" he muttered to himself, as he drew his short and tattered tunic closer together. "Even if it were warmer, and if, instead of this threadbare rag, I had a sack of feathers to wrap myself in, still I should feel a cold shiver if the spirits of hell that wander about here were to meet me again. Now I have actually seen one with my own eyes. Demons in women's form rush up the mountain out of the oasis to tempt and torture us in our sleep. What could it have been that the goblin in a white robe and with flowing hair held in its arms? Very likely the stone with which the incubus loads our breast when he torments us. The other one seemed to fly, but I did not see its wings. That side-building must be where the Gaul lives with his ungodly wife, who has ensnared my poor Hermas. I wonder whether she is really so beautiful! But what can a youth who has grown up among rocks and caves know of the charms of women. He would, of course, think the first who looked kindly at him the most enchanting of her sex. Besides she is fair, and therefore a rare bird among the sunburnt bipeds of the desert. The centurion surely cannot have found the sheepskin or all would not be so still here; once since I have been here an ass has brayed, once a camel has groaned, and now already the first cock is crowing; but not a sound have I heard from human lips,

not even a snore from the stout senator or his buxom wife Dorothea, and it would be strange indeed if they did not both snore.”

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He rose, went up to the window of Phoebicius dwelling, and listened at the half open shutters, but all was still.

An hour ago Miriam had been listening under Sirona's room; after betraying her to Phoebicius she had followed him at a distance, and had slipped back into the court-yard through the stables; she felt that she must learn what was happening within, and what fate had befallen Hermas and Sirona at the hands of the infuriated Gaul. She was prepared for anything, and the thought that the centurion might have killed them both with the sword filled her with bitter-sweet satisfaction. Then, seeing the light through the crack between the partly open wooden shutters, she softly pushed them farther apart, and, resting her bare feet against the wall, she raised herself to look in.

She saw Sirona sitting up upon her couch, and opposite to her the Gaul with pale distorted features; at his feet lay the sheepskin; in his right hand he held the lamp, and its light fell on the paved floor in front of the bed, and was reflected in a large dark red pool.

"That is blood," thought she, and she shuddered and closed her eyes.

When she reopened them she saw Sirona's face with crimson cheeks, turned towards her husband; she was unhurt—but Hermas?

"That is his blood!" she thought with anguish, and a voice seemed to scream in her very heart, "I, his murderess, have shed it."

Her hands lost their hold of the shutters, her feet touched the pavement of the yard, and, driven by her bitter anguish of soul, she fled out by the way she had come—out into the open and up to the mountain. She felt that rather would she defy the prowling panthers, the night-chill, hunger and thirst, than appear again before Dame Dorothea, the senator, and Marthana, with this guilt on her soul; and the flying Miriam was one of the goblin forms that had terrified Paulus.

The patient anchorite sat down again on the stone seat. "The frost is really cruel," thought he, "and a very good thing is such a woolly sheepskin; but the Saviour endured far other sufferings than these, and for what did I quit the world but to imitate Him, and to endure to the end here that I may win the joys of the other world. There, where angels soar, man will need no wretched ram's fell, and this time certainly selfishness has been far from me, for I really and truly suffer for another—I am freezing for Hermas, and to spare the old man pain. I would it were even colder! Nay, I will never, absolutely never again lay a sheepskin over my shoulders."

Paulus nodded his head as if to signify assent to his own resolve; but presently he looked graver, for again it seemed to him that he was walking in a wrong path.

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“Aye! Man achieves a handful of good, and forthwith his heart swells with a camel-load of pride. What though my teeth are chattering, I am none the less a most miserable creature. How it tickled my vanity, in spite of all my meditations and scruples, when they came from Raithu and offered me the office of elder; I felt more triumphant the first time I won with the quadriga, but I was scarcely more puffed up with pride then, than I was yesterday. How many who think to follow the Lord strive only to be exalted as He is; they keep well out of the way of His abasement. Thou, O Thou Most High, art my witness that I earnestly seek it, but so soon as the thorns tear my flesh the drops of blood turn to roses, and if I put them aside, others come and still fling garlands in my way. I verily believe that it is as hard here on earth to find pain without pleasure, as pleasure without pain.”

While thus he meditated his teeth chattered with cold, but suddenly his reflections were interrupted, for the dogs set up a loud barking. Phoebicius was knocking at the senator's door.

Paulus rose at once, and approached the gate-way. He could hear every word that was spoken in the court-yard; the deep voice was the senator's, the high sharp tones must be the centurion's.

Phoebicius was demanding his wife back from Petrus, as she had hidden in his house, while Petrus positively declared that Sirona had not crossed his threshold since the morning of the previous day.

In spite of the vehement and indignant tones in which his lodger spoke, the senator remained perfectly calm, and presently went away to ask his wife whether she by chance, while he was asleep, had opened the house to the missing woman. Paulus heard the soldier's steps as he paced up and down the court-yard, but they soon ceased, for Dame Dorothea appeared at the door with her husband, and on her part emphatically declared that she knew nothing of Sirona.

“Your son Polykarp then,” interrupted Phoebicius, “will be better informed of her whereabouts.”

“My son has been since yesterday at Raithu on business,” said Petrus resolutely but evasively; “we expect him home to-day only.”

“It would seem that he has been quick, and has returned much sooner,” retorted Phoebicius. “Our preparations for sacrificing on the mountain were no secret, and the absence of the master of the house is the opportunity for thieves to break in—above all, for lovers who throw roses into their ladies' windows. You Christians boast that you regard the marriage tie as sacred, but it seems to me that you apply the rule only to your fellow-believers. Your sons may make free to take their pleasure among the wives of the heathen; it only remains to be proved whether the heathen husbands will be



trifled with or not. So far as I am concerned, I am inclined for anything rather than jesting. I would have you to understand that I will never let Caesar's uniform, which I wear, be stained by disgrace, and that I am minded to search your house, and if I find my undutiful wife and your son within its walls, I will carry them and you before the judge, and sue for my rights."

