

Serapis — Volume 03 eBook

Serapis — Volume 03 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER XI.

Agne's flight remained unperceived for some little time, for every member of the merchant's household was at the moment intent on some personal interest. When Karnis and Orpheus had set out Gorgo was left with her grandmother and it was not till some little time after that she went out into the colonade on the garden side of the house, whence she had a view over the park and the shore as far as the ship-yard. There, leaning against the shaft of a pillar, under the shade of the blossoming shrubs, she stood gazing thoughtfully to the southward.

She was dreaming of the past, of her childhood's joys and privations. Fate had bereft her of a mother's love, that sun of life's spring. Below her, in a splendid mausoleum of purple porphyry, lay the mortal remains of the beautiful woman who had given her birth, and who had been snatched away before she could give her infant a first caress. But all round the solemn monument gardens bloomed in the sunshine, and on the further side of the wall covered with creepers, was the ship-yard, the scene of numberless delightful games. She sighed as she looked at the tall hulks, and watched for the man who, from her earliest girlhood, had owned her heart, whose image was inseparable from every thing of joy and beauty that she had ever known, and every grief her young soul had suffered under.

Constantine, the younger son of Clemens the shipbuilder, had been her brothers' companion and closest friend. He had proved himself their superior in talents and gifts, and in all their games had been the recognized leader. While still a tiny thing she would always be at their heels, and Constantine had never failed to be patient with her, or to help and protect her, and then came a time when the lads were all eager to win her sympathy for their games and undertakings. When her grandmother read in the stars that some evil influences were to cross the path of Gorgo's planet, the girl was carefully kept in the house; at other times she was free to go with the boys in the garden, on the lake or to the ship-yard. There the happy playmates built houses or boats; there, in a separate room, old Melampus modelled figure-heads for the finished vessels, and he would supply them with clay and let them model too. Constantine was an apt pupil, and Gorgo would sit quiet while he took her likeness, till, out of twenty images that he had made of her, several were really very like. Melampus declared that his young master might be a very distinguished sculptor if only he were the son of poor parents, and Gorgo's father appreciated his talent and was pleased when the boy attempted to copy the beautiful busts and statues of which the house was full; but to his parents, and especially his mother, his artistic proclivities were an offence. He himself, indeed, never seriously thought of devoting himself to such a heathenish occupation,



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for he was deeply penetrated by the Christian sentiments of his family, and he had even succeeded in inflaming the sons of Porphyrius, who had been baptized at an early age, with zeal for their faith. The merchant perceived this and submitted in silence, for the boys must be and remain Christians in consequence of the edict referring to wills; but the necessity for confessing a creed which was hateful to him was so painful and repulsive to a nature which, though naturally magnanimous was not very steadfast, that he was anxious to spare his sons the same experience, and allowed them to accompany Constantine to church and to wear blue—the badge of the Christians—at races and public games, with a shrug of silent consent.

With Gorgo it was different. She was a woman and need wear no colors; and her enthusiasm for the old gods and Greek taste and prejudices were the delight of her father. She was the pride of his life, and as he heard his own convictions echoed in her childish prattle, and later in her conversation and exquisite singing, he was grateful to his mother and to his friend Olympius who had implanted and cherished these feelings in his daughter. Constantine's endeavors to show her the beauty of his creed and to win her to Christianity were entirely futile; and the older they grew, and the less they agreed, the worse could each endure the dissent of the other.

An early and passionate affection attracted the young man to his charming playfellow; the more ardently he cherished his faith the more fervently did he desire to win her for his wife. But Olympius' fair pupil was not easy of conquest; nay, he was not unfrequently hard beset by her questions and arguments, and while, to her, the fight for a creed was no more than an amusing wrestling match, in which to display her strength, to him it was a matter in which his heart was engaged.

Damia and Porphyrius took a vain pleasure in their eager discussions, and clapped with delight, as though it were a game of skill, when Gorgo laughingly checkmated her excited opponent with some unanswerable argument.

But there came a day when Constantine discovered that his eager defence of that which to him was high and holy, was, to his hearers, no more than a subject of mockery, and henceforth the lad, now fast growing to manhood, kept away from the merchant's house. Still, Gorgo could always win him back again, and sometimes, when they were alone together, the old strife would be renewed, and more seriously and bitterly than of old. But while he loved her, she also loved him, and when he had so far mastered himself as to remain away for any length of time she wore herself out with longing to see him. They felt that they belonged to each other, but they also felt that an insuperable gulf yawned between them, and that whenever they attempted to clasp hands across the abyss a mysterious and irresistible impulse drove them to open it wider, and to dig it deeper by fresh discussions, till at last Constantine could not endure that she, of all people, should mock at his Holy of Holies and drag it in the dust.



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He must go—he must leave Gorgo, quit Alexandria, cost what it might. The travellers' tales that he had heard from the captains of trading-vessels and ships of war who frequented his father's house had filled him with a love of danger and enterprise, and a desire to see distant lands and foreign peoples. His father's business, for which he was intended, did not attract him. Away—away—he would go away; and a happy coincidence opened a path for him.

Porphyrius had taken him one day on some errand to Canopus; the elder man had gone in his chariot, his two sons and Constantine escorting him on horseback. At the city-gates they met Romanus, the general in command of the Imperial army, with his staff of officers, and he, drawing rein by the great merchant's carriage, had asked him, pointing to Constantine, whether that were his son.

“No,” replied Porphyrius, “but I wish he were.” At these words the ship-master's son colored deeply, while Romanus turned his horse round, laid his hand on the young man's arm and called out to the commander of the cavalry of Arsinoe: “A soldier after Ares' own heart, Columella! Do not let him slip.”

Before the clouds of dust raised by the officers' horses as they rode off, had fairly settled, Constantine had made up his mind to be a soldier. In his parents' house, however, this decision was seen under various aspects. His father found little to say against it, for he had three sons and only two shipyards, and the question seemed settled by the fact that Constantine, with his resolute and powerful nature, was cut out to be a soldier. His pious mother, on the other hand, appealed to the learned works of Clemens and Tertullian, who forbid the faithful Christian to draw the sword; and she related the legend of the holy Maximilianus, who, being compelled, under Diocletian, to join the army, had suffered death at the hands of the executioner rather than shed his fellow-creatures' blood in battle. The use of weapons, she added, was incompatible with a godly and Christian life.

His father, however, would not listen to this reasoning; new times, he said, were come; the greater part of the army had been baptized; the Church prayed for, victory, and at the head of the troops stood the great Theodosius, an exemplar of an orthodox and zealous Christian.

Clemens was master in his own house, and Constantine joined the heavy cavalry at Arsinoe. In the war against the Blemmyes he was so fortunate as to merit the highest distinction; after that he was in garrison at Arsinoe, and, as Alexandria was within easy reach of that town, he was in frequent intercourse with his own family and that of Porphyrius. Not quite three years previously, when a revolt had broken out in favor of the usurper Maximus in his native town, Constantine had assisted in suppressing it, and almost immediately afterwards he was sent to Europe to take part in the war which Theodosius had begun, again against Maximus.



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An unpleasant misunderstanding had embittered his parting from Gorgo; old Damia, as she held his hand had volunteered a promise that she and her granddaughter would from time to time slay a beast in sacrifice on his behalf. Perhaps she had had no spiteful meaning in this, but he had regarded it as an insult, and had turned away angry and hurt. Gorgo, however, could not bear to let him go thus; disregarding her grandmother's look of surprise, she had called him back, and giving him both hands had warmly bidden him farewell. Damia had looked after him in silence and had ever afterwards avoided mentioning his name in Gorgo's presence.

After the victory over Maximus, Constantine, though still very young, was promoted to the command of the troop in the place of Columella, and he had arrived in Alexandria the day before at the head of his 'ala miliaria'.

[The ala miliaria consisted of 24 'turmae' or 960 mounted troopers under the conduct of a Prefect.]

Gorgo had never at any time ceased to think of him, but her passion had constantly appeared to her in the light of treason and a breach of faith towards the gods, so, to condone the sins she committed on one side by zeal on another, she had come forth from the privacy of her father's house to give active support to Olympius in his struggle for the faith of their ancestors. She had become a daily worshipper at the temple of Isis, and the hope of hearing her sing had already more than once filled it to overflowing at high festivals. Then, while Olympius was defending the sanctuary of Serapis against the attacks of the Christians, she and her grandmother had become the leaders of a party of women who made it their task to provide the champions of the faith with the means of subsistence.

All this had given purpose to her life; still, every little victory in this contest had filled her soul with regrets and anxieties. For months and years she had been conspicuous as the opponent of her lover's creed, and the bright eager child had developed into a grave girl a clear-headed and resolute woman. She was the only person in the house who dared to contradict her grandmother, and to insist on a thing when she thought it right. The longing of her heart she could not still, but her high spirit found food for its needs in all that surrounded her, and, by degrees, would no doubt have gained the mastery and have been supreme in all her being and doing, but that music and song still fostered the softer emotions of her strong, womanly nature.

The news of Constantine's return had shaken her soul to the foundations. Would it bring her the greatest happiness or only fresh anguish and unrest?



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She saw him coming!—The plume of his helmet first came in sight above the bushes, and then his whole figure emerged from among the shrubbery. She leaned against the pillar for support now, for her knees trembled under her. Tall and stately, his armor blazing in the sunshine, he came straight towards her—a man, a hero—exactly as her fancy had painted him in many a dark and sleepless hour. As he passed her mother’s tomb, she felt as though a cold hand laid a grip on her beating heart. In a swift flash of thought she saw her own home with its wealth and splendor, and then the ship-builder’s house—simple, chillingly bare, with its comfortless rooms; she felt as though she must perish, nipped and withered, in such a home. Again she thought of him standing on his father’s threshold, she fancied she could hear his bright boyish laugh and her heart glowed once more. She forgot for the moment—clear-headed woman though she was, and trained by her philosopher to “know herself”—she forgot what she had fully acknowledged only the night before: That he would no more give up his Christ than she would her Isis, and that if they should ever reach the dreamed-of pinnacle of joy it must be for an instant only, followed by a weary length of misery. Yes—she forgot everything; doubts and fears were cast aside; as his approaching footsteps fell on her ear, she could hardly keep herself from flying, open armed, to meet him.

He was standing before her; she offered him her hand with frank gladness, and, as he clasped it in his, their hearts were too full for words. Only their eyes gave utterance to their feelings, and when he perceived that hers were sparkling through tears, he spoke her name once, twice— joyfully and yet doubtfully, as if he dared not interpret her emotion as he would. She laid her left hand lightly on his which still grasped her right, and said with a brilliant smile: “Welcome, Constantine, welcome home! How glad I am to see you back again!”

“And I—and I...” he began, greatly moved.

“O Gorgo! Can it really be years since we parted?”

“Yes, indeed,” she said. “Anxious, busy, struggling years!”

“But to-day we celebrate the festival of Peace,” he exclaimed fervently. “I have learnt to leave every man to go his own way so long as I am allowed to go mine. The old strife is buried; take me as I am and I, for my part, will think only of the noble and beautiful traits in which your nature is so rich. The fruit of all wholesome strife must be peace; let us pluck that fruit, Gorgo, and enjoy it together. Ah! as I stand here and gaze out over the gardens and the lake, hearing the hammers of the shipwrights, and rejoicing in your presence, I feel as though our childhood might begin all over again—only better, fuller and more beautiful!”

“If only my brothers were here!”

