

Serapis — Volume 04 eBook

Serapis — Volume 04 by Georg Ebers

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Contents

Serapis — Volume 04 eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	7
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	10
Page 6.....	11
Page 7.....	12
Page 8.....	13
Page 9.....	14
Page 10.....	15
Page 11.....	16
Page 12.....	17
Page 13.....	18
Page 14.....	20
Page 15.....	21
Page 16.....	22
Page 17.....	24
Page 18.....	25
Page 19.....	27
Page 20.....	28
Page 21.....	30
Page 22.....	31

Page 23.....	32
Page 24.....	33
Page 25.....	34
Page 26.....	35
Page 27.....	37
Page 28.....	38
Page 29.....	40
Page 30.....	41
Page 31.....	43
Page 32.....	44
Page 33.....	45
Page 34.....	46
Page 35.....	48
Page 36.....	50
Page 37.....	52
Page 38.....	53
Page 39.....	55

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
CHAPTER XVI.		1
CHAPTER XVII.		6
CHAPTER XVIII.		17
CHAPTER XIX.		26
ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:		34
Information about Project Gutenberg		35
(one page)		
(Three Pages)		36

Page 1

CHAPTER XVI.

The day had flown swiftly for Dada under the roof of Medius; there were costumes and scenery in wonderful variety for her to look over; the children were bright and friendly, and she had enjoyed playing with them, for all her little tricks and rhymes, which Papias was familiar with by this time, were to them new and delightful. It amused her, too, to see what the domestic difficulties were of which the singer had described himself as being a victim.

Medius was one of those men who buy everything that strikes them as cheap—for instance, that very morning, at Kibotus he had stood to watch a fish auction and had bought a whole tub-full of pickled fish for “a mere trifle;” but when, presently, the cargo was delivered, his wife flew into a great rage, which she vented first on the innocent lad who brought the fish, and then on the less innocent purchaser. They would not get to the bottom of the barrel and eat the last herring, she asserted, till they were a century old. Medius, while he disputed so monstrous a statement, vehemently declared that such wholesome and nutritious food as those fish was undoubtedly calculated to prolong the lives of the whole family to an exceptionally great age.

This discussion, which was not at all by way of a jest, amused Dada far more than the tablets, cylinders and cones covered with numbers and cabalistic signs, to which Medius tried to direct her attention. She darted off in the midst of his eager explanations to show his grandchildren how a rabbit sniffs and moves his ears when he is offered a cabbage-leaf.

The report, which reached them in the afternoon, of the proceedings in the square by the Prefect's house, disturbed Medius greatly, and he set off at once for the scene of action.

He did not return till evening, and then he looked like an altered man. He must have witnessed something very terrible, for his face was as pale as death, and his usually confident and swaggering manner had given place to a stricken and care-worn air. He walked up and down the room, groaning as he went; he flung himself on the divan and stared fixedly at the ground; he wandered into the atrium and gazed cautiously out on the street. Dada's presence seemed suddenly to be the source of much anxiety to him, and the girl, painfully conscious of this, hastened to tell him that she would prefer to return home at once to her uncle and aunt.

“You can please yourself,” was all he said, with a shrug and a sigh. “You may stay for aught I care. It is all the same now!”

So far his wife had left him to himself, for she was used to his violent and eccentric behavior whenever anything had crossed him; but now she peremptorily desired to be

informed what had happened to him and he at once acceded. He had been unwilling to frighten them sooner than was needful, but they must learn it sooner or later: Cynegius had arrived to overthrow the image of Serapis, and what must ensue they knew only too well. "To-day," he cried, "we will live; but by to-morrow—a thousand to one-by to-morrow there will be an end of all our joys and the earth will swallow up the old home and us with it!"

Page 2

His words fell on prepared ground; his wife and daughter were appalled, and as Medius went on to paint the imminent catastrophe in more vivid colors, his energy growing in proportion to its effect on them, they began at first to sob and whimper and then to wail loudly. When the children, who by this time were in bed, heard the lamentations of their elders, they, too, set up a howl, and even Dada caught the infection. As for Medius himself, he had talked himself into such a state of terror by his own descriptions of the approaching destruction of the world that he abandoned all claim to his proud reputation as a strong-minded man, and quite forgot his favorite theory that everything that went by the name of God was a mere invention of priests and rulers to delude and oppress the ignorant; at last he even went so far as to mutter a prayer, and when his wife begged to be allowed to join a family of neighbors in sacrificing a black lamb at daybreak, he recklessly gave her a handful of money.

None of the party closed an eye that night. Dada could not bear to remain in the house. Perhaps all these horrors existed only in Medius' fancy; but if destruction were indeed impending, she would a thousand times rather perish with her own relations than with these people, in whom there was something—she did not know what—for which she felt a deep aversion. This she explained to her host early in the day and he was ready to set out at once and restore her to the care of Karnis.

In fact, the purpose for which he had needed her must certainly come to nothing. He himself was attached to the service of Posidonius, a great magician and wizard, to whom half Alexandria flocked—Christians, Jews, and heathens—in order to communicate with the dead, with gods and with demons, to obtain spells and charms by which to attract lovers or injure foes, to learn the art of becoming invisible, or to gain a glimpse into the future. In the performance which was being planned Dada was to have appeared to a bereaved mother as the glorified presence of her lost daughter; but the disturbance in the city had driven the matron, who was rich, to take refuge in the country the previous afternoon. Nor was it likely that the sorcerer's other clients—even if all turned out better than could be hoped—would venture into the streets by night. Rich people were timid and suspicious; and as the Emperor had lately promulgated fresh and more stringent edicts against the magic arts, Posidonius had thought it prudent to postpone the meeting. Hence Medius had at present no use for the girl; but he affected to agree so readily to her wishes merely out of anxiety to relieve Isarnis as soon as possible of his uneasiness as to her fate.

Page 3

The morning was bright and hot, and the town was swarming with an excited mob soon after sunrise. Terror, curiosity and defiance were painted on every face; however, Medius and his young companion made their way unhindered as far as the temple of Isis by the lake. The doors of the sanctuary were closed, and guarded by soldiers; but the southern and western walls were surrounded by thousands and thousands of heathen. Some hundreds, indeed, had passed the night there in prayer, or in sheer terror of the catastrophe which could not fail to ensue, and they were kneeling in groups, groaning, weeping, and cursing, or squatting in stolid resignation, weary, crushed and hopeless. It was a heart-rending sight, and neither Dada—who till this moment had been dreading Dame Herse's scolding tongue far more than the destruction of the world—nor her companion could forbear joining in the wail that rose from this vast multitude. Medius fell on his knees groaning aloud and pulled the girl down beside him; for, upon the wall that enclosed the temple precincts, they now saw a priest who, after holding the sacred Sistrum up to view and muttering some unintelligible prayers and invocations, proceeded to address the people.

He was a short stout man, and the sweat streamed down his face as he stood under the blazing sun to sketch a fearful picture of the monstrous doom which was hanging over the city and its inhabitants. He spoke with pompous exaggeration, in a shrill, harsh voice, wiping his face meanwhile with his white linen robe or gasping for air, when breath failed him, like a fish stranded on the beach. All this, however, did not trouble his audience, for the hatred that inspired his language, and the terror of the immediate future which betrayed itself in every word exactly reflected their feelings. Dada alone was moved to mirth; the longer she looked at him the more she felt inclined to laugh; besides, the day was so bright—a pigeon on the wall pattered round his mate, nodding and wriggling after the funny manner of pigeons in love—and, above all, her heart beat so high and she had such a happy instinctive feeling that all was ordered for the best, that the world seemed to her a beautiful and fairly secure dwelling-place, in spite of the dark forebodings of the zealous preacher. On the eve of destruction the earth must surely look differently from this; and it struck her as highly improbable that the gods should have revealed their purpose to such a queer old driveller as this priest, and have hidden it from other men. The very fact that this burly personage should prophesy evil with such conviction made her doubt it; and presently, when the plumes of three or four helmets became visible behind the speaker, and a pair of strong hands grasped his thick ancles and suddenly dragged him down from his eminence and back into the temple, she could hardly keep herself from laughing outright.

Page 4

Now, however, there was more real cause for alarm a trumpet-blast was heard, and a maniple of the twenty-second legion marched down in close order on the crowd who fled before them. Medius was one of the first to make off; Dada kept close to his side, and when, in his alarm, he fairly took to his heels, she did the same; for, in spite of the reception she apprehended, she felt that the sooner she could rejoin her own people the better. Never till now had she known how dear they were to her. Herse might scold; but her sharpest words were truer and better than the smooth flattery of Medius. It was a joy to think of seeing them again—Agne, too, and little Papias—and she felt as though she were about to meet them after years of separation.

By this time they were at the ship-yard, which was divided only by a lane from the Temple-grove; there lay the barge. Dada pulled off her veil and waved it in the air, but the signal met with no response. They were at the house, no doubt, for some men were in the very act of drawing up the wooden gangway which connected the vessel with the land. Medius hurried forward and was so fortunate as to overtake the steward, who had been superintending the operation, before he reached the garden-gate.

The old man was rejoiced to see them, and told them at once that his old mistress had promised Herse to give Dada shelter if she should return to them. But Dada was proud. She had no liking for Gorgo or her grandmother; and when she had caught up to Medius, quite out of breath, she positively refused the old lady's hospitality.

The barge was deserted. Karnis—so the steward informed her—had withdrawn to the temple of Serapis with his son, intending to assist in its defence; and Herse had accompanied them, for Olympius had said that women would be found useful in the beleaguered sanctuary, in preparing food for the combatants and in nursing the wounded.

Dada stood looking at their floating home, utterly disappointed and discouraged. She longed to follow her aunt and to gain admission to the Serapeutn; but how could she do this now, and of what use could she hope to be? There was nothing heroic in her composition, and from her infancy she had always sickened at the sight of blood. She had no alternative but to return with Medius, and take refuge under his roof.