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"You will seek in vain," replied Petrus, commanding himself with difficulty. "My word is yea or nay, and I repeat once more no, we harbor neither her nor him. As for Dorothea and myself—neither of us is inclined to interfere in your concerns, but neither will we permit another—be he whom he may—to interfere in ours. This threshold shall never be crossed by any but those to whom I grant permission, or by the emperor's judge, to whom I must yield. You, I forbid to enter. Sirona is not here, and you would do better to seek her elsewhere than to fritter away your time here."

"I do not require your advice!" cried the centurion wrathfully.

"And I," retorted Petrus, "do not feel myself called upon to arrange your matrimonial difficulties. Besides you can get back Sirona without our help, for it is always more difficult to keep a wife safe in the house, than to fetch her back when she has run away."

"You shall learn whom you have to deal with!" threatened the centurion, and he threw a glance round at the slaves, who had collected in the court, and who had been joined by the senator's eldest son. "I shall call my people together at once, and if you have the seducer among you we will intercept his escape."

"Only wait an hour," said Dorothea, now taking up the word, while she gently touched her husband's hand, for his self-control was almost exhausted, "I and you will see Polykarp ride home on his father's horse. Is it only from the roses that my son threw into your wife's window, that you suppose him to be her seducer—she plays so kindly with all his brothers and sisters—or are there other reasons, which move you to insult and hurt us with so heavy an accusation?"

Often when wrathful men threaten to meet with an explosion, like black thunder-clouds, a word from the mouth of a sensible woman gives them pause, and restrains them like a breath of soft wind.

Phoebicius had no mind to listen to any speech from Polykarp's mother, but her question suggested to him for the first time a rapid retrospect of all that had occurred, and he could not conceal from himself that his suspicions rested on weak grounds. And at the same time he now said to himself, that if indeed Sirona had fled into the desert instead of to the senator's house he was wasting time, and letting the start, which she had already gained, increase in a fatal degree.

But few seconds were needed for these reflections, and as he was accustomed when need arose to control himself, he said:

"We must see—some means must be found—" and then without any greeting to his host, he slowly returned to his own house. But he had not reached the door, when he heard hoofs on the road, and Petrus called after him, "Grant us a few minutes longer, for here comes Polykarp, and he can justify himself to you in his own person."

The centurion paused, the senator signed to old Jethro to open the gate; a man was heard to spring from his saddle, but it was an Amalekite—and not Polykarp—who came into the court.

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“What news do you bring?” asked the senator, turning half to the messenger and half to the centurion. “My lord Polykarp, your son,” replied the Amalekite—a dark brown man of ripe years with supple limbs, and a sharp tongue—“sends his greetings to you and to the mistress, and would have you to know that before mid-day he will arrive at home with eight workmen, whom he has engaged in Raithu. Dame Dorothea must be good enough to make ready for them all and to prepare a meal.”

“When did you part from my son?” inquired Petrus.

“Two hours before sundown.”

Petrus heaved a sigh of relief, for he had not till now been perfectly convinced of his son’s innocence; but, far from triumphing or making Phoebicius feel the injustice he had done him, he said kindly—for he felt some sympathy with the Gaul in his misfortune:

“I wish the messenger could also give some news of your wife’s retreat; she found it hard to accommodate herself to the dull life here in the oasis, perhaps she has only disappeared in order to seek a town which may offer more variety to such a beautiful young creature than this quiet spot in the desert.”

Phoebicius waved his hand with a negative movement, implying that he knew better, and said, “I will show you what your nice night-bird left in my nest. It may be that you can tell me to whom it belongs.”

Just as he hastily stepped across the court-yard to his own dwelling Paulus entered by the now open gate; he greeted the senator and his family, and offered Petrus the key of the church.

The sun meanwhile had risen, and the Alexandrian blushed to show himself in Dame Dorothea’s presence in his short and ragged under-garment, which was quite inefficient to cover the still athletic mould of his limbs. Petrus had heard nothing but good of Paulus, and yet he measured him now with no friendly eye, for all that wore the aspect of extravagance repelled his temperate and methodical nature. Paulus was made conscious of what was passing in the senator’s mind when, without vouchsafing a single word, he took the key from his hand. It was not a matter of indifference to him, that this man should think ill of him, and he said, with some embarrassment:

“We do not usually go among people without a sheepskin, but I have lost mine.”

Hardly had he uttered the words, when Phoebicius came back with Hermas’ sheepskin in his hand, and cried out to Petrus:

“This I found on my return home, in our sleeping-room.”

“And when have you ever seen Polykarp in such a mantle?” asked Dorothea.

“When the gods visit the daughters of men,” replied the centurion, “they have always made choice of strange disguises. Why should not a perfumed Alexandrian gentleman transform himself for once into one of those rough fools on the mountain? However, even old Homer sometimes nodded—and I confess that I was in error with regard to your son. I meant no offence, senator! You have lived here longer than I; who can have made me a present of this skin, which still seems to be pretty new—horns and all.”

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Petrus examined and felt the skin, "This is an anchorite's garment," he said; "the penitents on the mountain are all accustomed to wear such."

"It is one of those rascals then that has found his way into my house!" exclaimed the centurion. "I bear Caesar's commission, and I am to exterminate ill vagabonds that trouble the dwellers in the oasis, or travellers in the desert. Thus run the orders which I brought with me from Rome. I will drive the low fellows together like deer for hunting, for they are all rogues and villains, and I shall know how to torture them until I find the right one."

"The emperor will ill-requite you for that," replied Petrus. "They are pious Christians, and you know that Constantine himself—"

"Constantine!" exclaimed the centurion scornfully. "Perhaps he will let himself be baptized, for water can hurt no one, and he cannot, like the great Diocletian, exterminate the masses who run after the crucified miracle-monger, without depopulating the country. Look at these coins; here is the image of Caesar, and what is this on the other side? Is this your Nazarene, or is it the old god, the immortal and invincible sun? And is that man one of your creed, who in Constantinople adores Tyche and the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux? The water he is baptized with to-day he will wipe away to-morrow, and the old gods will be his defenders, if in more peaceful times he maintains them against your superstitions."

"But it will be a good while till then," said Petrus coolly. "For the present, at least, Constantine is the protector of the Christians. I advise you to put your affair into the hands of Bishop Agapitus."

"That he may serve me up a dish of your doctrine, which is bad even for women," said the centurion laughing; "and that I may kiss my enemies' feet? They are a vile rabble up there, I repeat it, and they shall be treated as such till I have found my man. I shall begin the hunt this very day."