“I saw them,”

“Oh! where?”

“At Thessalonica, well and happy—I have letters for you from them.”



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“Letters!” cried Gorgo, drawing away her hand. “Well, you are a tardy messenger! Our houses are within a stone’s throw, and yet in a whole day, from noon till noon, so old a friend could not find a few minutes to deliver the letters entrusted to him, or to call upon such near neighbors . . .”

“First there were my parents,” interrupted the young soldier. “And then the tyrant military duty, which kept me on the stretch from yesterday afternoon till an hour or two since. Romanus robbed me even of my sleep, and kept me in attendance till the morn had set. However, I lost but little by that, for I could not have closed my eyes till they had beheld you! This morning again I was on duty, and rarely have I ridden to the front with such reluctance. After that I was delayed by various details; even on my way here—but for that I cannot be sorry for it gave me this chance of finding you alone. All I ask now is that we may remain so, for such a moment is not likely to be repeated.—There, I heard a door . . .”

“Come into the garden,” cried Gorgo, signing to him to follow her. “My heart is as full as yours. Down by the tank under the old sycamores—we shall be quietest there.”

Under the dense shade of the centenarian trees was a rough-hewn bench that they themselves had made years before; there Gorgo seated herself, but her companion remained standing.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “Here—here you must hear me! Here where we have been so happy together!”

“So happy!” she echoed softly,

“And now,” he went on, “we are together once more. My heart beats wildly, Gorgo; it is well that this breastplate holds it fast, for I feel as though it would burst with hope and thankfulness.”

“Thankfulness?” said Gorgo, looking down.

“Yes, thankfulness—sheer, fervent passionate gratitude! What you have given me, what an inestimable boon, you yourself hardly know; but no emperor could reward love and fidelity more lavishly than you have done—you, the care and the consolation, the pain and the joy of my life! My mother told me—it was the first thing she thought of—how you shed tears of grief on her bosom when the false report of my death reached home. Those tears fell as morning dew on the drooping hopes in my heart, they were a welcome such as few travellers find on their return home. I am no orator, and if I were, how could speech in any way express my feelings? But you know them—you understand what it is, after so many years . . .”



“I know,” she said looking up into his eyes, and allowing him to seize her hand as he dropped on the bench by her side. “If I did not I could not bear this—and I freely confess that I shed many more tears over you than you could imagine. You love me, Constantine . . .”

He threw his arm round her; but she disengaged herself, exclaiming:



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“Nay—I implore you, not so—not yet, till I have told you what troubles me, what keeps me from throwing myself wholly, freely into the arms of happiness. I know what you will ask—what you have a right to ask; but before you speak, Constantine, remember once more all that has so often saddened our life, even as children, that has torn us asunder like a whirlwind although, ever since we can remember, our hearts have flowed towards each other. But I need not remind you of what binds us—that we both know well, only too well...”

“Nay,” he replied boldly: “That we are only beginning to know in all its fullness and rapture. The other thing the whirlwind of which you speak, has indeed tossed and tormented me, more than it has you perhaps; but since I have known that you could shed tears for me and love me I have had no more anxieties; I know for certain that all must come right! You love me as I am, Gorgo. I am no dreamer nor poet; but I can look forward to finding life lovely and noble if shared with you, so long as one—only one thing is sure. I ask you plainly and truly: Is your heart as full of love for me as mine is for you? When I was away did you think of me every day, every night, as I thought of you, day and night without fail?”

Gorgo’s head sank and blushes dyed her cheeks as she replied: “I love you, and I have never even thought of any one else. My thoughts and yearnings followed you all the while you were away... and yet... oh, Constantine! That one thing . . .”

“It cannot part us,” said the young man passionately, “since we have love—the mighty and gracious power which conquers all things! When love beckon: the whirlwind dies away like the breath from a child’s lips; it can bridge over any abyss; it created the world and preserves the existence of humanity, it can remove mountains—and these are the most beautiful words of the greatest of the apostles: ‘It is long suffering and kind, it believes all things, hopes all things’ and it knows no end. It remains with us till death and will teach us to find that peace whose bulwark and adornment, whose child and parent it is!”

Gorgo had looked lovingly at him while he spoke, and he, pressing her hand to his lips went on with ardent feeling:

“Yes, you shall be mine—I dare, and I will go to ask you of your father. There are some words spoken in one’s life which can never be forgotten. Once your father said that he wished that I was his son. On the march, in camp, in battle, wherever I have wandered, those words have been in my mind; for me they could have but one meaning: I would be his son—I shall be his son when Gorgo is my wife!—And now the time has come . . .”



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“Not yet, not to-day,” she interrupted eagerly. “My hopes are the same as yours. I believe with you that our love can bring all that is sweetest into our lives. What you believe I must believe, and I will never urge upon you the things that I regard as holiest. I can give up much, bear much, and it will all seem easy for your sake. We can agree, and settle what shall be conceded to your Christ and what to our gods— but not to-day; not even to-morrow. For the present let me first carry out the task I have undertaken— when that is done and past, then... You have my heart, my love; but if I were to prove a deserter from the cause to-day or to-morrow it would give others—Olympius—a right to point at me with scorn.”

“What is it then that you have undertaken?” asked Constantine with grave anxiety.

“To crown and close my past life. Before I can say: I am yours, wholly yours . . .”

“Are you not mine now, to-day, at once?” he urged.

“To day-no,” she replied firmly. “The great cause still has a claim upon me; the cause which I must renounce for your sake. But the woman who gives only one person reason to despise her signs the death-warrant of her own dignity. I will carry out what I have undertaken... Do not ask me what it is; it would grieve you to know.—The day after tomorrow, when the feast of Isis is over . . .”

“Gorgo, Gorgo!” shouted Damia’s shrill voice, interrupting the young girl in her speech, and half a dozen slave-women came rushing out in search of her.

They rose, and as they went towards the house Constantine said very earnestly:

“I will not insist; but trust my experience: When we have to give something up sooner or later, if the wrench is a painful one, the sooner and the more definitely it is done the better. Nothing is gained by postponement and the pain is only prolonged. Hesitation and delay, Gorgo, are a barrier built up by your own hand between us and our happiness. You always had abundance of determination; be brave then, now, and cut short at once a state of things that cannot last.”

“Well, well,” she said hurriedly. “But you must not, you will not require me to do anything that is beyond my strength, or that would involve breaking my word. To-morrow is not, and cannot be yours; it must be a day of leave-taking and parting. After that I am yours, I cannot live without you. I want you and nothing else. Your happiness shall be mine; only, do not make it too hard to me to part from all that has been dear to me from my infancy. Shut your eyes to tomorrow’s proceedings, and then—oh! if only we were sure of the right path, if only we could tread it together! We know each other so perfectly, and I know, I feel, that it will perhaps be a comfort to our hearts to be patient with each other over matters which our judgment fails to comprehend or even to approve. I might

be so unutterably happy; but my heart trembles within me, and I am not, I dare not be quite glad yet.”



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CHAPTER XII.

The young soldier was heartily welcomed by his friends of the merchant's family; but old Damia was a little uneasy at the attitude which he and Gorgo had taken up after their first greeting. He was agitated and grave, she was eager and excited, with an air of determined enterprise.

Was Eros at the bottom of it all? Were the young people going to carry out the jest of their childhood in sober earnest? The young officer was handsome and attractive enough, and her granddaughter after all was but a woman.

So far as Constantine was concerned the old lady had no personal objection to him; nay, she appreciated his steady, grave manliness and, for his own sake, was very glad to see him once more; but to contemplate the ship-builder's son—the grandson of a freedman—a Christian and devoted to the Emperor, even though he were a prefect or of even higher grade—as a possible suitor for her Gorgo, the beautiful heiress of the greater part of her wealth—the centre of attraction to all the gilded youth of Alexandria—this was too much for her philosophy; and, as she had never in her life restrained the expression of her sentiments, though she gave him a friendly hand and the usual greeting, she very soon showed him, by her irony and impertinence, that she was as hostile to his creed as ever.

She put her word in on every subject, and when, presently, Demetrius—who, after Dada's rebuff, had come on to see his uncle—began speaking of the horses he had been breeding for Marcus, and Constantine enquired whether any Arabs from his stables were to be purchased in the town, Damia broke out:

“You out-do your crucified God in most things I observe! He could ride on an ass, and a stout Egyptian nag is not good enough for you.”

However, the young officer was not to be provoked; and though he was very well able to hold his own in a strife of words, he kept himself under control and pretended to see nothing in the old woman's taunts but harmless jesting.

Gorgo triumphed in his temperate demeanor, and thanked him with grateful glances and a silent grasp of the hand when opportunity offered.

Demetrius, who had also known Constantine as a boy, and who, through Porphyrius, had sold him his first charger, met him very warmly and told him with a laugh that he had seen him before that day, that he had evidently learnt something on his travels, that he had tracked the prettiest head of game in all the city; and he slapped him on the shoulder and gave him what he meant to be a very knowing glance. Constantine could not think where Demetrius had seen him or what he meant; while Gorgo supposed that he alluded to her, and thought him perfectly odious.



Porphyrius pelted the prefect with questions which Constantine was very ready to answer, till they were interrupted by some commotion in the garden. On looking out they saw a strange and displeasing procession, headed by Herse who was scolding, thumping and dragging Dada's Egyptian slave, while her husband followed, imploring her to moderate her fury. Behind them came Orpheus, now and then throwing out a persuasive word to soothe the indignant matron. This party soon came up with the others, and Herse, unmasked, poured out an explanation of her wrath.



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She had had but a brief interview with Mary, Marcus' mother, for she had positively opposed the Christian lady's suggestion that Karnis and his family would do well to quit Alexandria as soon as possible, accepting an indemnification from Mary herself. To the widow's threats of seeking the intervention of the law, she had retorted that they were not public singers but free citizens who performed for their own enjoyment; to the anxious mother's complaints that Dada was doing all she could to attract Marcus, she had answered promptly and to the point that her niece's good name would certainly outweigh anything that could be said against a young man to whom so much license was allowed in Alexandria. She would find some means of protecting her own sister's child. Mary had replied that Herse would do well to remember that she—Mary—had means at her command of bringing justice down on those who should attempt to entrap a Christian youth, and tempt him into the path of sin.

This had closed the interview. Herse had found her husband and son waiting for her at the door of Mary's house and had at once returned with them to the ship. There an unpleasant surprise awaited them; they had found no one on board but the Egyptian slave, who told them that Dada had sent her on shore to procure her some sandals; on her return the girl had vanished. The woman at the same time declared that she had seen Agne and her brother leave the garden and make for the high-road.

So far as the Christian girl was concerned Herse declared there would be no difficulty; but Dada, her own niece, had always clung to them faithfully, and though Alexandria was full of sorcerers and Magians they could hardly succeed in making away with a fullgrown, rational, and healthy girl. In her inexperience she had, no doubt, gone at the bidding of some perfidious wretch, and the Egyptian witch, the brown slave had, of course, had a finger in the trick. She would accuse no one, but she knew some people who would be only too glad if Dada and that baby-faced young Christian got into trouble and disgrace together. She delivered herself of this long story with tears of rage and regret, angrily refusing to admit any qualifying parentheses from her husband, to whose natural delicacy her rough and vociferous complaints were offensive in the presence of the high-bred ladies of the house. Old Damia, however, had listened attentively to her indignant torrent of words, and had only shrugged her shoulders with a scornful smile at the implied accusation of herself.