The singer gave her ample time for reflection; he had seated himself, with the steward, under the shade of a sycamore, and the two men were absorbed in convincing each other, by a hundred arguments which they had picked up during the last day or two, how inevitably the earth must be annihilated if the statue of Serapis should be overthrown. In the warmth of their discussion they paid no heed to the young girl, who was sitting on a fallen Hermes by the road-side. Her vigorous and lively temperament rendered her little apt to dream, or even meditate, in broad daylight; but the heat and the recent excitement had overwrought

Page 5

her and she felt into a drowsy reverie. Now and again, as her heavy head drooped on her breast, she fancied the Serapeum had actually fallen; then, as she raised it again, she recovered her consciousness that it was hot, that she had lost her home, and that she must, however unwillingly, return with Medius. But at length her eyelids closed, and as she sat in the full blaze of the sun, a rosy light filled her eyes and a bright vision floated before her: Marcus took the modius—the corn measure—from the head of the statue of Serapis and offered it to her; it was quite full of lilies and roses and violets, and she was delighted with the flowers and thanked him warmly when he set the modius down before her. He held out his hands to her calmly and kindly, and she gave him hers, feeling very happy under the steady, compassionate gaze of his large eyes which had often watched her, on board ship, for some minutes at a time. She longed to say something to him, but she could not speak; and she looked on quite unmoved as the statue of the god and the hall in which it stood were wrapt in flames. No smoke mingled with this clear and genial blaze, but it compelled her to shade her dazzled eyes; and as she lifted her hand she woke to see Medius standing in front of her.

He desired her to come home with him at once, and she rose to obey, listening in silence to his assurances that the lives of Karnis and Orpheus would not be worth a sesterce if they fell into the hands of the Roman soldiers.

She walked on, more hopeless and depressed than she had ever felt in her life before, past the unfinished hulks in the ship-yard where no one was at work to-day when, coming down the lane that divided the wharf from the temple precincts, she saw an old man and a little boy. She had not time to ask herself whether she saw rightly or was mistaken before the child caught sight of her, snatched his hand away from that of his companion, and flew towards her, shouting her name. In the next moment little Papias had rushed rapturously into her arms and, as she lifted him up, had thrown his hands round her neck, clinging to her as if he would never leave go again, while she hugged him closely for joy, and kissed him with her eyes full of tears. She was herself again at once; the sad and anxious girl was the lively Dada once more.

The man who had been leading the little boy was immediately besieged with questions, and from his answers they learnt that he had found the child the evening before at the corner of a street, crying bitterly; that he had taken him home, and with some little difficulty had ascertained from him that he belonged to some people who were living on board a barge, close to a ship-yard. In spite of the excitement that prevailed he had brought the child home as soon as possible, for he could fancy how anxious his parents must be. Dada thanked the kind-hearted artisan with sincere warmth, and the man, seeing how happy the girl and the child were at having met, went his way quite satisfied.

Page 6

Medius had stood by and had said nothing, but he looked on the pretty little boy with much favor. If the earth were not to crumble into nothingness after all, this child would be a real treasure trove; and when Dada begged him to find a corner for Papias in his house, though he hinted at the smallness of his earnings and the limited space at his command, he yielded, if reluctantly, to her entreaties, on her offering him her gold brooch to cover his expenses.

As they made their way back she cast many loving glances at the child; she was extremely fond of him, and he seemed a link to bind her to her own people.

CHAPTER XVII.

The singer's wife and daughter had joined some neighbors in sacrificing a black lamb to Zeus, a ceremony that was usual on the occasion of earthquakes or very severe storms; but it was done very secretly, for the edicts prohibiting the sacrifice of victims to the gods were promptly and rigidly enforced. The more the different members of the family came into contact with other citizens, the more deeply rooted was their terror that the end of all things was at hand. As soon as it was dark the old man buried all his savings, for even if everyone else were to perish, he felt that he—though how or why he knew not—might be exempt from the common doom.

The night was warm, and great and small alike slept—or lay awake—under the stars so as not to be overwhelmed by the crash of roofs and walls; the next day was oppressively hot, and the family cowered in a row in the scanty shade of a palm and of a fig-tree, the only growth of any size in the singer's garden. Medius himself, in spite of the scorching sun, could not be still.

He rushed off to the town again and again, but only to return each time to enhance the anguish of the household by relating all sorts of horrors which he had picked up in his wanderings. They were obliged to satisfy their hunger with bread, cheese, and fruit, for the two slave-women positively refused to risk their lives by cooking in the house.

Medius' temper varied as he came and went; now he was gentle and affectionate, and then again he raged like a madman; and his wife outdid him. At one moment she would abandon him and the children, while she anointed the household altar and put up prayers; at the next she railed at the baseness and cruelty of the gods. When her husband brought the news that the Serapeum was surrounded by the Imperial troops, she scoffed and spit at the sacred images, and five minutes later she was vowing a sacrifice to the deities of Olympus. The general confusion was distracting; as the sun rose, the anguish, physical and mental, of the whole family greatly increased, and by noon had reached an appalling pitch.

Page 7

Dada looked on intensely disgusted, and only shook her head when one or another of her companions was sure she felt a shock of earthquake or heard the roll of distant thunder. She could not explain to herself why she, who was usually timid enough, was exempt from the universal panic though she felt deeply pitiful towards the terrified women and children. None of them troubled themselves about her; the day dragged on with intolerable slowness, quenching all her gay vivacity, while she was utterly exhausted by the scorching African sun, of which, till now, she had never known the power. At last, in the afternoon, she found the little garden, which was by this time heated like an oven, quite unbearable, and she looked round for Papias. The child was sitting on the wall looking at the congregation streaming into the basilica of St. Mark. Dada followed his example, and when the many-voiced psalms rang out of the open door of the church, she listened to the music, for it seemed long since she had heard any, and after wiping the perspiration from the little boy's face with her peplos, she pointed to the building and said: "It must be nice and cool in there."

"Of course it is," said Papias.

"It is never too hot in church. I will tell you what—we will go there." This was a bright idea; for, thought Dada, any place must be pleasanter than this; and she felt strongly tempted, too, to see the inside of one of Agne's temples and to sing once more, or, at any rate, hear others sing.

"Come along," she said, and they stole through the deserted house to get into the street by the atrium. Medius saw them, but he made no attempt to detain them; he had sunk into lethargic indifference. It was not an hour since he had taken stock of his life and means, setting the small figure of his average income against his hospitality to Dada and her little companion; but then, again, he had calculated that, if all went well, he might make considerable profits out of the girl and the child. Now, he felt it was all the same to him whether he and his family and Dada met their doom in the house or out of it.

Dada and Papias soon reached the church of St. Mark, the oldest Christian basilica in the city. It consisted of a vestibule—the narthex—and the body of the church, a very long hall, with a flat roof ceiled with stained wood and supported on a double row of quite simple columns. This space was divided into two parts by a screen of pierced work; the innermost portion had a raised floor or podium, on which stood a table with chairs placed round it in a semicircle. The centre seat was higher and more richly decorated than the others. These chairs were unoccupied; a few deacons in 'talares' of light-colored brocade were busied about the table.

Page 8

In the middle of the vestibule there was a small tank; here a number of penitents had collected who, with their flayed ribs and abject lamentations, offered a more melancholy spectacle than even the terrified crowd whom Dada had seen the day before, gathered round the temple of Isis. Indeed, she would have withdrawn at once but that Papias dragged her forward, and when she had passed through the great door into the nave she breathed a sigh of relief. A soothing sense of respite came over her, such as she had rarely felt; for the lofty building, which was only half full, was deliciously cool and the subdued light was restful to her eyes. The slight perfume of incense and the sober singing of the assembled worshippers were soothing to her senses, and, as she took a seat on one of the benches, she felt sheltered and safe.

The old church struck her as a home of perfect peace; in all the city, she thought, there could hardly be another spot where she might rest so quietly and contentedly. So for some little time she gave herself up, body and soul, to the refreshing influences of the coolness, the solemnity, the fragrance and the music; but presently her attention was attracted to two women in the seats just in front of her.

One of them, who had a child on her arm, whispered to her neighbor:

“You here, Hannah, among the unbaptized? How are you going on at home?”

“I cannot stay long,” was the answer. “It is all the same where one sits, and when I leave I shall disturb no one. But my heart is heavy; the child is very bad. The doctor says he cannot live through the day, and I felt as if I must come to church.”

Very right, very right. Do you stay here and I will go to your house at once; my husband will not mind waiting.”

“Thank you very much, but Katharine is staying with the boy and he is quite safe there.”

“Then I will stay and pray with you for the dear little child.”

Dada had not missed a word of this simple dialogue. The woman whose child was ill at home, and who had come here to pray for strength or mercy, had a remarkably sweet face; as the girl saw the two friends bow their heads and fold their hands with downcast eyes, she thought to herself: “Now they are praying for the sick child. . .” and involuntarily she, too, bent her curly head, and murmured softly: “O ye gods, or thou God of the Christians, or whatever thou art called that hast power over life and death, make this poor woman’s little son well again. When I get home again I will offer up a cake or a fowl—a lamb is so costly.”

And she fancied that some invisible spirit heard her, and it gave her a vague satisfaction to repeat her simple supplication over and over again.

Page 9

Meanwhile a miserable blind dwarf had seated himself by her side; near him stood the old dog that guided him. He held him by a string and had been allowed to bring his indispensable comrade into the church. The old man joined loudly and devoutly in the psalm which the rest of the congregation were singing; his voice had lost its freshness, no doubt, but he sang in perfect tune. It was a pleasure to Dada to listen, and though she only half understood the words of the psalm she easily caught the air and began to sing too, at first timidly and hardly audibly; but she soon gained courage and, following the example of little Papias, joined in with all her might.

She felt as though she had reached land after a stormy and uncomfortable voyage, and had found refuge in a hospitable home; she looked about her to discover whether the news of the approaching destruction of the world had not penetrated even here, but she could not feel certain; for, though many faces expressed anguish of mind, contrition, and a passionate desire—perhaps for help or, perhaps, for something quite different—not a cry of lamentation was to be heard, such as had rent the air by the temple of Isis, and most of the men and women assembled here were singing, or praying in silent absorption. There were none of the frenzied monks who had terrified her in the Xenodochium and in the streets; on this day of tumult and anxiety they are devoting all their small strength and great enthusiasm to the service of the Church militant.