"And this very day you may end it, for the sheepskin is mine."

It was Paulus who spoke these words in a loud and decided tone; all eyes were at once turned on him and on the centurion.

Petrus and the slaves had frequently seen the anchorite, but never without a sheepskin similar to that which Phoebeius held in his hand. The anchorite's self-accusation must have appeared incredible, and indeed scarcely possible, to all who knew Paulus and Sirona; and nevertheless no one, not even the senator, doubted it for an instant. Dame Dorothea only shook her head incredulously, and though she could find no explanation for the occurrence, she still could not but say to herself, that this man did not look like a lover, and that Sirona would hardly have forgotten her duty for his sake. She could not

indeed bring herself to believe in Sirona's guilt at all, for she was heartily well disposed towards her; besides—though it, no doubt, was not right—her motherly vanity inclined her to believe that if the handsome young woman had indeed sinned, she would have preferred her fine tall Polykarp—whose roses and flaming glances she blamed in all sincerity—to this shaggy, wild-looking graybeard.

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Quite otherwise thought the centurion. He was quite ready to believe in the anchorite's confession, for the more unworthy the man for whom Sirona had broken faith, the greater seemed her guilt, and the more unpardonable her levity; and to his man's vanity it seemed to him easier—particularly in the presence of such witnesses as Petrus and Dorothea—to bear the fact that his wife should have sought variety and pleasure at any cost, even at that of devoting herself to a ragged beggar, than that she should have given her affections to a younger, handsomer, and worthier man than himself. He had sinned much against her, but all that lay like feathers on his side of the scales, while that which she had done weighed down hers like a load of lead. He began to feel like a man who, in wading through a bog, has gained firm ground with one foot, and all these feelings gave him energy to walk up to the anchorite with a self-control, of which he was not generally master, excepting when on duty at the head of his soldiers.

He approached the Alexandrian with an assumption of dignity and a demeanor which testified to his formerly having taken part in the representations of tragedies in the theatres of great cities. Paulus, on his part, did not retreat by a single step, but looked at him with a smile that alarmed Petrus and the rest of the bystanders. The law put the anchorite absolutely into the power of the outraged husband, but Phoebicius did not seem disposed to avail himself of his rights, and nothing but contempt and loathing were perceptible in his tone, as he said:

“A man who takes hold of a mangy dog in order to punish him, only dirties his hand. The woman who betrayed me for your sake, and you—you dirty beggar—are worthy of each other. I could crush you like a fly that can be destroyed by a blow of my hand if I chose, but my sword is Caesar's, and shall never be soiled by such foul blood as yours; however, the beast shall not have cast off his skin for nothing, it is thick, and so you have only spared me the trouble of tearing it off you before giving you your due. You shall find no lack of blows. Confess where your sweetheart has fled to and they shall be few, but if you are slow to answer they will be many. Lend me that thing there, fellow!”

With these words he took a whip of hippopotamus hide out of a camel-driver's band, went close up to the Alexandrian, and asked: “Where is Sirona?”

“Nay, you may beat me,” said Paulus. “However hard your whip may fall on me, it cannot be heavy enough for my sins; but as to where your wife is hiding, that I really cannot tell you—not even if you were to tear my limbs with pincers instead of stroking me with that wretched thing.”

There was something so genuinely honest in Paulus' voice and tone, that the centurion was inclined to believe him; but it was not his way to let a threatened punishment fail of execution, and this strange beggar should learn by experience that when his hand intended to hit hard, it was far from “stroking.” And Paulus did experience it, without uttering a cry, and without stirring from the spot where he stood.

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When at last Phoebicius dropped his weary arm and breathlessly repeated his question, the ill-used man replied, "I told you before I do not know, and therefore I cannot reveal it."

Up to this moment Petrus, though he had felt strongly impelled to rush to the rescue of his severely handled fellow-believer, had nevertheless allowed the injured husband to have his way, for he seemed disposed to act with unusual mildness, and the Alexandrian to be worthy of all punishment; but at this point Dorothea's request would not have been needed to prompt him to interfere.

He went up to the centurion, and said to him in an undertone, "You have given the evil-doer his due, and if you desire that he should undergo a severer punishment than you can inflict, carry the matter—I say once more—before the bishop. You will gain nothing more here. Take my word for it, I know the man and his fellow-men; he actually knows nothing of where your wife is hiding, and you are only wasting the time and strength which you would do better to save, in order to search for Sirona. I fancy she will have tried to reach the sea, and to get to Egypt or possibly to Alexandria; and there—you know what the Greek city is—she will fall into utter ruin."

"And so," laughed the Gaul, "find what she seeks—variety, and every kind of pleasure. For a young thing like that, who loves amusement, there is no pleasant occupation but vice. But I will spoil her game; you are right, it is not well to give her too long a start. If she has found the road to the sea, she may already—Hey, here Talib!" He beckoned to Polykarp's Amalekite messenger. "You have just come from Raithu; did you meet a flying woman on the way, with yellow hair and a white face?"

The Amalekite, a free man with sharp eyes, who was highly esteemed in the senator's house, and even by Phoebicius himself, as a trustworthy and steady man, had expected this question, and eagerly replied:

"At two stadia beyond el Heswe I met a large caravan from Petra, which rested yesterday in the oasis here; a woman, such as you describe, was running with it. When I heard what had happened here I wanted to speak, but who listens to a cricket while it thunders?"

"Had she a lame greyhound with her?" asked Phoebicius, full of expectation.

"She carried something in her arms," answered the Amalekite. "In the moonlight I took it for a baby. My brother, who was escorting the caravan, told me the lady was no doubt running away, for she had paid the charge for the escort not in ready money, but with a gold signet-ring."

The Gaul remembered a certain gold ring with a finely carved onyx, which long years ago he had taken from Glycera's finger, for she had another one like it, and which he had given to Sirona on the day of their marriage.