Porphyrius, to whom the whole business was simply revolting, questioned Herse closely and when the facts were clearly established, and it also was plainly proved that Agne had escaped from the garden, he desired the slave-woman to tell her story of all that had occurred during the absence of Karnis, promising her half a dozen stripes from the cane on the soles of her feet for every false word she might utter. The threat was enough to raise a howl from the Egyptian; but this Porphyrius soon put a stop to, and Sachepris, with perfect veracity, told her tale of all that had happened till Herse's return to the vessel. The beginning of the narrative was of no special interest, but when she was pressed to go faster to the point she went on to say:



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“And then—then my lord Constantine came to us on the ship, and the pretty mistress laughed with him and asked him to take off his helmet, because the pretty mistress wanted to see the cut, the great sword-cut above his eyes, and my lord Constantine took it off.”

“It is a lie!” exclaimed Gorgo.

“No, no; it is true. Sachepris does not want her feet flayed, mistress,” cried the slave. “Ask my lord Constantine himself.”

“Yes, I went on board,” said Constantine. “Just as I was crossing the ship-yard a young girl dropped her fan into the lake. I fished it out at her request, and carried it back to her.”

“Yes, that was it,” cried Sachepris. “And the pretty mistress laughed with my lord Constantine—is it not true?—and she took his helmet out of his hand and weighed it in hers . . .”

“And you could stop on your way here to trifle with that child?” cried Gorgo wrathfully. “Pah! what men will do!”

These words portended rage and intense disgust to Constantine. “Gorgo!” he cried with a reproachful accent, but she could not control her indignation and went on more vehemently than ever:

“You stopped—with that little hussy—on your way to me—stopped to trifle and flirt with her! Shame! Yes, I say shame! Men are thought lucky in being light-hearted, but, for my part, may the gods preserve me from such luck! Trifling, whispering, caressing—a tender squeeze of the hand—solemnly, passionately earnest!—And what next? Who dares warrant that it will not all be repeated before the shadows are an ell long on the shore!”

She laughed, a sharp, bitter laugh; but it was a short one. She ceased and turned pale, for her lover’s face had undergone a change that terrified her. The scar on his forehead was purple, and his voice was strange, harsh and hoarse as he leaned forward to bring his face on a level with hers, and said:

“Even if you had seen me with your own eyes you ought not to have believed them! And if you dare to say that you do believe it, I can say Shame! as well as you. My life may be at stake but I say: Shame!”

As he spoke he clutched the back of a chair with convulsive fury and stood facing the girl like an avenging god of war, his eyes flashing to meet hers. This was too much for old Damia; she could contain herself no longer, and striking her crutch on the floor she broke out:



“What next shall we hear! You threaten and storm at the daughter of this house as if she were a soldier in your camp! Listen to me, my fine gentleman, and mind what I say: In the house of a free Alexandrian citizen no one has any right to give his orders—be he Caesar, Consul or Comes; he has only to observe the laws of good manners.” Then turning to Gorgo she shook her head with pathetic emphasis; “This, my love, is the consequence of too much familiar condescension. Come, an end of this! Greeting and parting often go hand in hand.”



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The prefect turned on his heel and went towards the steps leading to the garden; but Gorgo flew after him and seized his hand, calling out to the old woman:

“No, no, grandmother; he is in the right, I am certain he is in the right. Stop, Constantine—wait, stay, and forgive my folly! If you love me, mother, say no more—he will explain it all presently.”

The soldier heaved a sigh of relief and assented in silence, while the slave went on with her story: “And when my lord Constantine was gone, my lord Demetrius came and he—but what should poor Sachepris say—ask my lord Demetrius himself to tell you.”

“That is soon done,” replied Demetrius, who had failed to understand a great deal of all that had been going forward. My brother Marcus is over head and ears in love with the little puss—she is a pretty creature—and to save that simple soul from mischief I thought I would take the business on my own shoulders which are broader and stronger than his. I went boldly to work and offered the girl—more shame for me, I must say—the treasures of Midas; however, offering is one thing and accepting is another, and the child snapped me up and sent me to the right about— by Castor and Pollux! packed me off with my tail between my legs! My only comfort was that Constantine had just quitted the pretty little hussy. By the side of the god of war, thought I, a country Pan makes but a poor figure; but this Ares was dismissed by Venus, and so, if only to keep up my self-respect, I was forced to conclude that the girl, with all her pertness, was of a better sort than we had supposed. My presents, which would have tempted any other girl in Alexandria to follow a cripple to Hades, she took as an insult; she positively cried with indignation, and I really respect pretty little Dada!”

“She is my very own sister’s child,” Herse threw in, honestly angered by the cheap estimation in which every one seemed to hold her adopted child. “My own sister’s,” she insisted, with an emphasis which seemed to imply that she had a whole family of half-sisters. “Though we now earn our bread as singers, we have seen better days; and in these hard times Croesus to-day may be Irus to-morrow. As for us, Karnis did not dissipate his money in riotous living. It was foolish perhaps but it was splendid—I believe we should do the same again; he spent all his inheritance in trying to reinstate Art. However, what is the use of looking after money when it is gone! If you can win it, or keep it you will be held of some account, but if you are poor the dogs will snap at you!—The girl, Dada—we have taken as much care of her as if she were our own, and divided our last mouthful with her before now. Karnis used to tease her about training her voice—and now, when she could really do something to satisfy even good judges—now, when she might have helped us to earn a living-now. . .”

The good woman broke down and burst into tears, while Karnis tried to soothe and comfort her.

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“We shall get on without them somehow,” he said. “‘Nil desperandum’ says Horace the Roman. And after all they are not lizards that can hide in the cracks of the walls; I know every corner of Alexandria and I will go and hunt them up at once.”

“And I will help you, my friend,” said Demetrius, “We will go to the Hippodrome—the gentry you will meet with there are capital blood-hounds after such game as the daughter of your ‘own sister,’ my good woman. As to the black-haired Christian girl—I have seen her many a time on board ship. . .”

“Oh! she will take refuge with some fellow-Christians,” remarked Porphyrius. “Olympius told me all about her. I know plenty of the same sort in the Church. They fling away life and happiness as if they were apple-peelings to snatch at something which they believe to constitute salvation. It is folly, madness! pure unmitigated madness! To have sung in the temple of the she-devil Isis with Gorgo and the other worshippers would have cost her her seat in Paradise. That, as I believe, is the cause of her flight.”

“That and nothing else!” cried Karnis. “How vexed the noble Olympius will be. Indeed, Apollo be my witness! I have not been so disturbed about anything for many a day. Do you happen to recollect,” he went on, turning to Demetrius, “our conversation on board ship about a dirge for Pytho? Well, we had transposed the lament of Isis into the Lydian mode, and when this young lady’s wonderful voice gave it out, in harmony with Agne’s and with Orpheus’ flute, it was quite exquisite! My old heart floated on wings as I listened! And only the day after to-morrow the whole crowd of worshippers in the temple of Isis were to enjoy that treat!—It would have roused them to unheard-of enthusiasm. Yesterday the girl was in it, heart and soul; nay, only this morning she and the noble Gorgo sang it through from beginning to end. One more rehearsal to-morrow, and then the two voices would have given such a performance as perhaps was never before heard within the temple walls.”

Constantine had listened to this rhapsody with growing agitation; he was standing close to Gorgo, and while the rest of the party held anxious consultation as to what could be done to follow up and capture the fugitives, he asked Gorgo in a low voice, but with gloomy looks:

“You intended to sing in the temple of Isis? Before the crowd, and with a girl of this stamp?”

“Yes,” she said firmly.

“And you knew yesterday that I had come home?” She nodded.

“And yet, this morning even, while you were actually expecting me, you could practise the hymn with such a creature?”



“Agne is not such another as the girl who played tricks with your helmet,” replied Gorgo, and the black arches of her eyebrows knit into something very like a scowl. “I told you just now that I was not yours today, nor to-morrow. We still serve different gods.”



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“Indeed we do!” he exclaimed, so vehemently that the others looked round, and old Damia again began to fidget in her chair.

Then with a strong effort he recovered himself and, after standing for some minutes gazing in silence at the ground, he said in a low tone:

“I have borne enough for to-day. Gorgo, pause, reflect. God preserve me from despair!”

He bowed, hastily explained that his duties called him away, and left the spot.

CHAPTER XIII.

The amateurs of horse-racing who assembled in the Hippodrome could afford no clue to Dada's hiding-place, because she had not, in fact, run away with any gay young gallant. Within a few minutes of her sending Sachepris to fetch her a pair of shoes, Medius had hailed her from the shore; he wanted to speak with Karnis, and having come on an ass it was not in vain that the incensed damsel entreated him to take her with him. He had in fact only come to try to persuade Karnis and his wife to spare Dada for a few performances, such as he had described, in the house of Posidonius. His hopes of success had been but slender; and now the whole thing had settled itself, and Dada's wish that her people should not, for a while, know where to find her was most opportune for his plans.

In the days when Karnis was the manager of the theatre at Tauromenium Medius had led the chorus, and had received much kindness at the hands of the girl's uncle. All this, he thought, he could now repay, for certainly his old patron was poor enough, and he intended honestly to share with his former benefactor the profits he expected to realize with so fair a prodigy as Dada. No harm could come to the girl, and gold—said he to himself—glitters as brightly and is just as serviceable, even when it has been earned for us against our will.

Medius, being a cautious man, made the girl bring her new dress away with her, and the girdle and jewels belonging to it, and his neat hands packed everything into the smallest compass. He filled up the basket which he took for the purpose with sweetmeats, oranges and pomegranates “for the children at home,” and easily consoled Dada for the loss of her shoes. He would lead the ass and she should ride. She covered her face with a veil, and her little feet could be hidden under her dress. When they reached his house he would at once have “a sweet little pair of sandals” made for her by the shoemaker who worked for the wife of the Comes and the daughters of the Alabarch—[The chief of the Jewish colony in Alexandria.]—These preparations and the start only took a few minutes; and their rapid search and broken conversation caused so much absurd confusion that Dada had quite recovered her spirits and laughed merrily as she



tripped bare-foot across the strand. She sprang gaily on to the little donkey and as they made their way along the road, the basket containing her small wardrobe placed in front of her on the ass's shoulders, she remarked that she should be mistaken for the young wife of a shabby old husband, returning from market with a load of provisions.



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She was delighted to think of what Herse's face would be when, on her return home, she should discover that the prisoner could make her escape even without shoes.

"Let her have a good hunt for me!" she cried quite enchanted. "Why should I always be supposed to be ready for folly and wickedness! But one thing I warn you: If I am not comfortable and happy with you, and if I do not like the parts you want me to fill, we part as quickly as we have come together.—Why are you taking me through all these dirty alleys? I want to ride through the main streets and see what is going on." But Medius would not agree to this, for in the great arteries of the town there were excitement and tumult, and they might think themselves fortunate if they reached his house unmolested.

He lived in a little square, between the Greek quarter and Rhacotis where the Egyptians lived, and his house, which was exactly opposite the church of St. Marcus, accommodated Medius himself, his wife, his widowed daughter and her five children, besides being crammed from top to bottom with all sorts of strange properties, standing or hanging in every available space. Dada's curiosity had no rest, and by the time she had spent a few hours in the house her host's pretty little grandchildren were clinging to her with devoted affection.

