

Serapis — Volume 05 eBook

Serapis — Volume 05 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER XX.

Gorgo, when she had left her grandmother, could not rest. Her lofty calmness of demeanor had given way to a restless mood such as she had always contemned severely in others, since she had ceased to be a vehement child and grown to be a woman. She tried to beguile the alarm that made her pulses beat so quickly, and the heart-sickness that ached like a wound, by music and singing; but this only added to her torment. The means by which she could usually recover her equanimity of mind had lost their efficacy, and Sappho's longing hymn, which she began to sing, had only served to bring the fervid longing of her own heart to light—to set it, as it were, in the full glare of the sun. She had become aware that every fibre, every nerve of her being yearned for the man she loved; she would have thrown away her life like a hollow nut for one single hour of perfect joy with him and in him. The faith in the old gods, the heathen world which contained the ideal of her young soul, her detestation of Christianity, her beautiful art—everything, in short, that had filled the spiritual side of her life, was cast into the shade by the one absorbing passion that possessed her soul. Every feeling, every instinct, urged her to abandon herself entirely to her lover, and yet she never for one instant doubted which side she would take in the approaching conflict of the great powers that ruled the world. The last few hours had only confirmed her conviction that the end of all things was at hand. The world was on the eve of destruction; she foresaw that she must perish—perish with Constantine, and that, in her eyes, was a grace from the gods.

While Damia was vainly struggling to liberate her soul from the bondage of the flesh, Gorgo had been wandering uneasily about the house; now going to the slaves, encouraging them with brave words, and giving them employment to keep them from utter desperation, and then stealing up to see whether her grandmother might not by this time be in need of her. As it grew dark she observed that several of the women, and even some of the men, had made their escape. These were such as had already shown a leaning towards the new faith, and who now made off to join their fellow-Christians, or to seek refuge in the churches under the protection of the crucified God whose supreme power might, perhaps, even yet, avert the impending catastrophe.

Twice had Porphyrius sent a messenger to assure his mother and daughter that all was well with him, that a powerful party was prepared to defend the Serapeum, and that he should pass the night in the temple. The Romans were evidently hesitating to attack it, and if, next morning, the heathen should succeed in repelling the first onset, reinforcements might yet be brought up in time. Gorgo could not share these hopes; a client of her father's had brought in a rumor that the Biamites, after advancing as far as Naucratis, had been dispersed by a few of the Imperial maniples. Fate was stalking on its way, and no one could give it pause.

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The evening brought no coolness, and when it was already quite dark, as her grandmother had not yet called her, Gorgo could no longer control her increasing anxiety, so, after knocking in vain at the door of the observatory, she went in. Her old nurse preceded her with a lamp, and the two women stood dumb with consternation, for the old lady lay senseless on the ground. Her head was thrown back against the seat of the chair off which she had slipped, and her pale face was lifeless and horrible to look at, with its half-closed eyes and dropped jaw. Wine, water, and strong essences were all at hand, and they laid the unconscious woman on a couch intended for the occasional use of the wearied observer. In a few minutes they had succeeded in reviving the old lady; but her eyes rested without recognition on the girl who knelt by her side, and she murmured to herself: "The ravens—where are they gone? Ravens!"

Her glance wandered round the room, to the tablets and rolls which had been tossed off the couch and the table to make room for her, and for the lamps and medicaments. They lay in disorder on the floor, and the sight of this confusion produced a favorable excitement and reaction; she succeeded in expressing herself in husky accents and broken, hardly intelligible sentences, so far as to scold them sharply for their irreverence for the precious documents, and for the disorder they had created. The waiting-woman proceeded to pick them up: but Damia again became unconscious. Gorgo bathed her brow and tried to pour some wine between her teeth, but she clenched them too firmly, till the slave-woman came to her assistance and they succeeded in making Damia swallow a few drops. The old woman opened her eyes, smacking her tongue feebly; but she took the cup into her own hand to hold it to her lips; and though she trembled so that half the contents were spilt, she drank eagerly till it was quite empty. "More," she gasped with the eagerness of intense thirst, "more—I want drink !"

Gorgo gave her a second and a third draught which Damia drank with equal eagerness; then, with a deep breath, she looked up fully conscious, at her granddaughter.

"Thank you, child," she said. "Now I shall do very well for a little while. The material world and all that belongs to it weighs us down and clings to us like iron fetters. We may long and strive to be free, but it pursues us and holds us fast. Only those who are content with their miserable humanity can enjoy it. They laugh, as you know, at Praxilla, the poetess, because she makes the dying Adonis lament, when face to face with death, that he is forced to leave the apples and pears behind him. But is not that subtly true? Yes, yes; Praxilla is right! We fast, we mortify ourselves—I have felt it all myself—to partake of divinity. We almost perish of hunger and thirst, when we might be so happy if only we would be satisfied with apples and pears! No man has ever yet succeeded in