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"It is strange!" thought he, "what we give to women to bind them to us they use as weapons to turn against us, be it to please some other man, or to smooth the path by which they escape from us. It was with a bracelet of Glycera's that I paid the captain of the ship that brought us to Alexandria; but the soft-hearted fool, whose dove flew after me, and I are men of a different stamp; I will follow my flown bird, and catch it again." He spoke the last words aloud, and then desired one of the senator's slaves to give his mule a good feed and drink, for his own groom, and the superior decurion who during his absence must take his place, were also worshippers of Mithras, and had not yet returned from the mountain.

Phoebicius did not doubt that the woman who had joined the caravan—which he himself had seen yesterday—was his fugitive wife, and he knew that his delay might have reduced his earnest wish to overtake her and punish her to the remotest probability; but he was a Roman soldier, and would rather have laid violent hands on himself than have left his post without a deputy. When at last his fellow-worshippers came from their sacrifice and worship of the rising sun, his preparations for his long journey were completed.

Phoebicius carefully impressed on the decurion all he had to do during his absence, and how he was to conduct himself; then he delivered the key of his house into Petrus' keeping as well as the black slave-woman, who wept loudly and passionately over the flight of her mistress; he requested the senator to bring the anchorite's misdeed to the knowledge of the bishop, and then, guided by the Amalekite Talib, who rode before him on his dromedary, he trotted hastily away in pursuit of the caravan, so as to reach the sea, if possible, before its embarkation.

As the hoofs of the mule sounded fainter and fainter in the distance, Paulus also quitted the senator's courtyard; Dorothea pointed after him as he walked towards the mountain. "In truth, husband," said she, "this has been a strange morning; everything that has occurred looks as clear as day, and yet I cannot understand it all. My heart aches when I think what may happen to the wretched Sirona if her enraged husband overtakes her. It seems to me that there are two sorts of marriage; one was instituted by the most loving of the angels, nay, by the All-merciful Himself, but the other it is not to be thought of! How can those two live together for the future? And that under our roof! Their closed house looks to me as though ruined and burnt-out, and we have already seen the nettles spring up which grow everywhere among the ruins of human dwellings."

CHAPTER XII.

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The path of every star is fixed and limited, every plant bears flowers and fruit which in form and color exactly resemble their kind, and in all the fundamental characteristics of their qualities and dispositions, of their instinctive bent and external impulse, all animals of the same species resemble each other; thus, the hunter who knows the red-deer in his father's forest, may know in every forest on earth how the stag will behave in any given case. The better a genus is fitted for variability in the conformation of its individuals, the higher is the rank it is entitled to hold in the graduated series of creatures capable of development; and it is precisely that wonderful many-sidedness of his inner life, and of its outward manifestation, which assigns to man his superiority over all other animated beings.

Some few of our qualities and activities can be fitly symbolized in allegorical fashion by animals; thus, courage finds an emblem in the lion, gentleness in the dove, but the perfect human form has satisfied a thousand generations, and will satisfy a thousand more, when we desire to reduce the divinity to a sensible image, for, in truth, our heart is as surely capable of comprehending "God in us,"—that is in our feelings— as our intellect is capable of comprehending His outward manifestation in the universe.

Every characteristic of every finite being is to be found again in man, and no characteristic that we can attribute to the Most High is foreign to our own soul, which, in like manner, is infinite and immeasurable, for it can extend its investigating feelers to the very utmost boundary of space and time. Hence, the roads which are open to the soul, are numberless as those of the divinity. Often they seem strange, but the initiated very well know that these roads are in accordance to fixed laws, and that even the most exceptional emotions of the soul may be traced back to causes which were capable of giving rise to them and to no others.

Blows hurt, disgrace is a burden, and unjust punishment embitters the heart, but Paulus' soul had sought and found a way to which these simple propositions did not apply.

He had been ill-used and contemned, and, though perfectly innocent, ere he left the oasis he was condemned to the severest penance. As soon as the bishop had heard from Petrus of all that had happened in his house, he had sent for Paulus, and as he could answer nothing to the accusation, he had expelled him from his flock—to which the anchorites belonged— forbidden him to visit the church on week-days, and declared that this his sentence should be publicly proclaimed before the assembled congregation of the believers.

And how did this affect Paulus as he climbed the mountain, lonely and proscribed?

A fisherman from the little seaport of Pharan, who met him half-way and exchanged a greeting with him, thought to himself as he looked after him, "The great graybeard looks as happy as if he had found a treasure." Then he walked on into the valley with his

scaly wares, reminded, as he went, of his son's expression of face when his wife bore him his first little one.

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Near the watch-tower at the edge of the defile, a party of anchorites were piling some stones together. They had already heard of the bishop's sentence on Paulus, the sinner, and they gave him no greeting. He observed it and was silent, but when they could no longer see him he laughed to himself and muttered, while he rubbed a weal that the centurion's whip had left upon his back, "If they think that a Gaul's cudgel has a pleasant flavor they are mistaken, however I would not exchange it for a skin of Anthyllan wine; and if they could only know that at least one of the stripes which torments me is due to each one of themselves, they would be surprised! But away with pride! How they spat on Thee, Jesus my Lord, and who am I, and how mildly have they dealt with me, when I for once have taken on my back another's stripes. Not a drop of blood was drawn! I wish the old man had hit harder!"

He walked cheerfully forward, and his mind recurred to the centurion's speech that he could if he list, "tread him down like a worm," and he laughed again softly, for he was quite aware that he was ten times as strong as Phoebicius, and formerly he had overthrown the braggart Arkesilaos of Kyrene and his cousin, the tall Xenophanes, both at once in the sand of the Palaestra. Then he thought of Hermas, of his sweet dead mother, and of his father, and—which was the most comforting thought of all—of how he had spared the old man this bitter sorrow.

On his path there grew a little plant with a reddish blossom. In years he had never looked at a flower or, at any rate, had never wished to possess one; to-day he stooped down over the blossom that graced the rock, meaning to pluck it. But he did not carry out his intention, for before he had laid his hand upon it, he reflected:

"To whom could I offer it? And perhaps the flowers themselves rejoice in the light, and in the silent life that is in their roots. How tightly it clings to the rock. Farther away from the road flowers of even greater beauty blow, seen by no mortal eye; they deck themselves in beauty for no one but for their Creator, and because they rejoice in themselves. I too will withdraw from the highways of mankind; let them accuse me! So long as I live at peace with myself and my God I ask nothing of any one. He that abases himself—aye, he that abases himself!—My hour too shall come, and above and beyond this life I shall see them all once more; Petrus and Dorothea, Agapitus and the brethren who now refuse to receive me, and then, when my Saviour himself beckons me to Him, they will see me as I am, and hasten to me and greet me with double kindness."