Agne had not been so fortunate as to find a refuge so easily. With no escort, unveiled, and left entirely to her own guidance, leading the little boy, she hurried forward, not knowing whither. All she thought was to get away—far away from these men who were trying to imperil her immortal soul.

She knew that Karnis had actually bought her, and that she was, therefore, his property and chattel. Even Christian doctrine taught her that the slave must obey his master; but she could not feel like a slave, and if indeed she were one her owner might destroy and kill her body, but not her soul. The law, however, was on the side of Karnis, and it allowed him to pursue her and cast her into prison. This idea haunted her, and for fear of being caught she avoided all the chief thoroughfares and kept close to the houses as she stole through the side streets and alleys. Once, in Antioch, she had seen a runaway slave, who, having succeeded in reaching a statue of the Emperor and laying his hand on it, was by that act safe from his pursuers. There must surely be such a statue somewhere in Alexandria—but where? A woman, of whom she enquired, directed her down a wider street that would take her into the Canopic Way. If she crossed that and went down the first turning to the left she would reach a large open square in the Bruchium, and there, in front of the Prefect's residence and by the side of the Bishop's house, stood the new statue of Theodosius.

This information, and the mention of the Bishop, gave a new course to her proceedings. It was wrong to defy and desert her master, but to obey him would be deadly sin. Which must she choose and which avoid? Only one person could advise in such a case—only one could relieve her mind of its difficulties and terrors: The

Shepherd of souls in the city—the Bishop himself. She too was a lamb of his flock; to him and to no one else could she turn.



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This thought fell on her heart like a ray of light dispersing the clouds of uncertainty and alarm. With a deep breath of relief she took the child in her arms and told him—for he was whimpering to know where she was taking him, and why he might not go back to Dada—that they were going to see a good, kind man who would tell them the way home to their father and mother. Papias, however, still wailed to go to Dada and not to the man.

Half insisting and half coaxing him with promises, she dragged him along as far as the main street. This was full of an excited throng; soldiers on foot and on horseback were doing what they could to keep the peace, and the bustle amused the little boy's curiosity so that he soon forgot his homesickness. When, at length, Ague found the street that led to the Prefect's house she was fairly carried along by the surging, rushing mob. To turn was quite impossible; the utmost she could do was to keep her wits about her, and concentrate her strength so as not to be parted from the child. Pushed, pulled, squeezed, scolded, and abused by other women for her folly in bringing a child out into such a crowd, she at last found herself in the great square. A hideous hubbub of coarse, loud voices pierced her unaccustomed ears; she could have sunk on the earth and cried; but she kept up her courage and collected all her energies, for she saw in the distance a large gilt cross over a lofty doorway. It was like a greeting and welcome home. Under its protection she would certainly, find rest, consolation and safety.

But how was she to reach it? The space before her was packed with men as a quiver is packed with arrows; there was not room for a pin between. The only chance of getting forward was by forcing her way, and nine-tenths of the crowd were men—angry and storming men, whose wild and strange demeanor filled her with terror and disgust. Most of them were monks who had flocked in at the Bishop's appeal from the monasteries of the desert, or from the Lauras and hermitages of Kolzum by the Red Sea, or even from Tabenna in Upper Egypt, and whose hoarse voices rent the air with vehement cries of: "Down with the idols! Down with Serapis! Death to the heathen!"

This army of the Saviour whose very essence was gentleness and whose spirit was love, seemed indeed to have deserted from his standard of light and grace to the blood-stained banner of murderous hatred. Their matted locks and beards fringed savage faces with glowing eyes; their haggard or paunchy nakedness was scarcely covered by undressed hides of sheep and goats; their parched skins were scarred and striped by the use of the scourges that hung at their girdles. One—a "crown bearer"—had a face streaming with blood, from the crown of thorns which he had vowed to wear day and night in memory and imitation of the Redeemer's sufferings, and which on this great occasion he pressed hard into the flesh with ostentatious



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martyrdom. One, who, in his monastery, had earned the name of the “oil-jar,” supported himself on his neighbors’ arms, for his emaciated legs could hardly carry his dropsical carcass which, for the last ten years, he had fed exclusively on gourds, snails, locusts and Nile water. Another was chained inseparably to a comrade, and the couple dwelt together in a cave in the limestone hills near Lycopolis. These two had vowed never to let each other sleep, that so their time for repentance might be doubled, and their bliss in the next world enhanced in proportion to their mortifications in this.

One and all, they were allies in a great fight, and the same hopes, ideas, and wishes fired them all. The Abominable Thing—which imperilled hundreds of thousands of souls, which invited Satan to assert his dominion in this world—should fall this day and be annihilated forever! To them the whole heathen world was the “great whore;” and though the gems she wore were beautiful to see and rejoiced the mind and heart of fools, they must be snatched from her painted brow; they would scourge her from off the face of the redeemed earth and destroy the seducer of souls forever. “Down with the idols! Down with Serapis! Down with the heathen!” Their shouts thundered and bellowed all about Agne; but, just as the uproar and crush were at the worst, a tall and majestic figure appeared on a balcony above the cross and extended his hand in calm and dignified benediction towards the seething mass of humanity. As he raised it all present, including Ague, bowed and bent the knee.

Agne felt, knew, that this stately man was the Bishop whom she sought, but she did not point him out to her little brother, for his aspect was that of some proud sovereign rather than of “the good, kind man” of whom she had dreamed. She could never dare to force her way into the presence of this great lord! How should the ruler over a million souls find time or patience for her and her trivial griefs?

However, there must be within his dwelling sundry presbyters and deacons, and she would address herself to one of them, as soon as the crowd had dispersed enough for her to make her way to the door beneath the cross. Twenty times at least did she renew her efforts, but she made very small progress; most of the monks, as she tried to squeeze past them, roughly pushed her back; one, on whose arm she ventured to lay her hand, begging him to make way for her, broke out into shrieks as though a serpent had stung him, and when the crush brought her into contact with the crown-bearer he thrust her away exclaiming:

“Away woman! Do not touch me, spawn of Satan tool of the evil one! or I will tread you under foot!”

Retreat had been as impossible as progress, and long hours went by which to her seemed like days; still she felt no fatigue, only alarm and disgust, and, more than anything else, an ardent desire to reach the Bishop’s palace and take counsel of a

priest. It was long past noon when a diversion took place which served at any rate to interest and amuse the crying child.



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On the platform above the doorway Cynegius came forth—Cynegius, the Emperor's delegate; a stout man of middle height, with a shrewd round head and a lawyer's face. State dignitaries, Consuls and Prefects had, at this date, ceased to wear the costume that had marked the patricians of old Rome—a woollen toga that fell in broad and dignified folds from the shoulders; a long, close-fitting robe had taken its place, of purple silk brocade with gold flowers. On the envoy's shoulder blazed the badge of the highest officials, a cruciform ornament of a peculiarly thick and costly tissue. He greeted the crowd with a condescending bow, a herald blew three blasts on the tuba, and then Cynegius, with a wave of his hand introduced his private secretary who stood by his side, and who at once opened a roll he held and shouted at the top of a ringing voice:

"Silence in Caesar's name!"

The trumpet then sounded for the fourth time, and silence so complete fell on the crowded square that the horses of the mounted guard in front of the Prefect's house could be heard snorting and champing.

"In Caesar's name," repeated the official, who had been selected for the duty of reading the Imperial message. Cynegius himself bent his head, again waved his hand towards his secretary, and then towards the statues of the Emperor and Empress which, mounted on gilt standards, were displayed to the populace on each side of the balcony; then the reading began:

"Theodosius Caesar greets the inhabitants of the great and noble city of Alexandria, by Cynegius, his faithful ambassador and servant. He knows that its true and honest citizens confess the Holy Faith in all piety and steadfastness, as delivered to believers in the beginning by Peter, the prince of the Apostles; he knows that they hold the true Christian faith, and abide by the doctrine delivered by the Holy Ghost to the Fathers of the Church in council at Nicaea.

"Theodosius Caesar who, in all humility and pride, claims to be the sword and shield, the champion and the rampart of the one true faith, congratulates his subjects of the great and noble city of Alexandria inasmuch as that most of them have turned from the devilish heresy of Arius, and have confessed the true Nicaean creed; and he announces to them, by his faithful and noble servant Cynegius, that this faith and no other shall be recognized in Alexandria, as throughout his dominions.

"In Egypt, as in all his lands and provinces, every doctrine opposed to this precious creed shall be persecuted, and all who confess, preach or diffuse any other doctrine shall be considered heretics and treated as such."

The secretary paused, for loud and repeated shouts of joy broke from the multitude. Not a dissentient word was heard—indeed, the man who should have dared to utter one

would certainly not have escaped unpunished. It was not till the herald had several times blown a warning blast that the reader could proceed, as follows:



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“It has come to the ears of your Caesar, to the deep grieving of his Christian soul, that the ancient idolatry, which so long smote mankind with blindness and kept them wandering far from the gates of Paradise, still, through the power of the devil, has some temples and altars in your great and noble city. But because it is grievous to the Christian and clement heart of the Emperor to avenge the persecutions and death which so many holy martyrs have endured at the hands of the bloodthirsty and cruel heathen on their posterity, or on the miscreant and— misbelieving enemies of our holy faith— and because the Lord hath said ‘vengeance is mine’—Theodosius Caesar only decrees that the temples of the heathen idols in this great and noble city of Alexandria shall be closed, their images destroyed and their altars overthrown. Whosoever shall defile himself with blood, or slay an innocent beast for sacrifice, or enter a heathen temple, or perform any religious ceremony therein, or worship any image of a god made by hands— nay, or pray in any temple in the country or in the city, shall be at once required to pay a fine of fifteen pounds of gold; and whosoever shall know of such a crime being committed without giving information of it, shall be fined to the same amount.”—[Codex Theodosianus XVI, 10, 10.]

The last words were spoken to the winds, for a shout of triumph, louder and wilder than had ever before been heard even on this favorite meeting-place of the populace, rent the very skies. Nor did it cease, nor yield to any trumpet-blast, but rolled on in spreading waves down every street and alley; it reached the ships in the port, and rang through the halls of the rich and the hovels of the poor; it even found a dull echo in the light-house at the point of Pharos, where the watchman was trimming the lamp for the night; and in an incredibly short time all Alexandria knew that Caesar had dealt a death-blow to the worship of the heathen gods.

The great and fateful rumor was heard, too, in the Museum and the Serapeum; once more the youth who had grown up in the high schools of the city, studying the wisdom of the heathen, gathered together; men who had refined and purified their intellect at the spring of Greek philosophy and fired their spirit with enthusiasm for all that was good and lovely in the teaching of ancient Greece—these obeyed the summons of their master, Olympius, or flew to arms under the leadership of Orestes, the Governor, for the High-Priest himself had to see to the defences of the Serapeum.—Olympius had weapons ready in abundance, and the youths rapidly collected round the standards he had prepared, and rushed into the square before the Prefect’s house to drive away the monks and to insist that Cynegius should return forthwith to Rome with the Emperor’s edict.

Young and noble lads were they who marched forth to the struggle, equipped like the Helleman soldiers of the palmy days of Athens; and as they went they sang a battle-song of Callinus which some one—who, no one could tell—had slightly altered for the occasion:



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“Come, rouse ye Greeks; what, sleeping still!
Is courage dead, is shame unknown?
Start up, rush forth with zealous will,
And smite the mocking Christians down!”