This meeting, at so unusual an hour, had been convened by Eusebius, the deacon of the district, with the intention of calming the spirits of those who had caught the general infection of alarm. Dada could see the old man step up into a raised pulpit on the inner side of the screen which parted the baptized from the unbaptized members of the congregation; his silvery hair and beard, and the cheerful calm of his face, with the high white forehead and gentle, loving gaze, attracted her greatly. She had heard Karnis speak of Plato, and knew by heart some axioms of his doctrine, and she had always thought of the sage as a young man; but in advanced age, she fancied, he might have looked like Eusebius. Aye, and it would have well beseemed this old man to die, like the great Athenian, at a mirthful wedding-feast.

The priest was evidently about to give a discourse, and much as she admired him, this idea prompted her to quit the church; for, though she could sit still for hours to hear music, she found nothing more irksome than to be compelled to listen for any length of time to a speech she might not interrupt. She was therefore rising to leave; but Papias held her back and entreated her so pathetically with his blue baby-eyes not to take him away and spoil his pleasure that she yielded, though the opportunity was favorable for moving unobserved, as the woman in front of her was preparing to go and was shaking hands with her neighbor. She had indeed risen from her seat when a little girl came in behind her and whispered, loud enough for Dada's keen ears to catch the words: "Come mother, come home at once. He has opened his eyes and called for you. The physician says all danger is over."

Page 10

The mother in her turn whispered to her friend in glad haste: "All is well!" and hurried away with the girl. The friend she had left raised her hands and eyes in thanksgiving, and Dada, too, smiled in sympathy and pleasure. Had the God of the Christian heard her prayer with theirs.

Meanwhile the preacher had ended his preliminary prayer and began to explain to his hearers that he had bidden them to the church in order to warn them against foolish terrors, and to lead them into the frame of mind in which the true Christian ought to live in these momentous times of disturbance. He wished to point out to his brethren and sisters in the Lord what was to be feared from the idols and their overthrow, what the world really owed to the heathen, and what he expected from his fellow-believers when the splendid and imminent triumph of the Church should be achieved.

"Let us look back a little, my beloved," he said, after this brief introduction. "You have all heard of the great Alexander, to whom this noble city owes its existence and its name. He was a mighty instrument in the hand of the Lord, for he carried the tongue and the wisdom of the Greeks throughout all lands, so that, in the fulness of time, the doctrine which should proceed from the only Son of God might be understood by all nations and go home to all hearts. In those days every people had its own idols by hundreds, and in every tongue on earth men put up their prayers to the supreme Power which makes itself felt wherever mortal creatures dwell. Here, by the Nile, after Alexander's death, reigned the Ptolemies; and the Egyptian citizens of Alexandria prayed to other gods than their Greek neighbors, so that they could never unite in worshipping their divinities; but Philadelphus, the second Ptolemy, a very wise man, gave them a god in common. In consequence of a vision seen in a dream he had the divinity brought from Sinope, on the shores of Pontus, to this town. This idol was Serapis, and he was raised to the throne of divinity here, not by Heaven, but by a shrewd and prudent man; a grand temple was built for him, which is to this day one of the wonders of the world, and a statue of him was made, as beautiful as any image ever formed by the hand of man. You have seen and know them both, and you know too, how, before the gospel was preached in Alexandria, crowds of all classes, excepting the Jews, thronged the Serapeum.

"A dim perception of the sublime teaching of the Lord by whom God has redeemed the world had dawned, even before His appearance on earth, on the spirit of the best of the heathen, and in the hearts of those wise men who—though not born into the state of grace—sought and strove after the truth, after inward purity, and an apprehension of the Almighty. The Lord chose them out to prepare the hearts of mankind for the good tidings, and make them fit to receive the gospel when the Star should rise over Bethlehem.

Page 11

“Many of these sages had infused precious doctrine into the worship of Serapis before the hour of true redemption had come. They enjoined the servants of Serapis to be more zealous in the care of the soul than in that of the body, for they had detected the imperishable nature of the spiritual and divine part of man; they saw that we are brought into existence by sin and love, and we must therefore die to our sinful love and rise again through the might of love eternal. These Hellenes, like the Egyptian sages of the times of the Pharaohs, divined and declared that the soul was held responsible after death for all it had done of good or evil in its mortal body. They distinguished virtue and sin by the eternal law, which was written in the hearts even of the heathen, to the end that they, by nature, might do the works of the law; nay, there were some of their loftiest spirits who, though they knew not the Lord, it is true, required the repentance in the sinner, in the name of Serapis, and pronounced that it was good to give up the delusive joys and vain pleasures of the flesh and to break away from the evil—whether of body or of soul—which we are led into by the senses. They called upon their disciples to hold meetings for meditation whereby they might discern truth and the divinity; and the vast precincts of the Serapeum contained cells and alcoves for penitents and devotees, in which many a soul touched by grace, dead to the world and absorbed in the contemplation of such things as they esteemed high and heavenly, has ripened to old age and death.

“But, my beloved, the Light in which we rejoice, through no merits or deserts of our own, had not yet been shed on the lost children of those days of darkness; and all those noble, and indeed most admirable efforts were polluted by an admixture, even here, of coarse superstition, bloody sacrifices, and foolish adoration of perishable stone idols and beasts without understanding; and in other places by the false and delusive arts of Magians and sorcerers. Even the dim apprehension of true salvation was darkened and distorted by the subtleties of a vain and inconsistent philosophy, which held a theory as immutably true one day and overthrew or denied it the next. Thus, by degrees, the temple of the idol of Sinope degenerated into a stronghold of deceit and bloodshed, of the basest superstition, the pleasures of the flesh, and abominations that cried to Heaven. Learning, to be sure, was still cherished in the halls of the Serapeum; but its disciples turned with hardened hearts from the truth which was sent into the world by the grace of God, and they remained the prophets of error. The doctrines which the sages had associated with the idea of Serapis, debased and degraded by the most contemptible trivialities; lost all their worth and dignity; and after the great Apostle to whom this basilica is dedicated, had brought the gospel to Alexandria, the idol’s throne began to totter, and the tidings of salvation shook

Page 12

its foundations and brought it to the verge of destruction in spite of the persecutions, in spite of the edicts of the apostate Julian, in spite of the desperate efforts of the philosophers, sophists, and heathen—for our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, has given certainty and actuality to the fleeting shadow of half-divined truth which lies in the core of the worship of Serapis. The pure and radiant star of Christian love has risen in the place of the dim nebulous mist of Serapis; and just as the moon pales when the sun appears triumphant, the worship of Serapis has died away in a thousand places where the gospel has been received. Even here, in Alexandria, its feeble flame is kept alive only by infinite care, and if the might of our pious and Christian Emperor makes itself felt—tomorrow, or next day—then, my beloved, it will vanish in smoke, and no power on earth can fan it into life again. Not our grandsons, no, but our own children will ask: Who—what was Serapis? For he who shall be overthrown is no longer a mighty god but an idol bereft of his splendor and his dignity. This is no struggle of might against might; it is the death-stroke given to a wounded and vanquished foe. The tree is rotten to the core and can crush no one in its fall, but it will cover all who stand near it with dust and rubbish. The sovereign has outlived his dominion, and when his fingers drop the sceptre few indeed will bewail him, for the new King has already mounted the throne and His is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever! Amen.”

Dada had listened to the deacon’s address with no particular interest, but the conclusion struck her attention. The old man looked dignified and honest; but Father Karnis was a well-meaning man, no doubt, and one of those who are wont to keep on the winning side. How was it that the preacher could draw so pitiable a picture of the very same god whose greatness her uncle had praised in such glowing terms only two days since? How could the same thing appear so totally different to two different people?

The priest looked more sagacious than the musician; Marcus, the young Christian, had a most kind heart; there was not a better or gentler creature under the sun than Agne—it was quite possible that Christianity was something very different in reality from what her foster parents chose to represent. As to the frightful consequences of the overthrow of the temple of Serapis, on that point she was completely reassured, and she prepared to listen with greater attention as Eusebius went on:

“Let us rejoice, beloved! The great idol’s days are numbered! Do you know what that false worship has been in our midst? It has been like a splendid and richly-dressed trireme sailing, plague-stricken, into a harbor full of ships and boats. Woe to those who allow themselves to be tempted on board by the magnificence of its decorations! How great is their chance of infection, how easily they will

Page 13

carry it from ship to ship, and from the ships on to the shore, till the pestilence has spread from the harbor to the city! Let us then be thankful to those who destroy the gorgeous vessel, who drive it from amongst us, or sink or burn it. May our Father in Heaven give courage to their hearts, strength to their hands and blessing on their deeds! When we hear: "Great Serapis has fallen to the earth and is no more, we and the world are free from him! then, in this city, and wherever Christians dwell and worship, let a solemn festival be held.

"But still let us be just, still let us bear in mind all the great and good gifts that the trireme brought to our parents when it rode the waves manned by a healthy crew. If we do, it will be with sincere pity that we shall watch the proud vessel sink to the bottom, and we shall understand the grief of those whom once it bore over ebb and flow, and who believe they owe every thing to it. We shall rejoice doubly, too, to think that we ourselves have a safe bark with stout planks and strong masts, and a trustworthy pilot at the helm; and that we may confidently invite others to join us on board as soon as they have purified themselves of the plague with which they have been smitten.

"I think you will all have understood this parable. When Serapis falls there will be lamentation and woe among the heathen; but we, who are true Christians, ought not to pass them by, but must strive to heal and save the wounded and sick at heart. When Serapis falls you must be the physicians—healers of souls, as the Lord hath said; and if we desire to heal, our first task must be to discover in what the sufferings consist of those we wish to succor, for our choice of medicine must depend on the nature of the injury.

"What I mean is this: None can give comfort but those who know how to sympathize with the soul that craves it, who feel the sorrows of others as keenly as though they were their own. And this gift, my brethren, is, next to faith, the Christian grace which of all others best pleases our Heavenly Master.