He looked up, proud and rejoicing as he thought thus, and painted to himself the joys of Paradise, to which this day he had earned an assured claim. He never took longer and swifter steps than when his mind was occupied with such meditations, and when he reached Stephanus' cave he thought the way from the oasis to the heights had been shorter than usual.

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He found the sick man in great anxiety, for he had waited until now for his son in vain, and feared that Hermas had met with some accident—or had abandoned him, and fled out into the world. Paulus soothed him with gentle words, and told him of the errand on which he had sent the lad to the farther coast of the sea.

We are never better disposed to be satisfied with even bad news than when we have expected it to be much worse; so Stephanus listened to his friend's explanation quite calmly, and with signs of approval. He could no longer conceal from himself that Hermas was not ripe for the life of an anchorite, and since he had learned that his unhappy wife—whom he had so long given up for lost—had died a Christian, he found that he could reconcile his thoughts to relinquishing the boy to the world. He had devoted himself and his son to a life of penance, hoping and striving that so Glycera's soul might be snatched from damnation, and now he knew that she herself had earned her title to Heaven.

"When will he come home again?" he asked Paulus.

"In five or six days," was the answer. "Ali, the fisherman—out of whose foot I took a thorn some time since—informed me secretly, as I was going to church yesterday, that the Blemmyes are gathering behind the sulphur-mountains; when they have withdrawn, it will be high time to send Hermas to Alexandria. My brother is still alive, and for my sake he will receive him as a blood-relation, for he too has been baptized."

"He may attend the school of catechumens in the metropolis, and if he— if he—"

"That we shall see," interrupted Paulus. "For the present it comes to this, we must let him go from hence, and leave him to seek out his own way. You fancy that there may be in heaven a place of glory for such as have never been overcome, and you would fain have seen Hermas among them. It reminds me of the physician of Corinth, who boasted that he was cleverer than any of his colleagues, for that not one of his patients had ever died. And the man was right, for neither man nor beast had ever trusted to his healing arts. Let Hermas try his young strength, and even if he be no priest, but a valiant warrior like his forefathers, even so he may honestly serve God. But it will be a long time before all this comes to pass. So long as he is away I will attend on you—you still have some water in your jar?"

"It has twice been filled for me," said the old man. "The brown shepherdess, who so often waters her goats at our spring, came to me the first thing in the morning and again about two hours ago; she asked after Hermas, and then offered of her own accord to fetch water for me so long as he was away. She is as timid as a bird, and flew off as soon as she had set down the jug."

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“She belongs to Petrus and cannot leave her goats for long,” said Paulus. “Now I will go and find you some herbs for a relish; there will be no more wine in the first place. Look me in the face—for how great a sinner now do you take me? Think the very worst of me, and yet perhaps you will hear worse said of me. But here come two men. Stay! one is Hilarion, one of the bishop’s acolytes, and the other is Pachomius the Memphite, who lately came to the mountain. They are coming up here, and the Egyptian is carrying a small jar. I would it might hold some more wine to keep up your strength.”

The two friends had not long to remain in ignorance of their visitor’s purpose. So soon as they reached Stephanus’ cave, both turned their backs on Paulus with conspicuously marked intention; nay the acolyte signed his brow with the cross, as if he thought it necessary to protect himself against evil influences.

The Alexandrian understood; he drew back and was silent, while Hilarion explained to the sick man that Paulus was guilty of grave sins, and that, until he had done full penance, he must remain excluded as a rotten sheep from the bishop’s flock, as well as interdicted from waiting on a pious Christian.

“We know from Petrus,” the speaker went on, “that your son, father, has been sent across the sea, and as you still need waiting on, Agapitus sends you by me his blessing and this strengthening wine; this youth too will stay by you, and provide you with all necessities until Hermas comes home.”

With these words he gave the wine-jar to the old man, who looked in astonishment from him to Paulus, who felt indeed cut to the heart when the bishop’s messenger turned to him for an instant, and with the cry, “Get thee out from among us!” disappeared. How many kindly ties, how many services willingly rendered and affectionately accepted were swept away by these words—but Paulus obeyed at once. He went up to his sick friend, their eyes met and each could see that the eyes of the other were dimmed with tears.

“Paulus!” cried the old man, stretching out both his hands to his departing friend, whom he felt he could forgive whatever his guilt; but the Alexandrian did not take them, but turned away, and, without looking back, hastily went up the mountain to a pathless spot, and then on towards the valley—onwards and still onwards, till he was brought to a pause by the steep declivity of the hollow way which led southwards from the mountains into the oasis.

The sun stood high and it was burning hot. Streaming with sweat and panting for breath he leaned against the glowing porphyry wall behind him, hid his face in his hands and strove to collect himself, to think, to pray—for a long time in vain; for instead of joy in the suffering which he had taken upon himself, the grief of isolation weighed upon his heart, and the lamentable cry of the old man had left a warning echo in his soul, and roused doubts of the righteousness of a deed, by which even the best and purest had been

deceived, and led into injustice towards him. His heart was breaking with anguish and grief, but when at last he returned to the consciousness of his sufferings physical and mental, he began to recover his courage, and even smiled as he murmured to himself:

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"It is well, it is well—the more I suffer the more surely shall I find grace. And besides, if the old man had seen Hermas go through what I have experienced it would undoubtedly have killed him. Certainly I wish it could have been done without—without—aye, it is even so—without deceit; even when I was a heathen I was truthful and held a lie, whether in myself or in another, in as deep horror as father Abraham held murder, and yet when the Lord required him, he led his son Isaac to the slaughter. And Moses when he beat the overseer—and Elias, and Deborah, and Judith. I have taken upon myself no less than they, but my lie will surely be forgiven me, if it is not reckoned against them that they shed blood."

These and such reflections restored Paulus to equanimity and to satisfaction with his conduct, and he began to consider, whether he should return to his old cave and the neighborhood of Stephanus, or seek for a new abode. He decided on the latter course; but first he must find fresh water and some sort of nourishment; for his mouth and tongue were quite parched.