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the great effort; those who would be truly happy must be content with small things. That is what makes children so happy. Apples and pears! Well, everything will be at an end for me ere long—even those. But if the great First Cause spares himself in the universal crash, there is still the grand idea of Apples and Pears; and who knows but that it may please Him, when this world is destroyed, to frame another to come after it. Will He then once more embody the ideas of Man—and Apples and Pears? It would be plagiarism from himself. Nay, if He is merciful, He will never again give substance to that hybrid idea called Man; or, if He does, He will let the poor wretch be happy with apples and pears—I mean trivial joys; for all higher joys, be they what they may, are vanity and vexation.... Give me another draught. Ah, that is good! And to-morrow is the end. I could find it in my heart to regret the good gifts of Dionysus myself; it is better than apples and pears; next to that comes the joy that Eros bestows on mortals, and there must be an end to all that, too. That, however, is above the level of apples and pears. It is great, very great happiness, and mingled therefor with bitter sorrow. Rapture and anguish—who can lay down the border line that divides them? Smiles and tears alike belong to both. And you are weeping? Aye, aye— poor child! Come here and kiss me.” Damia drew the head of the kneeling girl close to her bosom and pressed her lips to Gorge’s brow. Presently, however, she relaxed her embrace and, looking about the room, she exclaimed:

“How you have mixed and upset the book-rolls! If only I could show you how clearly everything agrees and coincides. We know now exactly how it will all happen. By the day after to-morrow there will be no more earth, no more sky; and I will tell you this, child: If, when Serapis falls, the universe does not crumble to pieces like a ruinous hovel, then the wisdom of the Magians is a lie, the course of the stars has nothing to do with the destinies of the earth and its inhabitants, the planets are mere lamps, the sun is no more than a luminous furnace, the old gods are marsh-fires, emanations from the dark bog of men’s minds—and the great Serapis... But why be angry with him? There is no doubt—no if nor butGive me the diptychon and I will show you our doom. There—just here—my sight is so dazzled, I cannot make it out.—And if I could, what matter? Who can alter here below what has been decided above? Leave me to sleep now, and I will explain it all to you to-morrow if there is still time. Poor child, when I think how we have tormented you to learn what you know, and how industrious you have been! And now—to what end? I ask you, to what end? The great gulf will swallow up one and all.”

“So be it, so be it !” cried Gorgo interrupting her. “Then, at any rate, nothing that I love on earth will be lost to me before I die!”

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"And the enemy will perish in the same ruin!" continued Damia, her eyes sparkling with revived fire. "But where shall we go to—where? The soul is divine by nature and cannot be destroyed. It must return—say, am I right or wrong?—It will return to its first fount and cause; for like attracts and absorbs like, and thus our deification, our union with the god will be accomplished."

"I believe it—I am sure of it!" replied Gorgo with conviction.

"You are sure of it?" retorted the old woman. "But I am not. For our clearest knowledge is but guesswork when it is not based on numbers. Nothing is proved or provable but by numbers, but they are surer than the rocks in the sea; that is why I believe in our coming doom, for, on those tablets, we have calculated it to a certainty. But who can calculate evidence of the future fate of the soul? If, indeed, the old order should not pass away—if the depths should remain below and the empyrean still keep its place above—then, to be sure, your studies would not be in vain; for then your soul, which is fixed on spiritual, supernatural and sublime conceptions, would be drawn upwards to the great Intelligence of which it is the offspring, to the very god, and become one with him—absorbed into him, as the rain-drop fallen from a cloud rises again and is reunited to its parent vapor. Then—for there may be a metempsychosis—your songful spirit might revive to inform a nightingale, then . . ."

Damia paused; and gazed upwards as if in ecstasy, and it was not till a few minutes later that she went on, with a changed expression in her face: "Then my son's widow, Mary, would be hatched out of a serpent's egg and would creep a writhing asp... Great gods! the ravens! What can they mean? They come again. Air, air! Wine! I cannot—I am choking—take it away!—To-morrow—to-day... Everything is going; do you see—do you feel? It is all black—no, red; and now black again. Everything is sinking; hold me, save me; the floor is going from under me.—Where is Porphyrius? Where is my son?—My feet are so cold; rub them. It is the water! rising—it is up to my knees. I am sinking—help! save me! help!" The dying woman fought with her arms as if she were drowning; her cries for help grew fainter, her head drooped on her laboring chest, and in a few minutes she had breathed her last in her grandchild's arms, and her restless, suffering soul was free.

Never before had Gorgo seen death. She could not persuade herself that the heart which had been so cold for others, but had throbbed so warmly and tenderly for her, was now stilled for ever; that the spirit which, even in sleep, had never been at rest, had now found eternal peace. The slave-woman had hastily taken her place, had closed the dead woman's eyes and mouth, and done all she could to diminish the horror of the scene, and the terrible aspect of the dead in the sight of the girl who had been her

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one darling. But Gorgo had remained by her side, and, while she did everything in her power to revive the stiffening body, the overwhelming might of Death had come home to her with appalling clearness. She felt the limbs of one she had loved growing cold and rigid under her hands, and her spirit rose in obstinate rebellion against the idea that annihilation stood between her and the woman who had so amply filled a mother's place. She insisted on having every method of resuscitation tried that had ever been heard of, and made her nurse send for physicians, though the woman solemnly assured her that human help was of no avail: then she sent for the priest of Saturn who—as the dead woman herself had told her—knew mighty spells which had called back many a departed spirit to the body it had quitted.