"I see it in my mind's eye! The ruined edifice of the Serapeum, the masterpiece of Bryaxis laid in fragments in the dust, and thousands of wailing heathen! As the Jews wept and hung their harps on the trees by the waters of Babylon when they remembered Zion, so do I see the heathen weep as they think of the perished splendor. They themselves, indeed, ruined and desecrated the glory they bewail; and when something higher and purer took its place they hardened their hearts, and, instead of leaving the dead to bury their dead and throwing themselves hopefully into the new life, they refused to be parted from the putrefying corpse. They were fools, but their folly was fidelity; and if we can win them over to our holy faith they will be faithful unto death, as they have been to their old gods, clinging to Jesus and earning the crown of life. 'There will be more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine that need no repentance,'—that you have heard; and whichever among you loves

the Saviour can procure him a great joy if he guides only one of these weeping heathen into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Page 14

“But perhaps you will ask: Is not the sorrow of the heathen a vain thing? What is it after all that they bewail? To understand that, try to picture to yourselves what it is that they think they are losing. Verily it is not a small matter, and it includes many things for which we and all mankind owe them a debt of gratitude. We call ourselves Christians and are proud of the name; but we also call ourselves Hellenes, and are proud of that name too. It was under the protection of the old gods, whose fall is about to be consummated, that the Greeks achieved marvellous deeds, nurturing the gifts of the intellect which the Almighty bestowed on their race, like faithful gardeners, and making them bring forth marvellous fruit. In the realm of thought the Greek is sovereign of the nations, and he has given to perishable matter a perfection of form which has elevated and vivified it to immortality. Nothing more beautiful has ever been imagined or executed, before or since, or by any other people, than was produced by Greece in its prime. But perhaps you will ask, why did not the Redeemer come down among our fathers in those glorious days? Because beauty, as they conceived and still conceive of it, is a mere perishable accident of matter, and because a race which thus devoted every thought and feeling to an inspired and fervent worship of beauty—which was so absorbed in the contemplation of the visible, could have no longing for the invisible which is the real life that came down among us with the only-begotten Son of God. Nevertheless Beauty is beautiful; and when the time shall come when the visible is married to the invisible, when eternal Truth is clothed in perfect form, then, and not till then, will the ideal which our fathers strove after in the great old days be realized, by the grace of the Saviour.

“But this visible beauty, which they so passionately cherished, does us good service too, so long as we do not allow it to dazzle us and lead us astray from the one thing needful. To whom, if not to the heathen Hellenes, do our great teachers owe, under God, the noble art of coordinating their loftiest feelings, and casting them in forms which are intelligible to the Christian and at once instruct, delight, and edify him? It was in a heathen school that each one of your pastors—that even I, the humblest of them—studied that rhetoric which enables me to utter with a flowing tongue the things which the Spirit gives me to speak to you; and if some day there are Christian schools, in which our sons may acquire the same power, they must adopt many of the laws devised by the heathen. If in the future we are rich enough to raise churches to the Almighty, to the Virgin Mary and the great Saints, in any way worthy of their sublime merits, we shall owe our skill to the famous architects of heathen Hellas. We are indebted to the arts of the heathen for a thousand things in daily use, beside numberless others that lend charm to existence. Yes, my beloved, when we consider all they did for us we cannot in justice withhold our tribute of gratitude and admiration.

Page 15

“Nor can we doubt that the best of them were acceptable to the Almighty himself, for he granted to them to see darkly and from afar what he has brought nigh to us, and poured into our hearts by divine revelation. You all know the name of Plato. He, from whom Salvation was hidden, saw remotely, by presentiment as it were, many things which to us, the Redeemed, are clear and plain and near. He perceived the relation of earthly beauty and heavenly truth. The great gift of Love binds and supports us all and Plato gave the name of the divine Eros, that is divine love, to an inspired devotion to the Imperishable. He placed goodness—the Good—at the top of the great scale of Ideas which he constructed. The Good was, to him, the highest Idea and the uttermost of which we can conceive:—Good, whose properties he made manifest by every means his lofty and lucid mind could command. This heathen, my brethren and sisters, was well worthy of the grace bestowed on us. Do justice then to the blinded souls, justice in Plato’s sense of the word; he calls the virtue of reason Wisdom; the virtue of spirit Courage, and the virtue of the senses Temperance. Well, well! ‘Prove all things and hold fast that which is good.’ That is to say: consider what may be worth anything in the works of the heathen that it may be duly preserved; but, on the other hand, tread all that is idolatry in the dust, all that brings the unclean thing among us, all that imperils our souls and bodies, or anything that is high and pure in life; but do not forget, my beloved, all that the heathen have done for us. Be temperate in all things; avoid excess of zeal; for thus, and thus only, can we be just. ‘It is not to hate, but to love each other that we are here.’ It was not a Christian but Sophocles, one of the greatest of the heathen, who uttered those words, and he speaks them still to us!”

Eusebius paused and drew a deep breath.

Dada had listened eagerly, for it pleased her to hear all that she had been wont to prize spoken of here with due appreciation. But since Eusebius had begun to discourse about Plato she had been disturbed by two men sitting just in front of her. One was tall and lean, with a long narrow head, and the other a shorter and more comfortable-looking personage. The first fidgeted incessantly, nudging and twitching his companion, and looking now and then as if he were ready to start up and interrupt the preacher. This behavior evidently annoyed his neighbors who kept signing to him to be quiet and hushing him down, while he took no notice of their demonstrations but kept clearing his throat with obtrusive emphasis and at last scraped and shuffled his feet on the floor, though not very noisily. But Eusebius began again:

Page 16

“And now, my brethren, how ought we to demean ourselves in these fateful times of disturbance? As Christians; only—or rather, by God’s aiding grace as Christians in the true sense of our Lord and Master, according to the precepts given by Him through the Apostles. Their words shall be mine. They say there are two paths—the path of Life and the path of Death, and there is a great difference between them. The path of Life is this: First, Thou shalt love God who hath created thee; next thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, and whatsoever thou wouldst men should do unto thee even so do unto them; but what thou wouldst not have done unto thee do thou not to them. And the sum of the doctrine contained in these words is this: Bless those that curse you, pray for your enemies and repent for those who persecute you, for ‘if ye love them that love you what thank have ye? Do not even the heathen the same?’ Love those that hate you and you will have no enemies.

“Take this teaching of the holy Apostles to heart this day. Beware of mocking or persecuting those who have been your enemies. Even the nobler heathen regarded it as an act of grace to respect the conquered foe, and to you, as Christians, it should be a law. It is not so hard to forgive an enemy when we regard him as a possible friend in the future; and the Christian can go so far as to love him when he remembers that every man is his brother and neighbor, and equally precious in the sight of the Saviour who is dearer to us than life.

“The heathen, the idolater, is the Christian’s archfoe; but soon he will be in fetters at our feet. And, then, my brethren, pray for him; for if the Almighty, who is without spot or stain and perfect beyond words, can forgive the sinner, ye who are base and guilty may surely forgive. ‘Fishers of souls’ we all should be; try to fulfil the injunction. Draw the enemy to you by kindness and love; show him by your example the beauty of the Christian life; let him perceive the benefits of Salvation; lead those whose gods and temples we have overthrown, into our churches; and when, after triumphing over those blind souls by the sword, we have also conquered them by love, faith and prayer—when they can rejoice with us in the Redemption by our Lord Jesus Christ—then shall we all be as one fold under one shepherd, and peace and joy shall reign in the city which is now torn by dissension and strife.”

At this point the preacher was interrupted, for a loud uproar broke out in the Narthex—[The vestibule of the early Christian basilica which was open to penitents.]—shouts and cries of men fighting, mingled with the dull roar of a bull.

The congregation started to their feet in extreme consternation, and the door was flung open and a host of heathen youths rushed into the nave, followed by an overwhelming force of Christians from whom they had sought refuge in the sanctuary. Here they turned at bay to make a last desperate resistance. Garlands, stripped of their leaves and flowers, still crowned their heads and hung over their shoulders. They had been attacked close to the church, by a party of monks when in the act of driving a gaily-

decorated steer to the temple of Apollo, in defiance of the Imperial edict; and the beast, terrified by the tumult, had rushed into the narthex for shelter.

Page 17

The fight in the church was a short one; the idolaters were soon vanquished; but Eusebius threw himself between them and the monks, and tried to save the victims from the revengeful fury of the conquerors. The women had all made for the door, but they did not venture out into the vestibule, for the young bull was still raging there, trampling or tossing everything that came in his way. At last, however, a soldier of the city-watch dealt him a sword-thrust in the neck, and he fell rolling in his own blood. At once the congregation forced their way out, shrieking with alarm and excitement, Dada among the number, dragging the child with her. Papias pulled with all his might to keep her back, declaring with vehement insistence that he had seen Agne in the church and wanted to go back to her. Dada, however, neither heard nor heeded; frightened out of her wits she went on with the crowd, taking him with her.

She never paused till she reached the house of Medius, quite out of breath; but then, as the little boy still asserted that he had seen his sister in the sanctuary, she turned back with him, as soon as the throng had dispersed. In the church there was no one to hinder them; but they got no further than the dividing screen, for on the floor beyond lay the mutilated and bleeding bodies of many a youth who had fallen in the contest.

How she made her way back to the house of Medius once more she never knew. For the first time she had been brought face to face with life in hideous earnest, and when the singer went to look for her in her room, at dusk, he was startled to find her bright face clouded and her eyes dim with tears. How bitterly she had been weeping Medius indeed could not know; he ascribed her altered appearance to fear of the approaching cataclysm and was happy to be able to tell her, in all good faith, that the danger was as good as over. Posidonius, the Magian, had been to see him, and had completely reassured him. This man, whose accomplice he had been again and again in producing false apparitions of spirits and demons, had once gained an extraordinary influence over him by casting some mysterious spell upon him and reducing his will to abject subjection to his own; and this magician, who had recovered his own self-possession, had assured him, with an inimitable air of infallibility, that the fall of the Temple of Serapis would involve no greater catastrophe than that of any old worn-out statue. Since this announcement Medius had laughed at his own alarms; he had recovered his "strong-mindedness," and when Posidonius had given him three tickets for the Hippodrome he had jumped at the offer.