Lower down in the valley sprang a brooklet of which he knew, and hard by it grew various herbs and roots, with which he had often allayed his hunger. He followed the declivity to its base, then turning to the left, he crossed a small table land, which was easily accessible from the gorge, but which on the side of the oasis formed a perpendicular cliff many fathoms deep. Between it and the main mass of the mountain rose numerous single peaks, like a camp of granite tents, or a wildly tossing sea suddenly turned to stone; behind these blocks ran the streamlet, which he found after a short search.

Perfectly refreshed, and with renewed resolve to bear the worst with patience, he returned to the plateau, and from the edge of the precipice he gazed down into the desert gorge that stretched away far below his feet, and in whose deepest and remotest hollow the palmgroves and tamarisk-thickets of the oasis showed as a sharply defined mass of green, like a luxuriant wreath flung upon a bier. The whitewashed roofs of the little town of Pharan shone brightly among the branches and clumps of verdure, and above them all rose the new church, which he was now forbidden to enter. For a moment the thought was keenly painful that he was excluded from the devotions of the community, from the Lord's supper and from congregational prayer, but then he asked, was not every block of stone on the mountain an altar—was not the blue sky above a thousand times wider, and more splendid than the mightiest dome raised by the hand of man, not even excepting the vaulted roof of the Serapeum at Alexandria, and he remembered the "Amen" of the stones, that had rung out after the preaching of the blind man. By this time he had quite recovered himself, and he went towards the cliff in order to find a cavern that he knew of, and that was empty—for its gray-headed inhabitant had died some weeks since. "Verily," thought he, "it seems to me that I am by no means weighed down by the burden of my disgrace, but, on the contrary, lifted up. Here at least I need not cast down my eyes, for I am alone with my God, and in his presence I feel I need not be ashamed."

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Thus meditating, he pressed on through a narrow space, which divided two huge masses of porphyry, but suddenly he stood still, for he heard the barking of a dog in his immediate neighborhood, and a few minutes after a greyhound rushed towards him—now indignantly flying at him, and now timidly retreating—while it carefully held up one leg, which was wrapped in a many-colored bandage.

Paulus recollected the enquiry which Phoebicius had addressed to the Amalekite as to a greyhound, and he immediately guessed that the Gaul's runaway wife must be not far off. His heart beat more quickly, and although he did not immediately know how he should meet the disloyal wife, he felt himself impelled to go to seek her. Without delay he followed the way by which the dog had come, and soon caught sight of a light garment, which vanished behind the nearest rock, and then behind a farther, and yet a farther one.

At last he came up with the fleeing woman. She was standing at the very edge of a precipice, that rose high and sheer above the abyss—a strange and fearful sight; her long golden hair had got tangled, and waved over her bosom and shoulders, half plaited, half undone. Only one foot was firm on the ground; the other—with its thin sandal all torn by the sharp stones—was stretched out over the abyss, ready for the next fatal step. At the next instant she might disappear over the cliff, for though with her right hand she held on to a point of rock, Paulus could see that the boulder had no connection with the rock on which she stood, and rocked too and fro.

She hung over the edge of the chasm like a sleepwalker, or a possessed creature pursued by demons, and at the same time her eyes glistened with such wild madness, and she drew her breath with such feverish rapidity that Paulus, who had come close up to her, involuntarily drew back. He saw that her lips moved, and though he could not understand what she said, he felt that her voiceless utterance was to warn him back.

What should he do? If he hurried forward to save her by a hasty grip, and if this manoeuvre failed, she would fling herself irredeemably into the abyss: if he left her to herself, the stone to which she clung would get looser and looser, and as soon as it fell she would certainly fall too. He had once heard it said, that sleep-walkers always threw themselves down when they heard their names spoken; this statement now recurred to his mind, and he forbore from calling out to her.

Once more the unhappy woman waved him off; his very heart stopped beating, for her movements were wild and vehement, and he could see that the stone which she was holding on by shifted its place. He understood nothing of all the words which she tried to say—for her voice, which only yesterday had been so sweet, to-day was inaudibly hoarse—except the one name “Phoebicius,” and he felt no doubt that she clung to the stone over the abyss, so that,

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like the mountain-goat when it sees itself surprised by the hunter, she might fling herself into the depth below rather than be taken by her pursuer. Paulus saw in her neither her guilt nor her beauty, but only a child of man trembling on the brink of a fearful danger whom he must save from death at any cost; and the thought that he was at any rate not a spy sent in pursuit of her by her husband, suggested to him the first words which he found courage to address to the desperate woman. They were simple words enough, but they were spoken in a tone which fully expressed the childlike amiability of his warm heart, and the Alexandrian, who had been brought up in the most approved school of the city of orators, involuntarily uttered his words in the admirably rich and soft chest voice, which he so well knew how to use.

“Be thankful,” said he, “poor dear woman—I have found you in a fortunate hour. I am Paulus, Hermas’ best friend, and I would willingly serve you in your sore need. No danger is now threatening you, for Phoebicius is seeking you on a wrong road; you may trust me. Look at me! I do not look as if I could betray a poor erring woman. But you are standing on a spot, where I would rather see my enemy than you; lay your hand confidently in mine—it is no longer white and slender, but it is strong and honest—grant me this request and you will never rue it! See, place your foot here, and take care how you leave go of the rock there. You know not how suspiciously it shook its head over your strange confidence in it. Take care! there—your support has rolled over into the abyss! how it crashes and splits. It has reached the bottom, smashed into a thousand pieces, and I am thankful that you preferred to follow me rather than that false support.” While Paulus was speaking he had gone up to Sirona, as a girl whose bird has escaped from its cage, and who creeps up to it with timid care in the hope of recapturing it; he offered her his hand, and as soon as he felt hers in his grasp, he had carefully rescued her from her fearful position, and had led her down to a secure footing on the plateau. So long as she followed him unresistingly he led her on towards the mountain—without aim or fixed destination—but away, away from the abyss.