Everything that opposed their progress was overthrown. Two maniples of foot-soldiers who held the high-road across the Bruchium attempted to turn them, but the advance of the inflamed young warriors was irresistible and they reached the street of the Caesareum and the square in front of the Prefect’s residence. Here they paused to sing the last lines of their battlesong:

“Fate seeks the coward out at home,
He dies unwept, unknown to fame,
While by the hero’s honored tomb
Our grandsons’ grandsons shall proclaim:
’In the great conflict’s fiercest hour
He stood unmoved, our shield and tower.”

It was here, at the wide opening into the square, that the collision took place: on one side the handsome youths, crowned with garlands, with their noble Greek type of heads, thoughtful brows, perfumed curls, and anointed limbs exercised in the gymnasium—on the other the sinister fanatics in sheep-skin, ascetic visionaries grown grey in fasting, scourging, and self-denial.

The monks now prepared to meet the onset of the young enthusiasts who were fighting for freedom of thought and enquiry, for Art and Beauty. Each side was defending what it felt to be the highest Good, each was equally in earnest as to its convictions, both fought for something dearer and more precious than this earthly span of existence. But the philosophers’ party had swords; the monks’ sole weapon was the scourge, and they were accustomed to ply that, not on each other but on their own rebellious flesh. A wild and disorderly struggle began with swingeing blows on both sides; prayers and psalms mingling with the battle-song of the heathen. Here a monk fell wounded, there one lay dead, there again lay a fine and delicate-looking youth, felled by the heavy fist of a recluse. A hermit wrestled hand to hand with a young philosopher who, only yesterday had delivered his first lecture on the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus to an interested audience.

And in the midst of this mad struggle stood Agne with her little brother, who clung closely to her skirts and was too terrified to shed a tear or utter a cry. The girl was resolutely calm, but she was too utterly terror-stricken even to pray. Fear, absorbing fear had stunned her thoughts; it overmastered her like some acute physical pain which began in her heart and penetrated every fibre of her frame.



Even while the Imperial message was being read she had been too frightened to take it all in; and now she simply shut her eyes tight and hardly understood what was going on around her, till a new and different noise sounded close in her ears: the clatter of hoofs, blare of trumpets and shouts and screams. At last the tumult died away and, when she ventured to open her eyes and look about her, the place all round her was as clear as though it had been swept by invisible hands; here and there lay a dead body and there still was a dense crowd in the street leading to the Caesareum, but even that was dispersing and retreating before the advance of a mounted force.



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She breathed freely once more, and released the child's head from the skirt of her dress in which he had wrapped and buried it. The end of her alarms was not yet come, however, for a troop of the young heathen came flying across the square in wild retreat before a division of the heavy cavalry, which had intervened to part the combatants.

The fugitives came straight towards her; again she closed her eyes tightly, expecting every instant to find herself under the horses' feet. Then one of the runaways knocked down Papias, and she could bear no more; her senses deserted her, her knees failed under her, she lost consciousness, and with a dull groan she fell on the dusty pavement. Close to her, as she lay, rushed the pursued and the pursuers—and at last, how long after she knew not, when she recovered her senses she felt as if she were floating in the air, and presently perceived that a soldier had her in his arms and was carrying her like a child.

Fresh alarms and fresh shame overwhelmed the poor girl; she tried to free herself and found him quite ready to set her down. When she was once more on her feet and felt that she could stand she glanced wildly round her with sudden recollection, and then uttered a hoarse cry, for her mouth and tongue were parched:

“Christ Jesus! Where is my brother?” She pushed back her hair with a desperate gesture, pressing her hands to her temples and peering all round her with a look of fevered misery.

She was still in the square and close to the door of the Prefect's house; a man on horseback, in all probability her preserver's servant, was following them, leading his master's horse. On the pavement lay wounded men groaning with pain; the street of the Caesareum was lined with a double row of footsoldiers of Papias no sign!

Again she called him, and with such deep anguish in her voice, which was harsh and shrill with terror, that the young officer looked at her with extreme compassion.

“Papias, Papias—my little brother! O God my Saviour!—where, where is the child?”

“We will have him sought for,” said the soldier whose voice was gentle and kind. “You are too young and pretty—what brought you into this crowd and amid such an uproar?”

She colored deeply and looking down answered low and hurriedly: “I was going to see the Bishop.”

“You chose an evil hour,” replied Constantine, for it was he who had found her lying on the pavement and who had thought it only an act of mercy not to trust so young and fair a girl to the protection of his followers. “You may thank God that you have got off so cheaply. Now, I must return to my men. You know where the Bishop lives? Yes, here. And with regard to your little brother.... Stay; do you live in Alexandria?” “No, my lord.”



“But you have some relation or friend whom you lodge with?”

“No, my lord. I am... I have... I told you, I only want to see my lord the Bishop.”



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“Very strange! Well, take care of yourself. My time is not my own; but by-and-bye, in a very short time, I will speak to the city watchmen; how old is the boy?”

“Nearly six.”

“And with black hair like yours?”

“No, my lord—fair hair,” and as she spoke the tears started to her eyes. “He has light curly hair and a sweet, pretty little face.”

The prefect smiled and nodded. “And if they find him,” he went on, “Papias, you say, is his name where is he to be taken?”

“I do not know, my lord, for—and yet! Oh! my head aches, I cannot think—if only I knew... If they find him he must come here—here to my lord the Bishop.”

“To Theophilus?” said Constantine in surprise. “Yes, yes—to him,” she said hastily. “Or—stay—to the gate-keeper at the Bishop’s palace.”

“Well, that is less aristocratic, but perhaps it is more to the purpose,” said the officer; and with a sign to his servant, he twisted his hand in his horse’s mane, leaped into the saddle, waved her a farewell, and rejoined his men without paying any heed to her thanks.

CHAPTER XIV.

There was much bustle and stir in the hall of the Episcopal palace. Priests and monks were crowding in and out; widows, who, as deaconesses, were entrusted with the care of the sick, were waiting, bandages in hand, and discussing their work and cases, while acolytes lifted the wounded on to the litters to carry them to the hospitals.

The deacon Eusebius, whom we have met as the spiritual adviser of Marcus, was superintending the good work, and he took particular care that as much attention should be shown to the wounded heathen as to the Christians.

In front of the building veterans of the twenty-first legion paced up and down in the place of the ordinary gate-keepers, who were sufficient protection in times of peace.

Agne looked in vain for any but soldiers, but at last she slipped in unobserved among the men and women who were tending the wounded. She was terribly thirsty, and seeing one of the widows mixing some wine and water and offer it to one of the wounded men who pushed it away, she took courage and begged the deaconess to give her a drink. The woman handed her the cup at once, asking to whom she belonged that she was here.



“I want to see my lord, the Bishop,” replied Agne, but then correcting herself, she added hastily: “If I could see the Bishop’s gate-keeper, I might speak to him.”

“There he is,” said the deaconess, pointing to an enormously tall man standing in the darkest and remotest corner of the hall. The darkness reminded her for the first time that it was now evening. Night was drawing on, and then where could she take refuge and find shelter? She shuddered and simply saying: “Thank you,” she went to the man who had been pointed out to her and begged that if her little brother should be found and brought to him, he would take charge of him.



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“To be sure,” said the big man good-naturedly. “He can be taken to the orphanage of the ‘Good Samaritan’ if they bring him here, and you can enquire for him there.”

She then made so bold as to ask if she could see a priest; but for this she was directed to go to the church, as all those who were immediately attached to the Bishop were today fully occupied, and had no time for trifles. Agne, however, persisted in her request till the man lost patience altogether and told her to be off at once; but at this instant three ecclesiastics came in at the door by which her friend was on guard, and Agne, collecting all her courage, went up to one of them, a priest of advanced age, and besought him urgently:

“Oh! reverend Father, I beg of you to hear me. I must speak to a priest, and that man drives me away and says you none of you have time to attend to me!”

“Did he say that!” asked the priest, and he turned angrily on the culprit saying: “The Church and her ministers never lack time to attend to the needs of any faithful soul—I will follow you, brothers.—Now, my child, what is it that you need?”

“It lies so heavily on my soul,” replied Agne, raising her eyes and hands in humble supplication. “I love my Saviour, but I cannot always do exactly as I should wish, and I do not know how I ought to act so as not to fall into sin.”

“Come with me,” said the priest, and leading the way across a small garden, he took her into a wide open court and from thence in at a side door and up a flight of stairs which led to the upper floor. As she followed him her heart beat high with painful and yet hopeful excitement. She kept her hands tightly clasped and tried to pray, but she could hardly control her thoughts of her brother and of all she wanted to say to the presbyter.

They presently entered a lofty room where the window-shutters were closed, and where a number of lamps, already lighted, were hanging over the cushioned divans on which sat rows of busy scribes of all ages.

“Here we are,” said the priest kindly, as he seated himself in an easy-chair at some little distance from the writers. “Now, tell me fully what troubles you; but as briefly as you can, for I am sparing you these minutes from important business.”

“My lord,” she began, “my parents were freeborn, natives of Augusta Trevirorum. My father was a collector of tribute in the Emperor’s service . . .”

“Very good—but has this anything to do with the matter?”

“Yes, yes, it has. My father and mother were good Christians and in the riots at Antioch—you remember, my lord, three years ago—they were killed and I and my brother—Papias is his name . . .”



“Yes, yes—go on.”

“We were sold. My master paid for us—I saw the money; but he did not treat us as slaves. But now he wants me—he, Sir, is wholly devoted to the heathen gods-and he wants me . . .”



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“To serve his idols?”

“Yes, reverend Father, and so we ran away.”

“Quite right, my child.”

“But the scriptures say that the slave shall obey his master?”

“True; but higher than the master in the flesh is the Father in Heaven, and it is better a thousand times to sin against man than against God.”

This conversation had been carried on in an undertone on account of the scribes occupied at the desks; but the priest raised his voice with his last words, and he must have been heard in the adjoining room, for a heavy curtain of plain cloth was opened, and an unusually deep and powerful voice exclaimed:

“Back again already, Irenaeus! That is well; I want to speak with you.”

“Immediately, my lord—I am at your service in a moment.—Now, my child,” he added, rising, “you know what your duty is. And if your master looks you up and insists on your assisting at the sacrifice or what ever it may be, you will find shelter with us. My name is Irenaeus.”

Here he was again interrupted, for the curtain was lifted once more and a man came out of the inner room whom no one could forget after having once met him. It was the Bishop whom Agne had seen on the balcony; she recognized him at once, and dropped on her knees to kiss the hem of his robe in all humility. Theophilus accepted the homage as a matter of course, hastily glancing at the child with his large keen eyes; Agne not daring to raise hers, for there was certainly something strangely impressive in his aspect. Then, with a wave of his long thin hand to indicate Agne, he asked:

“What does this girl want?”

“A freeborn girl—parents Christian—comes from Antioch. . .” replied Irenaeus. “Sold to a heathen master—commanded to serve idols—has run away and now has doubts. . .”

“You have told her to which Lord her service is due?” interrupted the Bishop. Then, turning to Agne, he said: “And why did you come here instead of going to the deacon of your own church?”

“We have only been here a few days,” replied the girl timidly, as she ventured to raise her eyes to the handsome face of this princely prelate, whose fine, pale features looked as if they had been carved out of marble.



“Then go to partake of the sacred Eucharist in the basilica of Mary,” replied the Bishop. “It is just now the hour—but no, stop. You are a stranger here you say; you have run away from your master—and you are young, very young and very... It is dark too. Where are you intending to sleep?”