The races were to be run next day, in spite of the general panic that had fallen on the citizens; and Dada, when he invited her to join him and his daughter in the enjoyment of so great a treat, dried her eyes and accepted gleefully.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Page 18

Alarming as was the outlook in Alexandria, the races, were to be held as usual. This had been decided only a few hours since at the Bishop's palace, and criers had been sent abroad throughout the streets and squares of the city to bid the inhabitants to this popular entertainment. In the writing-office of the Ephemeris, which would be given to the public the first thing in the morning, five hundred slaves or more were occupied in writing from dictation a list of the owners of the horses, of the 'agitatores' who would drive them, and of the prizes offered to the winners, whether Christians or heathen.

[Ephemeris—The news-sheet, which was brought out, not only in Rome, but in all the cities of the Empire, and which kept the citizens informed of all important events.]

The heat in the Episcopal council-hall had been oppressive, and not less so the heat of temper among the priests assembled there; for they had fully determined, for once, not to obey their prelate with blind submission, and they knew full well that Theophilus, on occasion, if his will were opposed, could not merely thunder but wield the bolt.

Besides the ecclesiastical members of the council, Cynegius, the Imperial legate—Evagrius, the Prefect—and Romanus, the commander-in-chief and Comes of Egypt,—had all been present. The officials of the Empire—Roman statesmen who knew Alexandria and her citizens well, and who had often smarted under the spiritual haughtiness of her Bishop—were on the prelate's side. Cynegius was doubtful; but the priests, who had not altogether escaped the alarms that had stricken the whole population, were so bold as to declare against a too hasty decision, and to say that the celebration of the games at a time of such desperate peril was not only presumptuous but sinful, and a tempting of God.

In answer to a scornful enquiry from Theophilus as to where the danger lay if—as the Comes promised—Serapis were to be overthrown on the morrow, one of the assembly answered in the name of his colleagues. This man, now very old, had formerly been a wonderfully successful exorcist, and, notwithstanding that he was a faithful Christian, he was the leader of a gnostic sect and a diligent student of magic. He proceeded to argue, with all the zeal and vehemence of conviction, that Serapis was the most terrible of all the heathen daemons, and that all the oracles of antiquity, all the prophecies of the seers, and all the conclusions of the Magians and astrologers would be proved false if his fall—which the present assembly could only regard as a great boon from Heaven—did not entail some tremendous convulsion of nature.

At this Theophilus gave the reins to his wrath; he snatched a little crucifix from the wall above his episcopal throne, and broke it in fragments, exclaiming in deep tones that quavered with wrath:

"And which do you regard as the greater: The only-begotten Son of God, or that helpless image?" And he flung the pieces of the broken crucifix down on the table round

which they were sitting. Then, as though horror-stricken at his own daring act, he fell on his knees, raised his eyes and hands in prayer, and gathering up the broken image, kissed it devoutly.

Page 19

This rapid scene had a tremendous effect. Amazement and suspense were painted on every face, not a hand, not a lip moved as Theophilus rose again and cast a glance of proud and stern defiance round the assembly, which each man took to himself. For some moments he remained silent, as though awaiting a reply; but his repellent mien and majestic bearing made it sufficiently clear that he was ready to annihilate any opponent. In fact none of the priests contradicted him; and, though Evagrius looked at him with a doubting shake of his shrewd head, Cynegius on the other hand nodded assent. The Bishop, however, seemed to care for neither dissent nor approval, and it was in brief and cutting terms, with no flourish of rhetoric, that he laid it down that wood and stone had nothing to do with the divine Majesty, even though they were made in the image of all that was Holy and worshipful or were most lavishly beautified by the hand of man with the foul splendors of perishable wealth. The greater the power ascribed by superstition to the base material—whatever form it bore—the more odious must it be to the Christian. Any man who should believe that a daemon could turn even a breath of the Most High to its own will and purpose, would do well to beware of idolatry, for Satan had already laid his clutches somewhere on his robe.

At this sweeping accusation many a cheek colored wrathfully, and not a word was spoken when the Bishop proceeded to require of his hearers that, if the Serapeum should fall into the hands of the Imperial troops, it should be at once and ruthlessly destroyed, and that his hearers should not cease from the work of ruin till this scandal of the city should be swept from the face of the earth.

“If then the world crumbles to atoms!” he cried, “well and good—the heathen are right and we are wrong, and in that case it were better to perish; but as surely as I sit on this throne by the grace of God, Serapis is the vain imagining of fools and blind, and there is no god but the God whose minister I am!”

“Whose Kingdom is everlasting, Amen!” chanted an old priest; and Cynegius rose to explain that he should do nothing to hinder the total overthrow of the temple and image.

Then the Comes spoke in defence of the Bishop’s resolution to allow the races to be held, as usual, on the morrow. He sketched a striking picture of the shallow, unstable nature of the Alexandrians, a people wholly given over to enjoyment. The troops at his command were few in number in comparison with the heathen population of the city, and it was a very important matter to keep a large proportion of the worshippers of Serapis occupied elsewhere at the moment of the decisive onset. Gladiator-fights were prohibited, and the people were tired of wild beasts; but races, in which heathen and Christian alike might enter their horses for competition, must certainly prove most attractive just at this time of bitter

Page 20

rivalry and oppugnancy between the two religions, and would draw thousands of the most able-bodied idolaters to the Hippodrome. All this he had already considered and discussed with the Bishop and Cynegius; nay, that zealous destroyer of heathen worship had come to Alexandria with the express purpose of overthrowing the Serapeum; but, as a prudent statesman, he had first made sure that the time and circumstances were propitious for the work of annihilation. All that he had here seen and heard had only strengthened his purpose; so, after suggesting a few possible difficulties, and enjoining moderation and mercy as the guiding principles of his sovereign, he commanded, in the Emperor's name, that the sanctuary of Serapis should be seized by force of arms and utterly destroyed, and that the races should be held on the morrow.

The assembled council bowed low; and when Theophilus had closed the meeting with a prayer he withdrew to his ungarnished study, with his head bent and an air of profound humility, as though he had met with a defeat instead of gaining a victory.

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The fate of the great god of the heathen was sealed, but in the wide precincts of the Serapeum no one thought of surrender or of prompt defeat. The basement of the building, on which stood the grandest temple ever erected by the Hellenes, presented a smooth and slightly scarp'd rampart of impregnable strength to the foe. A sloping way extended up over a handsomely-decorated incline, and from the middle of the grand curve described by this road, two flights of steps led up to the three great doors in the facade of the building.

The heathen had taken care to barricade this approach in all haste, piling the road and steps with statuary-images of the gods of the finest workmanship, figures and busts of kings, queens, and heroes, Hermes, columns, stelae, sacrificial stones, chairs and benches-torn from their places by a thousand eager hands. The squared flags of the pavement and the granite blocks of the steps had been built up into walls and these were still being added to after the besiegers had surrounded the temple; for the defenders tore down stones, pilasters, gutters and pieces of the cornice, and flung them on to the outworks, or, when they could, on to the foe who for the present were not eager to commence hostilities.

The captains of the Imperial force had miscalculated the strength of the heathen garrison. They supposed a few hundreds might have entrenched themselves, but on the roof alone above a thousand men were to be seen, and every hour seemed to increase the number of men and women crowding into the Serapeum. The Romans

could only suppose that this constantly growing multitude had been concealed in the secret halls and chambers of the temple ever since Cynegius had first arrived, and had no idea that they were still being constantly reinforced.

Karnis, Herse, and Orpheus, among others, had made their way thither from the timber-yard, down the dry conduit, and an almost incessant stream of the adherents of the old gods had preceded and followed them.

Page 21

While Eusebius had been exhorting his congregation in the church of St. Mark to Christian love towards the idolaters, these had collected in the temple precincts to the number of about four thousand, all eager for the struggle. A vast multitude! But the extent of the Serapeum was so enormous that the mass of people was by no means densely packed on the roof, in the halls, and in the underground passages and rooms. There was no crowding anywhere, least of all in the central halls of the temple itself; indeed, in the great vestibule crowned with a dome which formed the entrance, in the vast hall next to it, and in the magnificent hypostyle with a semicircular niche on the furthest side in which stood the far-famed image of the god, there were only scattered groups of men, who looked like dwarfs as the eye compared them with the endless rows of huge columns.

The full blaze of day penetrated nowhere but into the circular vestibule, which was lighted by openings in the drum of the cupola that rested on four gigantic columns. In the inner hall there was only dim twilight; while the hypostyle was quite dark, but for a singularly contrived shaft of light which produced a most mysterious effect.

The shadows of the great columns in the fore hall, and of the double colonnade on each side of the hypostyle, lay like bands of crape on the many-colored pavement; borders, circles, and ellipses of mosaic diversified the smooth and lucent surface, in which were mirrored the astrological figures which sparkled in brighter hues on the ceiling, the trophies of symbols and mythological groups that graced the walls in tinted high relief, and the statues and Hermes between the columns. A wreath of lovely forms and colors dazzled the eye with their multiplicity and profusion, and the heavy atmosphere of incense which filled the halls was almost suffocating, while the magical and mystical signs and figures were so many and so new that the enquiring mind, craving for an explanation and an interpretation of all these incomprehensible mysteries, hardly dared investigate them in detail.

A heavy curtain, that looked as though giants must have woven it on a loom of superhuman proportions, hung, like a thick cloud shrouding a mountain-peak, from the very top of the hypostyle, in grand folds over the niche containing the statue, and down to the floor; and while it hid the sacred image from the gaze of the worshipper it attracted his attention by the infinite variety of symbolical patterns and beautiful designs which were woven in it and embroidered on it.