She paused by a square block of diorite, and Paulus, who had not failed to observe how heavy her steps were, desired her to sit down; he pushed up a flag of stone, which he propped with smaller ones, so that Sirona might not lack a support for her weary back. When he had accomplished this, Sirona leaned back against the stone, and something of dawning satisfaction was audible in the soft sigh, which was the first sound that had escaped her tightly closed lips since her rescue. Paulus smiled at her encouragingly, and said, “Now rest a little, I see what you want; one cannot defy the heat of the sun for a whole day with impunity.”

Sirona nodded, pointed to her mouth, and implored wearily and very softly for “water, a little water.” Paulus struck his hand against his forehead, and cried eagerly, “Directly—I will bring you a fresh draught. In a few minutes I will be back again.”

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Sirona looked after him as he hastened away. Her gaze became more and more staring and glazed, and she felt as if the rock, on which she was sitting, were changing into the ship which had brought her from Massilia to Ostia. Every heaving motion of the vessel, which had made her so giddy as it danced over the shifting waves, she now distinctly felt again, and at last it seemed as if a whirlpool had seized the ship, and was whirling it round faster and faster in a circle. She closed her eyes, felt vaguely and in vain in the air for some holdfast, her head fell powerless on one side, and before her cheek sank upon her shoulder she uttered one feeble cry of distress, for she felt as if all her limbs were dropping from her body, as leaves in autumn fall from the boughs, and she fell back unconscious on the stony couch which Paulus had constructed for her.

It was the first swoon that Sirona, with her sound physical and mental powers, had ever experienced; but the strongest of her sex would have been overcome by the excitement, the efforts, the privations, and the sufferings which had that day befallen the unfortunate fair one.

At first she had fled without any plan out into the night and up the mountain; the moon lighted her on her way, and for fully an hour she continued her upward road without any rest. Then she heard the voices of travellers who were coming towards her, and she left the beaten road and tried to get away from them, for she feared that her greyhound, which she still carried on her arm, would betray her by barking, or if they heard it whining, and saw it limp. At last she had sunk down on a stone, and had reflected on all the events of the last few hours, and on what she had to do next. She could look back dreamily on the past, and build castles in the air in a blue-skyed future-this was easy enough; but she did not find it easy to reflect with due deliberation, and to think in earnest. Only one thing was perfectly clear to her: she would rather starve and die of thirst, and shame, and misery-nay, she would rather be the instrument of her own death, than return to her husband. She knew that she must in the first instance expect ill-usage, scorn, and imprisonment in a dark room at the Gaul's hands; but all that seemed to her far more endurable than the tenderness with which he from time to time approached her. When she thought of that, she shuddered and clenched her white teeth, and doubled her fists so tightly that her nails cut the flesh. But what was she to do? If Hermas were to meet her? And yet what help could she look for from him, for what was he but a mere lad, and the thought of linking her life to his, if only for a day, appeared to her foolish and ridiculous.

Certainly she felt no inclination to repent or to blame herself; still it had been a great folly on her part to call him into the house for the sake of amusing herself with him.

Then she recollected the severe punishment she had once suffered, because, when she was still quite little, and without meaning any harm, she had taken her father's water-clock to pieces, and had spoiled it.

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She felt that she was very superior to Hermas, and her position was now too grave a one for her to feel inclined to play any more. She thought indeed of Petrus and Dorothea, but she could only reach them by going back to the oasis, and then she feared to be discovered by Phoebicius.

If Polykarp now could only meet her on his way back from Raithu; but the road she had just quitted did not lead from thence, but to the gate-way that lay more to the southwards.

The senator's son loved her—of that she was sure, for no one else had ever looked into her eyes with such deep delight, or such tender affection; and he was no inexperienced boy, but a right earnest man, whose busy and useful life now appeared to her in a quite different light to that in which she had seen it formerly. How willingly now would she have allowed herself to be supported and guided by Polykarp! But how could she reach him? No—even from him there was nothing to be expected; she must rely upon her own strength, and she decided that so soon as the morning should blush, and the sun begin to mount in the cloudless sky, she would keep herself concealed during the day, among the mountains, and then as evening came on, she would go down to the sea, and endeavor to get on board a vessel to Klysma and thence reach Alexandria. She wore a ring with a finely cut onyx on her finger, elegant ear-rings in her ears, and on her left arm a bracelet. These jewels were of virgin gold, and besides these she had with her a few silver coins and one large gold piece, that her father had given her as token out of his small store, when she had quitted him for Rome, and that she had hitherto preserved as carefully as if it were a talisman.

She pressed the token, which was sewn into a little bag, to her lips, and thought of her paternal home, and her brothers and sisters.

Meanwhile the sun mounted higher and higher: she wandered from rock to rock in search of a shady spot and a spring of water, but none was to be found, and she was tormented with violent thirst and aching hunger. By mid-day the strips of shade too had vanished, where she had found shelter from the rays of the sun, which now beat down unmercifully on her unprotected head. Her forehead and neck began to tingle violently, and she fled before the burning beams like a soldier before the shafts of his pursuer. Behind the rocks which hemmed in the plateau on which Paulus met her, at last, when she was quite exhausted, she found a shady resting-place. The greyhound lay panting in her lap, and held up its broken paw, which she had carefully bound up in the morning when she had first sat down to rest, with a strip of stuff that she had torn with the help of her teeth from her under-garment. She now bound it up afresh, and nursed the little creature, caressing it like an infant. The dog was as wretched and suffering as herself, and besides it was the only being that, in spite of her helplessness, she could cherish and

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be dear to. But ere long she lost the power even to speak caressing words or to stir a hand to stroke the dog. It slipped off her lap and limped away, while she sat staring blankly before her, and at last forgot her sufferings in an uneasy slumber, till she was roused by lambe's barking and the Alexandrian's footstep. Almost half-dead, her mouth parched and brain on fire, while her thoughts whirled in confusion, she believed that Phoebicius had found her track, and was come to seize her. She had already noted the deep precipice to the edge of which she now fled, fully resolved to fling herself over into the depths below, rather than to surrender herself prisoner.

Paulus had rescued her from the fall, but now—as he came up to her with two pieces of stone which were slightly hollowed, so that he had been able to bring some fresh water in them, and which he held level with great difficulty, walking with the greatest care—he thought that inexorable death had only too soon returned to claim the victim he had snatched from him, for Sirona's head hung down upon her breast, her face was sunk towards her lap, and at the back of her head, where her abundant hair parted into two flowing tresses, Paulus observed on the snowy neck of the insensible woman a red spot which the sun must have burnt there.