“I do not know,” said Agne, and her eyes filled with tears.

“That is what I call courage!” murmured Theophilus to the priest, and then he added to Agne: “Well, thanks to the saints, we have asylums for such as you, here in the city. That scribe will give you a document which will secure your admission to one. So you come from Antioch? Then there is the refuge of Seleucus of Antioch. To what parish—[Parochia in Latin]—did your parents belong?”



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“To that of John the Baptist?”

“Where Damascius was the preacher?”

“Yes, holy Father. He was the shepherd of our souls.”

“What! Damascius the Arian?” cried the Bishop. He drew his fine and stately figure up to its most commanding height and closed his thin lips in august contempt, while Irenaeus, clasping his hands in horror, asked her:

“And you—do you, too, confess the heresy of Arius?”

“My parents were Arians,” replied Agne in much surprise. “They taught me to worship the godlike Saviour.”

“Enough!” exclaimed the Bishop severely. “Come Irenaeus.”

He nodded to the priest to follow him, opened the curtain and went in first with supreme dignity.

Agne stood as if a thunderbolt had fallen, pale, trembling and desperate. Then was she not a Christian? Was it a sin in a child to accept the creed of her parents? And were those who, after charitably extending a saving hand, had so promptly withdrawn it—were they Christians in the full meaning of the All-merciful Redeemer?

Agonizing doubts of everything that she had hitherto deemed sacred and inviolable fell upon her soul; doubts of everything in heaven and earth, and not merely of Christ and of his godlike, or divine goodness—for what difference was there to her apprehension in the meaning of the two words which set man to hunt and persecute man? In the distress and hopeless dilemma in which she found herself, she shed no tears; she simply stood rooted to the spot where she had heard the Bishop’s verdict.

Presently her attention was roused by the shrill voice of an old writer who called out to one of the younger assistants.

“That girl disturbs me, Petubastis; show her out.” Petubastis, a pretty Egyptian lad, was more than glad of an interruption to his work which somehow seemed endless to-day; he put aside his implements, stroked back the black hair that had fallen over his face, and removing the reed-pen from behind his ear, stuck in a sprig of dark blue larkspur. Then he tripped to the door, opened it, looked at the girl with the cool impudence of a connoisseur in beauty, bowed slightly, and pointing the way out said with airified politeness:

“Allow me!”



Agne at once obeyed and with a drooping head left the room; but the young Egyptian stole out after her, and as soon as the door was shut he seized her hand and said in a whisper: "If you can wait half an hour at the bottom of the stairs, pretty one, I will take you somewhere where you will enjoy yourself."

She had stopped to listen, and looked enquiringly into his face, for she had no suspicion of his meaning; the young fellow, encouraged by this, laid his hand on her shoulder and would have drawn her towards him but that she, thrusting him from her as if he were some horrible animal, flew down the steps as fast as her feet could carry her, and through the courtyard back into the great entrance-hall.



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Here all was, by this time, dark and still; only a few lamps lighted the pillared space and the flare of a torch fell upon the benches placed there for the accommodation of priests, laymen and supplicants generally.

Utterly worn out—whether by terror or disappointment or by hunger and fatigue she scarcely knew—she sank on a seat and buried her face in her hands.

During her absence the wounded had been conveyed to the sick-houses; one only was left whom they had not been able to move. He was lying on a mattress between two of the columns at some little distance from Agne, and the light of a lamp, standing on a medicine-chest, fell on his handsome but bloodless features. A deaconess was kneeling at his head and gazed in silence in the face of the dead, while old Eusebius crouched prostrate by his side, resting his cheek on the breast of the man whose eyes were sealed in eternal sleep. Two sounds only broke the profound silence of the deserted hall: an occasional faint sob from the old man and the steady step of the soldiers on guard in front of the Bishop's palace. The widow, kneeling with clasped hands, never took her eyes off the face of the youth, nor moved for fear of disturbing the deacon who, as she knew, was praying—praying for the salvation of the heathen soul snatched away before it could repent. Many minutes passed before the old man rose, dried his moist eyes, pressed his lips to the cold hand of the dead and said sadly:

“So young—so handsome—a masterpiece of the Creator's hand!... Only to-day as gay as a lark, the pride and joy of his mother-and now! How many hopes, how much triumph and happiness are extinct with that life. O Lord my Saviour, Thou hast said that not only those who call Thee Lord, Lord, shall find grace with our Father in Heaven, and that Thou hast shed Thy blood for the salvation even of the heathen—save, redeem this one! Thou that are the Good Shepherd, have mercy on this wandering sheep!”

Stirred to the bottom of his soul the old man threw up his arms and gazed upwards rapt in ecstasy. But presently, with an effort, he said to the deaconess:

“You know, Sister, that this lad was the only son of Berenice, the widow of Asclepiodorus, the rich shipowner. Poor, bereaved mother! Only yesterday he was driving his quadriga out of the gate on the road to Marea, and now—here! Go and tell her of this terrible occurrence. I would go myself but that, as I am a priest, it might be painful to her to learn of his tragic end from one of the very men against whom the poor darkened youth had drawn the sword. So do you go, Sister, and treat the poor soul very tenderly; and if you find it suitable show her very gently that there is One who has balm for every wound, and that we—we and all who believe in Him—lose what is dear to us only to find it again. Tell her of hope: Hope is everything. They say that green is the color of hope, for it is the spring-tide of the heart. There may be a Spring for her yet.”



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The deaconess rose, pressed a kiss on the eyes of the dead youth, promised Eusebius that she would do her best and went away. He, too, was about to leave when he heard a sound of low sobbing from one of the benches. He stood still to listen, shook his old head, and muttering to himself:

“Great God—merciful and kind.... Thou alone canst know wherefore Thou hast set the rose-garland of life with so many sharp thorns,” he went up to Agne who rose at his approach.

“Why, my child,” he said kindly, “what are you weeping for? Have you, too, lost some dear one killed in the fray?”

“No, no,” she hastily replied with a gesture of terror at the thought.

“What then do you want here at so late an hour?”

“Nothing—nothing,” she said. “That is all over! Good God, how long I must have been sitting here—I—I know I must go; yes, I know it.”

“And are you alone—no one with you?”

She shook her head sadly. The old man looked at her narrowly.

“Then I will take you safe home,” he said. “You see I am an old man and a priest. Where do you live, my child?”

“I? I . . .” stammered Agne, and a torrent of scalding tears fell down her cheeks. “My God! my God! where, where am I to go?”

“You have no home, no one belonging to you?” asked the old man. “Come, child, pluck up your courage and tell me truly what it is that troubles you; perhaps I may be able to help you.”

“You?” she said with bitter melancholy. “Are not you one of the Bishop’s priests?”

“I am a deacon, and Theophilus is the head of my church; but for that very reason . . .”

“No,” said Agne sharply, “I will deceive no one. My parents were Arians, and as my beliefs are the same as theirs the Bishop has driven me away as an outcast, finally and without pity.”

“Indeed,” said Eusebius. “Did the Bishop do that? Well, as the head of a large community of Christians he, of course, is bound to look at things in their widest aspect; small things, small people can be nothing to him. I, on the contrary, am myself but a small personage, and I care for small things. You know, child, that the Lord has said



'that in his Father's kingdom there are many mansions,' and that in which Arius dwells is not mine; but it is in the Father's kingdom nevertheless. It cannot be so much amiss after all that you should cling to the creed of your parents. What is your name?"

"Agne."

"Agne, or the lamb. A pretty, good name! It is a name I love, as I, too, am a shepherd, though but a very humble one, so trust yourself to me, little lamb. Tell me, why are you crying? And whom do you seek here? And how is it that you do not know where to find a home?"

Eusebius spoke with such homely kindness, and his voice was so full of fatherly sympathy that hope revived in Agne's breast, and she told him with frank confidence all he wanted to know.



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The old man listened with many a “Hum” and “Ha”—then he bid her accompany him to his own house, where his wife would find a corner that she might fill.

She gladly agreed, and thanked him eagerly when he also told the doorkeeper to bring Papias after them if he should be found. Relieved of the worst of her griefs, Agne followed her new friend through the streets and lanes, till they paused at the gate of a small garden and he said: “Here we are. What we have we give gladly, but it is little, very little. Indeed, who can bear to live in luxury when so many are perishing in want and misery?”

As they went across the plot, between the little flower-beds, the deacon pointed to a tree and said with some pride: “Last year that tree bore me three hundred and seven peaches, and it is still healthy and productive.”

A hospitable light twinkled in the little house at the end of the garden, and as they entered a queer-looking dog came out to meet his master, barking his welcome. He jumped with considerable agility on his fore-legs, but his hind legs were paralyzed and his body sloped away and stuck up in the air as though it were attached to an invisible board.

“This is my good friend Lazarus,” said the old man cheerfully. “I found the poor beggar in the road one day, and as he was one of God’s creatures, although he is a cripple, I comfort myself with the verse from the Psalms: ‘The Lord has no joy in the strength of a horse, neither taketh he pleasure in any man’s legs.’”

He was so evidently content and merry that Agne could not help laughing too, and when, in a few minutes, the deacon’s wife gave her a warm and motherly reception she would have been happier than she had been for a long time past, if only her little brother had not been a weight on her mind and if she had not longed so sadly to have him safe by her side. But even that anxiety presently found relief, for she was so weary and exhausted that, after eating a few mouthfuls, she was thankful to lie down in the clean bed that Elizabeth had prepared for her, and she instantly fell asleep. She was in the old deacon’s bed, and he made ready to pass the night on the couch in his little sitting-room.

As soon as the old couple were alone Eusebius told his wife how and where he had met the girl and ended by saying:

“It is a puzzling question as to these Arians and other Christian heretics. I cannot be hard on them so long as they cling faithfully to the One Lord who is necessary to all. If we are in the right—and I firmly believe that we are—and the Son is of one substance of the Father, he is without spot or blemish; and what can be more divine than to overlook the error of another if it concerns ourselves, or what more meanly human than to take such an error amiss and indulge in a cruel or sanguinary revenge on the erring soul?”



Do not misunderstand me. I, unfortunately—or rather, I say, thank God!—I have done nothing great here on earth, and have never risen to be anything more than a deacon. But if a boy comes up to me and mistakes me for an acolyte or something of that kind, is that a reason why I should flout or punish him? Not a bit of it.



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“And to my belief our Saviour is too purely divine to hate those who regard Him as only ‘God-like.’ He is Love. And when Arius goes to Heaven and sees Jesus Christ in all His divine glory, and falls down before Him in an ecstasy of joy and repentance, the worst the Lord will do to him will be to take him by the ear and say: ‘Thou fool! Now thou seest what I really am; but thine errors be forgiven!’”

Elizabeth nodded assent. “Amen,” she said, “so be it.—And so, no doubt, it will be. Did the Lord cast out the woman taken in adultery? Did he not give us the parable of the Samaritan?—Poor little girl! We have often wished for a daughter and now we have found one; a pretty creature she is too. God grants us all our wishes! But you must be tired, old man; go to rest now.”

“Directly, directly,” said Eusebius; but then, striking his forehead with his hand, he went on in much annoyance: “And with all this tumult and worry I had quite forgotten the most important thing of all: Marcus! He is like a possessed creature, and if I do not make a successful appeal to his conscience before he sleeps this night mischief will come of it. Yes, I am very tired; but duty before rest. It is of no use to contradict me, Mother. Get me my cloak; I must go to the lad.” And a few minutes later the old man was making his way to the house in the Canopic street.