Page 22

The gold and silver vessels and precious jewels that lay concealed by this hanging were of more value than many a mighty king's treasure; and everything was on so vast a scale that man shuddered to feel his own littleness, and the mind sought some new standard of measurement by which to realize such unwonted proportions. The finite here seemed to pass into the infinite; and as the spectator gazed up, with his head thrown back, at the capitals of the lofty columns and the remote height of the ceiling, his sight failed him before he had succeeded in distinguishing or even perceiving a small portion only of the bewildering confusion of figures and emblems that were crowded on to the surface. Greek feeling for beauty had here worked hand in hand with Oriental taste for gorgeous magnificence, and every detail could bear examination; for there was not a motive of the architecture, not a work of sculpture, painting, or mosaic, not a product of the foundry or the loom, which did not bear the stamp of thorough workmanship and elaborate finish. The ruddy, flecked porphyry, the red, white, green, or yellow marbles which had been used for the decorations were all the finest and purest ever wrought upon by Greek craftsmen. Each of the hundreds of sculptured works which here had found a home was the masterpiece of some great artist; as the curious visitor lingered in loving contemplation of the mosaics on the polished floor, or examined the ornamental mouldings that framed the reliefs, dividing the walls into panels, he was filled with wonder and delight at the beauty, the elegance and the inventiveness that had given charm, dignity, and significance to every detail.

Adjoining these great halls devoted especially to the worship of the god, were hundreds of courts, passages, colonnades and rooms, and others not less numerous lay underground. There were long rows of rooms containing above a hundred thousand rolls of books, the famous library of the Serapeum, with separate apartments for readers and copyists; there were store-rooms, refectories and assembly-rooms for the high-priests of the temple, for teachers and disciples; while acrid odors came up from the laboratories, and the fragrance of cooking from the kitchen and bake-houses. In the very thickness of the walls of the basement were cells for penitents and recluses, long since abandoned, and rooms for the menials and slaves, of whom hundreds were employed in the precincts; under ground spread the mystical array of halls, grottoes, galleries and catacombs dedicated to the practice of the Mysteries and the initiation of neophytes; on the roof stood various observatories—among them one erected for the study of the heavens by Eratosthenes, where Claudius Ptolemaeus had watched and worked. Up here astronomers, star-gazers, horoscopists and Magians spent their nights, while, far below them, in the temple-courts that were surrounded by store-houses and stables, the blood of sacrificed beasts was shed and the entrails of the victims were examined.

Page 23

The house of Serapis was a whole world in little, and centuries had enriched it with wealth, beauty, and the noblest treasures of art and learning. Magic and witchcraft hedged it in with a maze of mystical and symbolical secrets, and philosophy had woven a tissue of speculation round the person of the god. The sanctuary was indeed the centre of Hellenic culture in the city of Alexander; what marvel then, that the heathen should believe that with the overthrow of Serapis and his temple, the earth, nay the universe itself must sink into the abyss?

Anxious spirits and throbbing hearts were those that now sought shelter in the Serapeum, fully prepared to perish with their god, and yet eager with enthusiasm to avert his fall if possible.

A strange medley indeed of men and women had collected within these sacred precincts! Grave sages, philosophers, grammarians, mathematicians, naturalists, and physicians clung to Olympius and obeyed him in silence. Rhetoricians with shaven faces, Magians and sorcerers, whose long beards flowed over robes embroidered with strange figures; students, dressed after the fashion of their forefathers in the palmy days of Athens; men of every age, who dubbed themselves artists though they were no more than imitators of the works of a greater epoch, unhappy in that no one at this period of indifference to beauty called upon them to prove what they could do, or to put forth their highest powers. Actors, again, from the neglected theatres, starving histrions, to whom the stage was prohibited by the Emperor and Bishop, singers and flute-players; hungry priests and temple-servitors expelled from the closed sanctuaries; lawyers, scribes, ships' captains, artisans, though but very few merchants, for Christianity had ceased to be the creed of the poor, and the wealthy attached themselves to the faith professed by those in authority.

One of the students had contrived to bring a girl with him, and several others, seeing this, went back into the streets by the secret way and brought in damsels of no very fair repute, till the crowd of men was diversified by a considerable sprinkling of wreathed and painted girls, some of them the outcast maids of various temples, and others priestesses of higher character, who had remained faithful to the old gods or who practised magic arts.

Among these women one, a tall and dignified matron in mourning robes, was a conspicuous figure. This was Berenice, the mother of the young heathen who had been ridden down and wounded in the skirmish near the Prefect's house, and whose eyes Eusebius had afterwards closed. She had come to the Serapeum expressly to avenge her son's death and then to perish with the fall of the gods for whom he had sacrificed his young life. But the mad turmoil that surrounded her was more than she could bear; she stood, hour after hour, closely veiled and absorbed in her own thoughts, neither raising her eyes nor uttering a word, at the foot of a bronze statue of justice dispensing rewards and punishments.

Page 24

Olympius had entrusted the command of the little garrison of armed men to Memnon, a veteran legate of great experience, who had lost his left arm in the war against the Goths. The high-priest himself was occupied alternately in trying to persuade the hastily-collected force to obey their leader, and in settling quarrels, smoothing difficulties, suppressing insubordination, and considering plans with reference to supplies for his adherents, and the offering of a great sacrifice at which all the worshippers of Serapis were to assist. Karnis kept near his friend, helping him so far as was possible; Orpheus, with others of the younger men, had been ordered to the roof, where they were employed— under the scorching sun, reflected from the copper-plated covering and the radiating surface of the dome—in loosening blocks of stone from the balustrade to be hurled down to-morrow on the besieging force.

Herse devoted herself to the sick and wounded, for a few who had ventured forth too boldly to aid in barricading the entrance, had been hurt by arrows and lances flung by the idle soldiery; and a still greater number were suffering from sun-stroke in consequence of toiling on the top of the building.

Inside the vast, thick-walled halls it was much cooler than in the streets even, and the hours glided fast to the besieged heathen. Many of them were fully occupied, or placed on guard; others were discussing the situation, and disputing or guessing at what the outcome might, or must be. Numbers, panic-stricken or absorbed in pious awe, sat huddled on the ground, praying, muttering magical formulas, or wailing aloud. The Magians and astrologers had retired with knots of followers into the adjoining studies, where they were comparing registers, making calculations, reading signs, devising new formulas and defending them against their opponents.

An incessant bustle went on, to and fro between these rooms and the great library, and the tables were covered with rolls and tablets containing ancient prophecies, horoscopes and potent exorcisms. Messengers, one after another, were sent out from thence to command silence in the great halls, where the assembled youths and girls were kissing, singing, shouting and dancing to the shrill pipe of flutes and twang of lutes, clapping their hands, rattling tambourines—in short, enjoying to the utmost the few hours that might yet be theirs before they must make the fatal leap into nothingness, or at least into the dim shades of death.

The sun was sinking when suddenly the great brazen gong was loudly struck, and the hard, blatant clatter rent the air of the temple-hall. The mighty waves of sound reverberated from the walls of the sanctuary like the surge of a clangorous sea, and sent their metallic vibration ringing through every room and cell, from the topmost observatory-turret to the deepest vault beneath, calling all who were within the precincts to assemble. The holy places filled at once;

Page 25

the throng poured in through the vestibule, and in a few minutes even the hypostyle, the sanctum of the veiled statue, was full to overflowing. Without any distinction of rank or sex, and regardless of all the usual formalities or the degrees of initiation which each had passed through, the worshippers of Serapis crowded towards the sacred niche, till a chain, held up by neokores—[Temple-servants]—at a respectful distance from the mystical spot, checked their advance. Densely packed and in almost breathless silence, they filled the nave and the colonnades, watching for what might befall.

Presently a dull low chant of men's voices was heard. This went on for a few minutes, and then a loud pean in honor of the god rang through the temple with an accompaniment of flutes, cymbals, lutes and trumpets.

Karnis had found a place with his wife and son; all three, holding hands, joined enthusiastically in the stirring hymn; and, with them, Porphyrius, who by accident was close to them, swelling the song of the multitude. All now stood with hands uplifted and eyes fixed in anxious expectancy on the curtain. The figures and emblems on the hanging were invisible in the gloom—but now-now there was a stir, as of life, in the ponderous folds,—they moved—they began to ripple like streams, brooks, water-falls, recovering motion after long stagnation—the curtain slowly sank, and at length it fell so suddenly that the eye could scarcely note the instant. From every lip, as but one voice, rose a cry of admiration, amazement, and delight, for Serapis stood revealed to his people.

The noble manhood of the god sat with dignity on a golden throne that was covered with a blaze of jewels; his gracious and solemn face looked down on the crowd of worshippers. The hair that curled upon his thoughtful brow, and the kalathos that crowned it were of pure gold. At his feet crouched Cerberus, raising his three fierce heads with glistening ruby eyes. The body of the god—a model of strength in repose—and the drapery were of gold and ivory. In its perfect harmony as a whole, and the exquisite beauty of every detail, this statue bore the stamp of supreme power and divine majesty. When such a divinity as this should rise from his throne the earth indeed might quake and the heavens tremble! Before such a Lord the strongest might gladly bow, for no mortal ever shone in such radiant beauty. This Sovereign must triumph over every foe, even over death—the monster that lay writhing in impotent rage at his feet!

Gasping and thrilled with pious awe, enraptured but dumb with reverent fear, the assembled thousands gazed on the god dimly revealed to them in the twilight, when suddenly, for a moment of solemn glory, a ray of the setting sun—a shaft of intense brightness—pierced the star-spangled apse of the niche and fell on the lips of the god as though to kiss its Lord and Father.

Page 26

A shout like a thunder-clap-like the roar of breakers on a reef, burst from the spectators; a shout of triumph so mighty that the statues quivered, the brazen altars rang, the hangings swayed, the sacred vessels clattered and the lamps trembled and swung; the echo rolled round the aisles like a whirlpool at the flood, and was dashed from pillar to column in a hundred wavelets of sound. The glorious sun still recognized its lord; Serapis still reigned in undiminished might; he had not yet lost the power to defend himself, his world and his children!