His whole soul was full of compassion for the young, fair, and unhappy creature, and, while he took hold of her chin, which had sunk on her bosom, lifted her white face, and moistened her forehead and lips with water, he softly prayed for her salvation.

The shallow cavity of the stones only offered room for a very small quantity of the refreshing moisture, and so he was obliged to return several times to the spring. While he was away the dog remained by his mistress, and would now lick her hand, now put his sharp little nose close up to her mouth, and examine her with an anxious expression, as if to ascertain her state of health.

When Paulus had gone the first time to fetch some water for Sirona he had found the dog by the side of the spring, and he could not help thinking, "The unreasoning brute has found the water without a guide while his mistress is dying of thirst. Which is the wiser—the man or the brute?" The little dog on his part strove to merit the anchorite's good feelings towards him, for, though at first he had barked at him, he now was very friendly to him, and looked him in the face from time to time as though to ask, "Do you think she will recover?"

Paulus was fond of animals, and understood the little dog's language. When Sirona's lips began to move and to recover their rosy color, he stroked lambe's smooth sharp head, and said, as he held a leaf that he had curled up to hold some water to Sirona's lips, "Look, little fellow, how she begins to enjoy it! A little more of this, and again a little more. She smacks her lips as if I were giving her sweet Falernian. I will go and fill the stone again; you stop here

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with her, I shall be back again directly, but before I return she will have opened her eyes; you are pleasanter to look upon than a shaggy old graybeard, and she will be better pleased to see you than me when she awakes.” Paulus’ prognosis was justified, for when he returned to Sirona with a fresh supply of water she was sitting upright; she rubbed her open eyes, stretched her limbs, clasped the greyhound in both arms, and burst into a violent flood of tears.

The Alexandrian stood aside motionless, so as not to disturb her, thinking to himself:

“These tears will wash away a large part of her suffering from her soul.”

When at last she was calmer, and began to dry her eyes, he went up to her, offered her the stone cup of water, and spoke to her kindly. She drank with eager satisfaction, and ate the last bit of bread that he could find in the pocket of his garment, soaking it in the water. She thanked him with the childlike sweetness that was peculiar to her, and then tried to rise, and willingly allowed him to support her. She was still very weary, and her head ached, but she could stand and walk.

As soon as Paulus had satisfied himself that she had no symptoms Of fever, he said, “Now, for to-day, you want nothing more but a warm mess of food, and a bed sheltered from the night-chill; I will provide both. You sit down here; the rocks are already throwing long shadows, and before the sun disappears behind the mountain I will return. While I am away, your four-footed companion here will while away the time.”

He hastened down to the spring with quick steps; close to it was the abandoned cave which he had counted on inhabiting instead of his former dwelling. He found it after a short search, and in it, to his great joy, a well preserved bed of dried plants, which he soon shook up and relaid, a hearth, and wood proper for producing fire by friction, a water-jar, and in a cellar-like hole, whose opening was covered with stones and so concealed from any but a practised eye, there were some cakes of hard bread, and several pots. In one of these were some good dates, in another gleamed some white meal, a third was half full of sesame-oil, and a fourth held some salt.

“How lucky it is,” muttered the anchorite, as he quitted the cave, “that the old anchorite was such a glutton.”

By the time he returned to Sirona, the sun was going down.

There was something in the nature and demeanor of Paulus, which made all distrust of him impossible, and Sirona was ready to follow him, but she felt so weak that she could scarcely support herself on her feet.

“I feel,” she said, “as if I were a little child, and must begin again to learn to walk.”

“Then let me be your nurse. I knew a Spartan dame once, who had a beard almost as rough as mine. Lean confidently on me, and before we go down the slope, we will go up and down the level here two or three times.” She took his arm, and he led her slowly up and down.

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It vividly recalled a picture of the days of his youth, and he remembered a day when his sister, who was recovering from a severe attack of fever, was first allowed to go out into the open air. She had gone out, clinging to his arm into the peristyle of his father's house; as he walked backward and forwards with poor, weary, abandoned Sirona, his neglected figure seemed by degrees to assume the noble aspect of a high-born Greek; and instead of the rough, rocky soil, he felt as if he were treading the beautiful mosaic pavement of his father's court. Paulus was Menander again, and if there was little in the presence of the recluse, which could recall his identity with the old man he had trodden down, the despised anchorite felt, while the expelled and sinful woman leaned on his arm, the same proud sense of succoring a woman, as when he was the most distinguished youth of a metropolis, and when he had led forward the master's much courted daughter in the midst of a shouting troop of slaves.

Sirona had to remind Paulus that night was coming on, and was startled, when the hermit removed her hand from his arm with ungentle haste, and called to her to follow him with a roughness that was quite new to him. She obeyed, and wherever it was necessary to climb over the rocks, he supported and lifted her, but he only spoke when she addressed him.

When they had reached their destination, he showed her the bed, and begged her to keep awake, till he should have prepared a dish of warm food for her, and he shortly brought her a simple supper, and wished her a good night's rest, after she had taken it.

Sirona shared the bread and the salted meal-porridge with her dog, and then lay down on the couch, where she sank at once into a deep, dreamless sleep, while Paulus passed the night sitting by the hearth.

He strove to banish sleep by constant prayer, but fatigue frequently overcame him, and he could not help thinking of the Gaulish lady, and of the many things, which if only he were still the rich Menander, he would procure in Alexandria for her and for her comfort. Not one prayer could he bring to its due conclusion, for either his eyes closed before he came to the "Amen," or else worldly images crowded round him, and forced him to begin his devotions again from the beginning, when he had succeeded in recollecting himself. In this half-somnolent state he obtained not one moment of inward collectedness, of quiet reflection; not even when he gazed up at the starry heavens, or looked down on the oasis, veiled in night, where many others like himself were deserted by sleep. Which of the citizens could it be that was watching by that light which he saw glimmering down there in unwonted brightness?—till he himself, overpowered by fatigue, fell asleep.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Overlooks his own fault in his feeling of the judge's injustice

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