CHAPTER XV.

Dread and anxiety had taken possession of the merchant’s household after Constantine had left them. Messengers came hurrying in, one after another, to request the presence of Olympius. A heathen secretary of Evagrius the Governor, had revealed what was astir, and the philosopher had at once prepared to return to the Serapeum. Porphyrius himself ordered his closed harmamaxa to be brought out, and undertook to fetch weapons and standards to the temple from a storehouse where they were laid by. This building stood on a plot of ground belonging to him in Rhacotis, behind a timber-yard which was accessible from the streets in front and behind, but sheltered from the public gaze by sheds and wood-stacks.

The old aqueduct, which supplied the courts of sacrifice and the Subterranean crypts of the temple where the mysteries of Serapis were celebrated, passed close by the back-wall of this warehouse. Since the destruction of the watercourse, under the Emperor Julian, the underground conduit had been dry and empty, and a man by slightly stooping could readily pass through it unseen into the Serapeum. This mysterious passage had lately been secretly cleared out, and it was now to be used for the transport of the arms to the temple precincts.

Damia had been present at the brief but vehement interview between her son and Olympius, and had thrown in a word now and again: “It is serious, very serious!” or, “Fight it out—no quarter!”



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The parting was evidently a very painful one to Olympius; when the merchant held out both his hands the older man clasped them in his and held them to his breast, saying: "Thanks, my friend; thanks for all you have done. We have lived—and if now we perish it is for the future happiness of our grandchildren. What would life be to you and me if it were marred by scourgings and questionings?—The omens read ill, and if I am not completely deceived we are at the beginning of the end. What lies beyond...! we as philosophers must meet it calmly. The supreme Mind that governs us has planned the universe so well, that it is not likely that those things of which we now have no knowledge should not also be ordered for the best. The pinions of my soul beat indeed more freely and lightly as I foresee the moment when it shall be released from the burden of this flesh!"

The High-Priest raised his arms as though indeed he were prepared to soar and uttered a fervent and inspired prayer in which he rehearsed to the gods all that he and his had done in their honor and vowed to offer them fresh sacrifices. His expressions were so lofty, and his flow of language so beautiful and free, that Porphyrius did not dare to interrupt him, though this long delay on the part of the leader of the cause made him intolerably anxious. When the old man—who was as emotional as a boy—ceased speaking, his white beard was wet with tears, and seeing that even Damia's and Gorgo's eyes were moist, he was preparing to address them again; but Porphyrius interposed. He gave him time only to press his lips to Datnia's hand and to bid Gorgo farewell.

"You were born into stirring times," he said to her, "but under a good sign. Two worlds are in collision; which shall survive?—For you, my darling, I have but one wish: May you be happy!"

He left the room and the merchant paced up and down lost in gloomy thoughts. Presently, as he caught his mother's eye fixed uneasily upon him, he murmured, less to her than to himself: "If he can think thus of what the end will be, who can still dare to hope?" Damia drew herself up in her chair.

"I," she exclaimed passionately, "I—I dare, and I do hope and trust in the future. Is everything to perish which our forefathers planned and founded? Is this dismal superstition to overwhelm and bury the world and all that is bright and beautiful, as the lava stream rolled over the cities of Vesuvius? No, a thousand times no! Our retrograde and cowardly generation, which has lost all heart to enjoy life in sheer dread of future annihilation, may perhaps be doomed by the gods, as was that of Deucalion's day. Well—if so, what must be must! But such a world as they dream of never can, never will last. Let them succeed in their monstrous scheme! if the Temple of temples, the House of Serapis, were to be in ashes and the image of the mighty god to be dashed to pieces, what then... I say what then? Then indeed everything will be at an end—we, everybody; but they too, they, too, will perish."



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She clenched her fist with hatred and revenge and went on: "I know what I know—there are legible and infallible signs, and it is given to me to interpret them, and I tell you: It is true, unerringly true, as every Alexandrian child has learnt from its nurse: When Serapis falls the earth will collapse like a dry puff-ball under a horse's hoof. A hundred oracles have announced it, it is written in the prophecies of the heavenly bodies, and in the scroll of Fate. Let them be! Let it come! The end is sweet to those who, in the hour of death, can see the enemy thrust the sword into his own breast."

The old woman sank back panting and gasping for breath, but Gorgo hastened to support her in her arms and she soon recovered. Hardly had she opened her eyes again than, seeing her son still in the room, she went on angrily:

"You—here still? Do you think there is any time to spare? They will be waiting, waiting for you! You have the key and they need weapons."

"I know what I am about," replied Porphyrius calmly. "All in good time. I shall be on the spot long before the youngsters have assembled. Cyrus will bring me the pass-words and signs; I shall send off the messengers, and then I shall still be in time for action."

"Messengers! To whom?"

"To Barkas. He is at the head of more than a thousand Libyan peasants and slaves. I shall send one, too, to Pachomius to bid him win us over adherents among the Biamite fishermen and the population of the eastern Delta."

"Right, right—I know. Twenty talents—Pachomius is poor—twenty talents shall be his, out of my private coffer, if only they are here in time."

"I would give ten, thirty times as much if they were only here now!" cried the merchant, giving way for the first time to the expression of his real feelings. "When I began life my father taught me the new superstitions. Its chains still hang about me; but in this fateful hour I feel more strongly than ever, and I mean to show, that I am faithful to the old gods. We will not be wanting; but alas! there is no escape for us now if the Imperial party are staunch. If they fall upon us before Barkas can join us, all is lost; if, on the contrary, Barkas comes at once and in time, there is still some hope; all may yet be well. What can a party of monks do? And as yet only our Constantine's heavy cavalry have come to the assistance of the two legions of the garrison."

"Our Constantine!" shrieked Damia. "Whose? I ask you, whose? We have nothing to do with that miserable Christian!"

But Gorgo turned upon her at once:

"Indeed, grandmother," she exclaimed, quivering with rage, "but we have! He is a soldier and must do his duty; but he is fondly attached to us."



“Us, us?” retorted the old woman with a laugh. “Has he sworn love to you, let me ask? Has he? and you-do you believe him, simple fool? I know him, I know him! Why, for a scrap of bread and a drop of wine from the hand of his priest he would see you and all of us plunged into misery! But see, here are the messengers.”



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Porphyrius gave his instructions to the young men who now entered the hall, hurried them off, clasped Gorgo in a tender embrace and then bent over his mother to kiss her—a thing he had not done for many a day. Old Damia laid aside her stick, and taking her son's face in both her withered hands, muttered a few words which were half a fond appeal and half a magical formula, and then the women were alone. For a long while both were silent. The old woman sat sunk in her arm-chair while Gorgo stood with her back against the pedestal of a bust of Plato, gazing meditatively at the ground. At last it was Damia who spoke, asking to be carried into the women's rooms.

Gorgo, however, stopped her with a gesture, went close to her and said: "No, wait a minute, mother; first you must hear what I have to say."

"What you have to say?" asked her grandmother, shrugging her shoulders.

"Yes. I have never deceived you; but one thing I have hitherto concealed from you because I was never till this morning sure of it myself—now I am. Now I know that I love him."

"The Christian?" said the old woman, pushing aside a shade that screened her eyes.

"Yes, Constantine; I will not hear you abuse him." Damia laughed sharply, and said in a tone of supreme scorn:

"You will not? Then you had better stop your ears, my dear, for as long as my tongue can wag. . . ."

"Hush, grandmother, say no more," said the girl resolutely. "Do not provoke me with more than I can bear. Eros has pierced me later than he does most girls and has done it but once, but how deeply you can never know. If you speak ill of him you only aggravate the wound and you would not be so cruel! Do not—I entreat you; drop the subject or else. . . ."

"Or else?"

"Or else I must die, mother—and you know you love me."

Her tone was soft but firm; her words referred to the future, but that future was as clear to Gorgo's view as if it were past. Damia gave a hasty, sidelong glance at her grandchild, and a cold chill ran through her; the—girl stood and spoke with an air of inspiration—she was full of the divinity as Damia thought, and the old woman herself felt as though she were in a temple and in the immediate presence of the Immortals.

Gorgo waited for a reply, but in vain; and as her grandmother remained silent she went back to her place by the pedestal. At last Damia raised her wrinkled face, looked straight in the girl's eyes and asked:



“And what is to be the end of it?”

“Aye—what?” said Gorgo gloomily and she shook her head. “I ask myself and can find no answer, for his image is ever present to me and yet walls and mountains stand between us. That face, that image—I might perhaps force myself to shatter it; but nothing shall ever induce me to let it be defiled or disgraced! Nothing!”

The old woman sank into brooding thought once more; mechanically she repeated Gorgo’s last word, and at intervals that gradually became longer she murmured, at last scarcely audibly: “Nothing—nothing!”

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She had lost all sense of time and of her immediate surroundings, and long-forgotten sorrows crowded on her memory: The dreadful day when a young freedman—a gifted astronomer and philosopher who had been appointed her tutor, and whom she had loved with all the passion of a vehement nature—had been kicked out of her father's house by slaves, for daring to aspire to her hand. She had given him up—she had been forced to do so; and after she was the wife of another and he had risen to fame, she had never given him any token that she had not forgotten him. Two thirds of a century lay between that happy and terrible time, and the present. He had been dead many a long year, and still she remembered him, and was thinking of him even now. A singular effort of fancy showed her herself, as she had then been, and Gorgo—whom she saw not with her bodily eyes, though the girl was standing in front of her—two young creatures side by side. The two were but one in her vision; the same anguish that embittered one life now threatened the other. But after all she, Damia, had dragged this grief after her through the weary decades, like the iron ball at the end of a chain which keeps the galley-slave to his place at the oar, and from which he can no more escape than from a ponderous and ever-present shadow; and Gorgo's sorrow could not at any rate be for long, since the end of all things was at hand—it was coming slowly but with inevitable certainty, nearer and nearer every hour.

When had a troop of enthusiastic students and hastily-collected peasant-soldiers ever been able to snake an effectual stand against the hosts of Rome? Damia, who only a few minutes since had spoken with such determined encouragement to her son, had terrible visions of the Imperial legions putting Olympius to rout, with the Libyans under Barkas and the Biamite rabble under Pachomius; storming the Serapeum and reducing it to ruin: Firebrands flying through its sacred halls, the roof giving way, the vaults falling in; the sublime image of the god—the magnificent work of Bryaxis—battered by a hail of stones, and sinking to mingle with the reeking dust. Then a cry rose up from all nature, as though every star in heaven, every wave of ocean, every leaf of the forest, every blade in the meadow, every rock on the shore and every grain of sand in the measureless desert had found a voice; and this universal wail of “Woe, woe!” was drowned by rolling thunder such as the ear of man had never heard, and no mortal creature could hear and live. The heavens opened, and out of the black gulf of death-bearing clouds poured streams of fire; consuming flames rose to meet it from the riven womb of earth, rushing up to lick the sky. What had been air turned to fire and ashes, the silver and gold stars fell crashing from the firmament, and the heavens themselves bowed and collapsed, burying the ruined earth. Ashes, ashes, fine grey dusty ashes pervaded space, till presently a hurricane



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rose and swept away the chaos of gloom, and vast nothingness yawned before her: a bottomless abyss—an insatiable throat, swallowing down with greedy thirst all that was left; till where the world had been, with gods and men and all their works, there was only nothingness; hideous, inscrutable and unfathomable. And in it, above it, around it—for what are the dimensions of nothingness?—there reigned the incomprehensible Unity of the Primal One, in calm and pitiless self-concentration, beyond—the Real, nay even beyond the Conceivable—for conception implies plurality—the Supreme One of the Neo-Platonists to whose school she belonged.