The sun was gone, night fell on the temple and suddenly there was a swaying movement of the apse above the statue; the stars were shaken by invisible hands, and colored flames twinkled with dazzling brightness from a myriad five-rayed perforations. Once more the god was revealed to his worshippers under a flood of magical glory, and now fully visible in his unique beauty. Again the great halls rang with the acclamations of the delirious throng; Olympius stepped forth, arrayed in a flowing robe with the insignia and decorations of the high-priesthood; standing in front of the image he poured on the pedestal a libation to the gods out of a golden cup, and waved a censer of the costliest incense. Then, in burning words, he exhorted all the followers of Serapis to fight and conquer for their god, or—if need must—to perish for and with him. He added a fervent prayer in a loud ringing voice—a cry for help that came from the bottom of his heart, and went to the souls of his hearers.

Then a solemn hymn was chanted as the curtain was raised; and while the assembled multitude watched it rise in reverent silence, the temple-servants lighted the lamps that illuminated the sanctuary from every cornice and pillar.

Karnis had left hold of his companions' hands, for he wanted to wipe away the tears of devotional excitement that flowed down his withered cheeks; Orpheus had thrown his arms round his mother, and Porphyrius, who had joined a group of philosophers and sages, sent a glance of sympathy to the old musician.

CHAPTER XIX.

By an hour after sunset the sacrifice of a bull in the great court of the Serapeum was consummated, and the Moscosphragist announced that the god had graciously accepted it—the examination of the entrails showed more favorable indications than it had the day before. The flesh of the slaughtered beast went forthwith to the kitchen; and, if the savor of roast beef that presently rose up was as grateful to Serapis as to his worshippers, they might surely reckon on a happy issue from the struggle.

The besieged, indeed, were, ere long, in excellent spirits; for Olympius had taken care to store the cellars of the sanctuary with plenty of good wine, and the happy auguries drawn from the appearance of the god and the state of the victim had filled them with fresh confidence. As there was not sleeping accommodation for nearly all the men, they

had to turn night into day; and as, to most of them, life consisted wholly in the enjoyment of the moment, and all was delightful that was new or strange, they soon eat and drank themselves into a valiant frame of mind.

Page 27

Couches, such as they were wont to be on at meals, there were not, so each man snatched up the first thing he could lay his hands on to serve as a seat. When cups were lacking the jugs and vessels from the sanctuary were sent for, and passed from one to another. Many a youth lounged with his head in some fair one's lap; many a girl leaned back to back with some old man; and as flowers were not to be had, messengers were sent to the town to buy them, with vine-wreaths and other greenery.

They were easily procured, and with them came the news that the races were to be held next morning.

This information was regarded by many as being of the first importance; Nicarchus, the son of the rich Hippocleides, and Zenodotus a weaver of tapestry—whose quadriga had once proved victorious—hastily made their way into the town to give the requisite orders in their stables, and they were closely followed by Hippias, the handsome agitator, who was the favorite driver in the arena for the horses belonging to wealthy owners. In the train of these three every lover of horses vanished from the scene, with a number of Hippias' friends, and of flower-sellers, door-keepers, and ticket-holders—in short, of all who expected to derive special pleasure or profit from the games. Each man reflected that one could not be missed, and as the god was favorably disposed he might surely contrive to defend his own temple till after the races were over; they would then return to conquer or die with the rest.

Then some others began to think of wives and children in bed at home, and they, too, departed; still, by far the larger proportion remained behind—above three thousand in all, men and women. These at once possessed themselves of the half-emptied wine-jars left by the deserters; gay music was got up, and then, wreathed with garlands on their heads and shoulders, and 'filled with the god' they drank, shouted and danced far into the night. The merry feast soon became a wild orgy; loud cries of *Evoe*, and tumultuous singing reached the ears of the Magians, who had once more settled down to calculations and discussions over their rolls and tablets.

The mother of the youth that had been killed still sat huddled at the foot of the statue of justice, enduring the anguish of listening to these drunken revels with dull resignation. Every shout of laughter, every burst of mad mirth from the revellers above cut her to the heart—and yet, how they would have gladdened her if only one other voice could have mingled with those hundreds! When Olympius, still in his fullest dress, and carrying his head loftily as became him, made his way through the temple at the head of his subordinates, he noticed Berenice—whom he had known as a proud and happy mother—and begged her to join the friends whom he had bidden to his own table; but she dreaded any social contact with men whom she knew, and preferred to remain where she was at the feet of the goddess.

Page 28

Wherever the high-priest went he was hailed with enthusiasm: “Rejoice,” he would say to encourage the feasters, cheering them with wise and fervid exhortations, reminding them of Pharaoh Mycerinus who, having been told by an oracle that he had only six years to live, determined to prove the prophecy false, and by carousing through every night made the six years allotted to him a good dozen.

“Imitate him!” cried Olympius as he raised a cup to his lips, “crowd the joys of a year into the few hours that still are left us, and pour a libation to the god as I do, out of every cup ere you drink.”

His appeal was answered by a rapturous shout; the flutes and cymbals piped and clanged, metal cups rang sharply as the drinkers pledged each other, and the girls thumped their tambourines, till the calf-skin droned and the bells in the frames tinkled shrilly.

Olympius thanked them, and bowed on all sides, as he walked from group to group of his adherents. Seldom, indeed, had his heart beat so high! His end perhaps was very near, but it should at least be worthy of his life.

He knew how the sunbeam had been reflected so as to kiss the statue’s lips. For centuries had this startling little scene and the sudden illumination of the niche round the head of the god been worked in precisely the same way at high festivals—[They are mentioned by Rufinus.]—these were mere stimulants to the dull souls of the vulgar who needed to be stirred up by the miraculous power of the god, which the elect recognized throughout the universe, in the wondrous co-operation of forces and results in nature, and in the lives of men. He, for his part, firmly believed in Serapis and his might, and in the prophecies and calculations which declared that his fall must involve the dissolution of the organic world and its relapse into chaos.

Many winds were battling in the air, each one driving the ship of life towards the whirlpool. To-day or to-morrow—what matter which? The threatened cataclysm had no terrors for Olympius. One thing only was a pang to his vanity: No succeeding generations would preserve the memory of his heroic struggle and death for the cause of the gods. But all was not yet lost, and his sunny nature read in the glow of the dying clay the promise and dawn of a brilliant morrow. If the expected succor should arrive—if the good cause should triumph here in Alexandria—if the rising were to be general throughout Greek heathendom, then indeed had he been rightly named Olympius by his parents—then he would not change places with any god of Olympus—then the glory of his name, more lasting than bronze or marble, would shine forth like the sun, so long as one Greek heart honored the ancient gods and loved its native land.

This night—perhaps its last—should see a grand, a sumptuous feast; he invited his friends and adherents—the leaders of spiritual life in Alexandria—to a ‘symposium’,

after the manner of the philosophers and dilettanti of ancient Athens, to be held in the great concert-hall of the Serapeum.

Page 29

How different was its aspect from that of the Bishop's council-chamber! The Christians sat within bare walls, on wooden benches, round a plain table; the large room in which Olympius received his supporters was magnificently decorated, and furnished with treasures of art in fine inlaid work, beaten brass and purple stuffs—a hall for kings to meet in. Thick cushions, covered with lion and panther-skins, tempted fatigue or indolence; and when the hero of the hour joined his guests, after his progress through the precincts, every couch was occupied. To his right lay Helladius, the famous grammarian and high-priest of Zeus; Porphyrius, the benefactor of the Serapeum, was on his left; even Karnis had been allotted a place in his old friend's social circle, and greatly appreciated the noble juice of the grape, that was passed round, as well as the eager and intelligent friction of minds, from which he had long been cut off.

Olympius himself was unanimously chosen Symposiarch, and he invited the company to discuss, in the first instance, the time-honored question: Which was the highest good?

One and all, he said, they were standing on a threshold, as it were; and as travellers, quitting an old and beloved home to seek a new and unknown one in a distant land, pause to consider what particular joy that they have known under the shelter of the old Penates has been the dearest, so it would beseem them to reflect, at this supreme moment, what had been the highest good of their life in this world. They were on the eve, perhaps, of a splendid victory; but, perchance, on the other hand, their foot was already on the plank that led from the shore of life to Charon's bark.

The subject was a familiar one and a warm discussion was immediately started. The talk was more flowery and brilliant, no doubt, than in old Athens, but it led to no deeper views and threw no clearer light on the well-worn question. The wranglers could only quote what had been said long since as to the highest Good, and when presently Helladius called upon them to bring their minds to bear on the nature of humanity, a vehement disputation arose as to whether man were the best or the worst of created beings. This led to various utterances as to the mystical connection of the spiritual and material worlds, and nothing could be more amazing than the power of imagination which had enabled these mystical thinkers to people with spirits and daemons every circle of the ladder-like structure which connected the incomprehensible and self-sufficing One with the divine manifestation known as Man. It became quite intelligible that many Alexandrians should fear to fling a stone lest it might hit one of the good daemons of which the air was full— a spirit of light perhaps, or a protecting spirit. The more obscure their theories, the more were they overloaded with image and metaphor; all simplicity of statement was lost, and yet the disputants prided themselves on the brilliancy of their language and the wealth of their ideas. They believed that they had brought the transcendental within the grasp of intelligent sense, and that their empty speculations had carried them far beyond the narrow limits of the Ancients.

Page 30

Karnis was in raptures; Porphyrius only wished for Gorgo by his side, for, like all fathers, he would rather that his child should have enjoyed this supreme intellectual treat than himself.

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In Porphyrius' house, meanwhile, all was gloom and anxiety. In spite of the terrific heat Damia would not be persuaded to come down from the turret-room where she had collected all the instruments, manuals and formulas used by astrologers and Magians. A certain priest of Saturn, who had a great reputation as a master of such arts, and who, for many years, had been her assistant whenever she sought to apply her science to any important event, was in attendance—to give her the astrological tables, to draw circles, ellipses or triangles at her bidding, to interpret the mystical sense of numbers or letters, which now and then escaped her aged memory; he made her calculations or tested those she made herself, and read out the incantations which she thought efficacious under the circumstances. Occasionally, too, he suggested some new method or fresh formula by which she might verify her results.

She had fasted, according to rule, the whole forenoon, and was frequently so far overcome by the heat as to drop asleep in the midst of her studies; then, when she woke with a start, if her assistant had meanwhile worked out his calculation to a result contrary to her anticipations, she took him up sharply and made him begin again from the beginning. Gorge, went up from time to time; but, though she offered the old woman refreshment prepared by her own hand, she could not persuade her even to moisten her lips with a little fruitsyrup, for to break the prescribed fast might endanger the accuracy of her prognostications and the result of all her labor. However, when she seemed to doze, her granddaughter sprinkled strong waters about the room to freshen the air, poured a few drops on the old lady's dress, wiped the dews from her brow, and fanned her to cool her. Damia submitted to all this; and though she had only closed her weary eyes, she pretended to be asleep in order to have the pleasure of being cared for by her darling.

Towards noon she dismissed the Magian and allowed herself a short interval of rest and sleep; but as soon as she woke she collected her wits, and set to work again with fresh zeal and diligence. When, at last, she had mastered all the signs and omens, she knew for certain that nothing could avert the awful doom foretold by the oracles of old.

The fall of Serapis and the end of the world were at hand.

The Magian covered his head as he saw, plainly demonstrated, how she had reached this conclusion, and he groaned in sincere terror; she, however, dismissed him with

perfect equanimity, handing him her purse, which she had filled in the morning, and saying:

“To last till the end.”

Page 31

The sun was now long past the meridian and the old woman, quite worn out, threw herself back in her chair and desired Gorgo to let no one disturb her; nay, not to return herself till she was sent for. As soon as Damia was alone she gazed at herself in a mirror for some little time, murmuring the seven vocables incessantly while she did so; and then she fixed her eyes intently on the sky. These strange proceedings were directed to a particular end, she was endeavoring to close her senses to the external world, to become blind, deaf, and impervious to everything material—the polluting burthen which divided her divine and spiritual part from the celestia fount whence it was derived; to set her soul free from its earthly shroud—free to gaze on the god that was its father. She had already more than once nearly attained to this state by long fasting and resolute abstraction and once, in a moment she could never forget, had enjoyed the dizzy ecstasy of feeling herself float, as it were through infinite space, like a cloud, bathed in glorious radiance. The fatigue that had been gradually overpowering her now seconded her efforts; she soon felt slight tremor; a cold sweat broke out all over her; she lost all consciousness of her limbs, and all sense of sights and hearing; a fresher and cooler air seemed to revive not her lungs only, but every part of her body, while undulating rays of red and violet light danced before her eyes. Was not their strange radiance an emanation from the eternal glory that she sought? Was not some mysterious power uplifting her, bearing her towards the highest goal? Was her soul already free from the bondage of the flesh? Had she indeed become one with God and had her earnest seeking for the Divinity ended in glorification? No; her arms which she had thrown up as if to fly, fell by her side it was all in vain. A pain—a trifling pain in her foot, had brought her down again to the base world of sense which she so ardently strove to soar away from.

Several times she took up the mirror, looked in it fixedly as before, and then gazed upwards; but each time that she lost consciousness of the material world and that her liberated soul began to move its unfettered pinions, some little noise, the twitch of a muscle, a fly settling on her hand, a drop of perspiration falling from her brow on to her cheek, roused her senses to reassert themselves.

Why—why was it so difficult to shake off this burthen of mortal clay? She thought of herself as of a sculptor who chisels away all superfluous material from his block of marble, to reveal the image of the god within; but it was easier to remove the enclosing stone than to release the soul from the body to which it was so closely knit. Still, she did not give up the struggle to attain the object which others had achieved before her; but she got no nearer to it—indeed, less and less near, for, between her and that hoped-for climax, rose up a series of memories and strange faces which she could not get rid of. The chisel slipped aside, went wrong or lost its edge before the image could be extracted from the block.

Page 32

One illusion after another floated before her eyes first it was Gorgo, the idol of her old heart, lying pale and fair on a sea of surf that rocked her on its watery waste—up high on the crest of a wave and then deep down in the abyss that yawned behind it. She, too—so young, a hardly-opened blossom—must perish in the universal ruin, and be crushed by the same omnipotent hand that could overthrow the greatest of the gods; and a glow of passionate hatred snatched her away from the aim of her hopes. Then the dream changed she saw a scattered flock of ravens flying in wide circles, at an unattainable height, against the clouds; suddenly they vanished and she saw, in a grey mist, the monument to Porphyrius' wife, Gorgo's long-departed mother. She had often visited the mausoleum with tender emotion, but she did not want to see it now— not now, and she shook it off; but in its place rose up the image of her daughter-in-law herself, the dweller in that tomb, and no effort of will or energy availed to banish that face. She saw the dead woman as she had seen her on the last fateful occasion in her short life. A solemn and festal procession was passing out through the door of their house, headed by flute-players and singing-girls; then came a white bull; a garland of the scarlet flowers of the pomegranate—[This tree was regarded as the symbol of fertility, on account of its many-seeded fruit.]—hung round its massive neck, and its horns were gilt. By its side walked slaves, carrying white baskets full of bread and cakes and heaps of flowers, and these were followed by others, bearing light-blue cages containing geese and doves. The bull, the calves, the flowers and the birds were all to be deposited in the temple of Eileithyia, as a sacrifice to the protecting goddess of women in child-birth. Close behind the bull came Gorgo's mother, dressed with wreaths, walking slowly and timidly, with shy, downcast eyes-thinking perhaps of the anguish to come, and putting up a silent prayer.

Damia followed with the female friends of the house, the clients and their wives and some personal attendants, all carrying pomegranates in the right hand, and holding in the left a long wreath of flowers which thus connected the whole procession.

In this order they reached the ship-yard; but at that spot they were met by a band of crazy monks from the desert monasteries, who, seeing the beast for sacrifice, abused them loudly, cursing the heathen. The slaves indignantly drove them off, but then the starveling anchorites fell upon the innocent beast which was the chief abomination in their eyes. The bull tossed his huge head, snuffing and snorting to right and left, stuck out his tail and rushed away from the boy whose guidance he had till now meekly followed, flung a monk high in the air with his huge horns, and then turned in his fury on the women who were behind.

They fled like a flock of doves on which a hawk comes swooping down; some were driven quite into the lake and others up against the paling of the shipyard, while Damia herself—who was going through it all again in the midst of her efforts to rise to the divinity—and the young wife whom she had vainly tried to shelter and support, were both knocked down. To that hour of terror Gorgo owed her birth, while to her mother it was death.

Page 33

On the following day Alexandria beheld a funeral ceremony as solemn, as magnificent, and as crowded as though a conquering hero were being entombed; it was that of the monk whom the bull had gored; the Bishop had proclaimed that by this attack on the abomination of desolation—the blood-sacrifice of idolatry—he had won an eternal crown in Paradise.

But now the black ravens crossed Damia's vision once more, till presently a handsome young Greek gaily drove them off with his thyrsus. His powerful and supple limbs shone with oil, applied in the gymnasium of Timagetes, the scene of his frequent triumphs in all the sports and exercises of the youthful Greeks. His features and waving hair were those of her son Apelles; but suddenly his aspect changed: he was an emaciated penitent, his knees bent under the weight of a heavy cross; his widow, Mary, had declared him a martyr to the cause of the crucified Jew and defamed his memory in the eyes of his own son and of all men. Damia clenched her trembling hands. Again those ravens came swirling round, flapping their wings wildly over the prostrate penitent.

Then her husband appeared to her, calmly indifferent to the birds of ill-omen. He looked just as she remembered him many—so many years ago, when he had come in smiling and said: "The best stroke of business I ever did! For a sprinkling of water I have secured the corn trade with Thessalonica and Constantinople; that is a hundred gold solidi for each drop."

Yes, he had made a good bargain. The profits of that day's work were multiplied by tens, and water, nothing in the world but Nile water—Baptismal water the priest had called it—had filled her son's money-bags, too, and had turned their plot of land into broad estates; but it had been tacitly understood that this sprinkling of water established a claim for a return, and this both father and son had solemnly promised. Its magic turned everything they touched to gold, but it brought a blight on the peace of the household. One branch, which had grown up in the traditions of the old Macedonian stock, had separated from the other; and her husband's great lie lay between them and the family still living in the Canopic way, like a wide ocean embittered with the salt of hatred. That he had infused poison into his son's life and compelled him, proud as he was, to forfeit the dignity of a free and high-minded man. Though devoted in his heart to the old gods he had humbled himself, year after year, to bow the knee with the hated votaries of the Christian faith, and in their church, to their crucified Lord, and had publicly confessed Christ. The water—the terrible thaumaturgic stream—clung to him more inseparably than the brand-mark on a slave's arm. It could neither be dried up nor wiped away; for if the false Christian, who was really a zealous heathen, had boldly confessed the Olympian gods and abjured the odious new faith, the gifts of the all-powerful water and all the possessions of their old family would be confiscated to the State and Church, and the children of Porphyrius, the grandchildren of the wealthy Damia, would be beggars. And this—all this—for the sake of a crucified Jew.

Page 34

The gods be praised the end of all this wretchedness was at hand! A thrill of ecstasy ran through her as she reflected that with herself and her children, every soul, everything that bore the name of Christian would be crushed, shattered and annihilated. She could have laughed aloud but that her throat was so dry, her tongue so parched; but her scornful triumph was expressed in every feature, as her fancy showed her Marcus riding along the Canopic street with that little heathen hussy Dada, the singing girl, while her much-hated daughter-in-law looked after them, beating her forehead in grief and rage.

Quite beside herself with delight the old woman rocked backwards and forwards in her chair; not for long, however, for the black birds seemed to fill the whole room, describing swift, interminable spirals round her head. She could not hear them, but she could see them, and the whirling vortex fascinated her; she could not help turning her head to follow their flight; she grew giddy and she was forced to try to recover her balance.

The old woman sat huddled in her chair, her hands convulsively clutching the arms, like a horseman whose steed has run away with him round and round the arena; till at length, worn out by excitement and exhaustion, she became unconscious, and sank in a heap on the ground, rigid and apparently lifeless.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Christianity had ceased to be the creed of the poor
He spoke with pompous exaggeration
Whether man were the best or the worst of created beings

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Page 35

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Page 36

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