The old woman's blood ran cold and hot as she pictured the scene; but she believed in it, and chose to believe in it; "Nothing, nothing. . ." which she had begun by muttering, insensibly changed to "Nothingness, nothingness!" and at last she spoke it aloud.

Gorgo stood spellbound as she gazed at her grandmother. What had come over her? What was the meaning of this glaring eye, this gasping breath, this awful expression in her face, this convulsive action of her hands? Was she mad? And what did she mean by "Nothingness, nothingness. . ." repeated in a sort of hollow cry?

Terrified beyond bearing she laid her hand on Dainia's shoulder, saying: "Mother, mother! wake up! What do you mean by saying 'nothingness, nothingness' in that dreadful way?"

Dainia collected her scattered wits, shivered with cold and then said, dully at first, but with a growing cheerfulness that made Gorgo's blood run cold: "Did I say 'nothingness'? Did I speak of the great void, my child? You are quick of hearing. Nothingness—well, you have learnt to think; are you capable of defining the meaning of the word—a monster that has neither head nor tail, neither front nor back—can you, I say, define the idea of nothingness?"

"What do you mean, mother?" said Gorgo with growing alarm.

"No, she does not know, she does not understand," muttered the old woman with a dreary smile. "And yet Melampus told me, only yesterday, that you understood his lesson on conic sections better than many men. Aye, aye, child; I, too, learnt mathematics once, and I still go through various calculations every night in my observatory; but to this day I find it difficult to conceive of a mathematical point. It is nothing and yet it is something. But the great final nothingness!—And that even is nonsense, for it can be neither great nor small, and come neither sooner nor later. Is it not so, my sweet? Think of nothing—who cannot do that; but it is very hard to imagine nothingness. We can neither of us achieve that. Not even the One has a place in it. But what is the use of racking our brains? Only wait till to-morrow or the day after; something will happen then which will reduce our own precious persons and this



beautiful world to that nothingness which to-day is inconceivable. It is coming; I can hear from afar the brazen tramp of the airy and incorporeal monster. A queer sort of giant—smaller than the mathematical point of which we were speaking, and yet vast beyond all measurement. Aye, aye; our intelligence, polyp-like, has long arms and can apprehend vast size and wide extent; but it can no more conceive of nothingness than it can of infinite space or time.



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“I was dreaming that this monstrous Nought had come to his kingdom and was opening a yawning mouth and toothless jaws to swallow its all down into the throat that it has not got—you, and me, and your young officer, with this splendid, recreant city and the sky and the earth. Wait, only wait! The glorious image of Serapis still stands radiant, but the cross casts an ominous shadow that has already darkened the light over half the earth! Our gods are an abomination to Caesar, and Cynegius only carries out his wishes. . .”

Here Damia was interrupted by the steward, who rushed breathless into the room, exclaiming:

“Lost! All is lost! An edict of Theodosius commands that every temple of the gods shall be closed, and the heavy cavalry have dispersed our force.”

“Ah ha!” croaked the old woman in shrill accents. “You see, you see! There it is: the beginning of the end! Yes—your cavalry are a powerful force. They are digging a grave—wide and deep, with room in it for many: for you, for me, and for themselves, too, and for their Prefect. —Call Argus, man, and carry me into the Gynaeconitis—[The women’s apartment]—and there tell us what has happened.” In the women’s room the steward told all he knew, and a sad tale it was; one thing, however, gave him some comfort: Olympius was at the Serapeunt and had begun to fortify the temple, and garrison it with a strong force of adherents.

Damia had definitely given up all hope, and hardly heeded this part of his story, while on Gorgo’s mind it had a startling effect. She loved Constantine with all the fervor of a first, and only, and long-suppressed passion; she had repented long since of her little fit of suspicion, and it would have cost her no perceptible effort to humble her pride, to fly to him and pray for forgiveness. But she could not—dared not—now, when everything was at stake, renounce her fidelity to the gods for whose sake she had let him leave her in anger, and to whom she must cling, cost what it might; that would be a base desertion. If Olympius were to triumph in the struggle she might go to her lover and say: “Do you remain a Christian, and leave me the creed of my childhood, or else open my heart to yours.” But, as matters now stood, her first duty was to quell her passion and retrain faithful to the end, even though the cause were lost. She was Greek to the backbone; she knew it and felt it, and yet her eye had sparkled with pride as she heard the steward’s tale, and she seemed to see Constantine at the head of his horsemen, rushing upon the heathen and driving them to the four winds like a flock of sheep. Her heart beat high for the foe rather than for her hapless friends—these were but bruised reeds—those were the incarnation of victorious strength.



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These divided feelings worried and vexed her; but her grandmother had suggested a way of reconciling them. Where he commanded victory followed, and if the Christians should succeed in destroying the image of Serapis the joints of the world would crack and the earth would crumble away. She herself was familiar with the traditions and the oracles which with one consent foretold this doom; she had learnt them as an infant from her nurse, from the slave-women at the loom, from learned men and astute philosophers—and to her the horrible prophecy meant a solution of every contradiction and the bitter-sweet hope of perishing with the man she loved.

As it grew dark another person appeared: the Moschosphragist—[The examiner of sacrificed animals]—from the temple of Serapis, who, every day, examined the entrails of a slaughtered beast for Damia; to-day the augury had been so bad that he was almost afraid of revealing it. But the old woman, sure of it beforehand, took his soothsaying quite calmly, and only desired to be carried up to her observatory that she might watch the risings of the stars.

Gorgo remained alone below. From the adjoining workrooms came the monotonous rattle of the loom at which, as usual, a number of slaves were working.

Suddenly the clatter ceased. Damia had sent a slave-girl down to say that they might leave off work and rest till next day if they chose. She had ordered that wine should be distributed to them in the great hall, as freely as at the great festival of Dionysus.

All was silent in the Gynaeconitis. The garlands of flowers, which Gorgo herself had helped some damsels of her acquaintance to twine for the temple of Isis, lay in a heap—the steward had told her that the venerable sanctuary was to be closed and surrounded by soldiers. This then put an end to the festival; and she could have been heartily glad, for it relieved her of the necessity of defying Constantine; still, it was with tender melancholy that she thought of the gentle goddess in whose sanctuary she had so often found comfort and support. She could remember, as a tiny child, gathering the first flowers in her little garden, and sticking them in the ground near the tank from which water was fetched for libations in the temple; with the pocketmoney given her by her elders, she had bought perfumes to pour on the altars of the divinity; and often when her heart was heavy she had found relief in prayer before the marble statue of the goddess. How splendid had the festivals of Isis been, how gladly and rapturously had she sung in their honor! Almost everything that had lent poetry and dignity to her childhood had been bound up with Isis and her sanctuary—and now it was closed and the image of the divine mother was perhaps lying in fragments in the dirt!

Gorgo knew all the lofty ideals which lay at the foundation of the worship of this goddess; but it was not to them that she had turned for help, but to the image in whose mystical strength she trusted. And what had already been done to Isis and her temple might soon be done to Serapis and to his house.



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She could not bear the thought, for she had been accustomed to regard the Serapeum as the very heart of the universe—the centre and fulcrum on which the balance of the earth depended; to her, Serapis himself was inseparable from his temple and its atmosphere of magical and mystical power. Every prophecy, every Sibylline text, every oracle must be false if the overthrow of that image could remain unpunished—if the destruction of the universe failed to follow, as surely as a flood ensues from a breach in a dyke. How indeed could it be otherwise, according to the explanation which her teacher had given her of the Neo-Platonic conception of the nature of the god?

It was not Serapis but the great and unapproachable One—supreme above comprehension and sublime beyond conception, for whose majesty every name was too mean, the fount and crown of Good and Beauty, in whole all that exists ever has been and ever shall be. He it was who, like a brimful vessel, overflowed with the quintessence of what we call divine; and from this effluence emanated the divine Mind, the pure intelligence which is to the One what light is to the sun. This Mind with its vitality—a life not of time but of eternity—could stir or remain passive as it listed; it included a Plurality, while the One was Unity, and forever indivisible. The concept of each living creature proceeded from the second: The eternal Mind; and this vivifying and energizing intelligence comprehended the prototypes of every living being, hence, also, of the immortal gods—not themselves but their idea or image. And just as the eternal Mind proceeded from the One, so, in the third place, did the Soul of the universe proceed from the second; that Soul whose twofold nature on one side touched the supreme Mind, and, on the other, the baser world of matter. This was the immortal Aphrodite, cradled in bliss in the pure radiance of the ideal world and yet unable to free herself from the gross clay of matter fouled by sensuality and the vehicle of sin.

The head of Serapis was the eternal Mind; in his broad breast slept the Soul of the Universe, and the prototypes of all created things; the world of matter was the footstool under his feet. All the subordinate forces obeyed him, the mighty first Cause, whose head towered up to the realm of the incoinprellensible and inconceivable One. He was the sum total of the universe, the epitome of things created; and at the same time he was the power which gave them life and intelligence and preserved them from perishing by perpetual procreation. It was his might that kept the multiform structure of the material and psychical world in perennial harmony. All that lived—Nature and its Soul as much as Man and his Soul—were inseparably dependent on him. If he—if Serapis were to fall, the order of the universe must be destroyed; and with him: The Synthesis of the Universe—the Universe itself must cease to exist.

But what would survive would not be the nothingness—the void of which her grandmother had spoken; it would be the One—the cold, ineffable, incomprehensible One! This world would perish with Serapis; but perhaps it might please that One to call another world into being out of his overflowing essence, peopled by other and different beings.



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Gorgo was startled out of these meditations by a wild tumult which came up from the slaves' hall some distance off and reached her ears in the women's sitting-room. Could her grandmother have opened the wine stores all too freely; were the miserable wretches already drunk?

No, the noise was not that of a troop of slaves who have forgotten themselves, and given the rein to their wild revelry under the influence of Dionysus! She listened and could distinctly hear lamentable howls and wild cries of grief. Something frightful must have happened! Had some evil befallen her father? Greatly alarmed she flew across the courtyard to the slaves' quarters and found the whole establishment, black and white alike, in a state of frenzy. The women were rushing about with their hair unbound over their faces, beating their breasts and wailing, the men squatted in silence with their wine-cups before them untouched, softly sobbing and whining.

What had come upon them—what blow had fallen on the house?

Gorgo called her old nurse and learnt from her that the Moschosphragist had just told them that the troops had been placed all round the Serapeum and that the Emperor had commanded the Prefect of the East to lay violent hands on the temple of the King of gods. Today or to-morrow the crime was to be perpetrated. They had been warned to pray and repent of their sins, for at the moment when the holiest sanctuary on earth should fall the whole world would crumble into nothingness. The entrails of the beast sacrificed by Damia had been black as though scorched, and a terrific groan had been heard from the god himself in the great shrine; the pillars of the great hypostyle had trembled and the three heads of Cerberus, lying at the feet of Serapis; had opened their jaws.

Gorgo listened in silence to the old woman's story; and all she said in reply was: "Let them wail."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Pretended to see nothing in the old woman's taunts
Very hard to imagine nothingness

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