When, at last, she was alone and gazed on the hard, set features of the dead, though she shuddered with horror, she so far controlled herself as to press her lips in sorrow and gratitude to the thin hand whose caresses she had been wont to accept as a mere matter of course. How cold and heavy it was! She shivered and dropped it, and the large rings on the fingers rattled on the wooden frame of the couch. There was no hope; she understood that her friend and mother was indeed dead and silent forever.

Deep and bitter grief overwhelmed her completely, with the sense of abandoned loneliness, the humiliating feeling of helplessness against a brutal power that marches on, scorning humanity, as a warrior treads down the grass and flowers in his path. She fell on her knees by the corpse, sobbing passionately, and crying like an indignant child when a stronger companion has robbed it of some precious possession. She wept with rage at her own impotence; and her tears flowed faster and faster as she more fully realized how lonely she was, and what a blow this must be to her father. In this hour no pleasant reminiscences of past family happiness came to infuse a drop of sweetness into the bitterness of her grief. Only one reflection brought her any comfort, and that was the thought that the grave which had yawned already for her grandmother would soon, very soon, open for herself and all living souls. On the table, close at hand, lay the evidence of their impending doom, and a longing for that end gradually took complete possession of her, excluding every other feeling. Thinking of this she rose from her knees and ceased to weep.

When, presently, her waiting-woman should return, she was resolved to leave the house at once; she could not bear to stay; her feelings and duty alike indicated the place where she might find the last hour's happiness that she expected or desired of life. Her father must learn from herself, and not from a stranger, of the loss that had befallen them, and she knew that he was in the Serapeum—on the very spot where she might hope next morning to meet Constantine. It would be her lover's duty to open the gate to destruction, and she would be there to pass through it at his side.

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She waited a long, long time, but at last there was a noise on the stairs. That was her nurse's step, but she was not alone. Had she brought the leech and the exorciser? The door opened and the old steward came in, carrying a three-branched lamp; then followed the slave-woman, and then—her heart stood still then came Constantine and his mother.

Gorgo, pale and speechless, received her unexpected visitors. The nurse had failed to find the physician, whose aid would, at any rate, have come too late; and as the housekeeper had taken herself off with others of the Christian slaves, the faithful soul had said to herself that "her child" would want some womanly help and comfort in her trouble, and had gone to the house of their neighbor Clemens, to entreat his wife to come with her to see the dead, and visit her forlorn young mistress. Constantine, who had come home a short time previously, had said nothing, but had accompanied the two women.

While Constantine gazed with no unkindly feelings at the still face of Damia—to whom, after all, he owed many a little debt of kindness—and then turned to look at Gorgo who stood downcast, pale, and struggling to breathe calmly, Dame Marianne tried to proffer a few words of consolation. She warmly praised everything in the dead woman which was not in her estimation absolutely reprobate and godless, and brought forward all the comforting arguments which a pious Christian can command for the edification and encouragement of those who mourn a beloved friend; but to Gorgo all this well-meant discourse was as the babble of an unknown tongue; and it was only when, at length, Marianne went up to her and drew her to her motherly bosom, to kiss her, and bid her be welcome under Clelnens' roof till Porphyrius should be at home again, that she understood that the good woman meant kindly, and honestly desired to help and comfort her.

But the allusion to her father reminded her of the first duty in her path; she roused her energies, thanked Marianne warmly, and begged her only to assist her in carrying the corpse into the thalamos, and then to take charge of the keys. She herself, she explained, meant at once to seek her father, since he ought to learn from no one but herself of his mother's death. Nor would she listen for a moment to her friend's pressing entreaties that she would put off this task, and pass the night, at any rate, under her roof.

Constantine had kept in the background; it was not till Gorgo approached the dead and gave the order to carry the body down into the house that he came forward, and with simple feeling offered her his hand. The girl looked frankly in his face, and, as she put her hand in his, she said in a low voice: "I was unjust to you, Constantine. I insulted and hurt you; but I repented sincerely, even before you had left the house. And you owe me no grudge, I know, for you understood how forlorn I must be and came to see me. There is no ill-feeling, is there, nothing to come between us?"

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"Nothing, nothing!" he eagerly exclaimed, seizing her other hand with passionate fervor.

She felt as if all the blood in her body had rushed in a full tide to her heart—as if he were some part of her very being, that had been torn out, snatched from her, and that she must have back again, even if it cost them both their life and happiness. The impulse was irresistible; she drew away her hands from his grasp and flung them round his neck, clinging to him as a weary child clings to its mother. She did not know how it had come about—how such a thing was possible, but it was done; and without paying any heed to Marianne, who looked on in dismay while her son's lips were pressed to the brow and lips of the lovely idolatress, she wept upon her lover's shoulders, feeling a thousand roses blossoming in her soul and a thousand thorns piercing and tearing her heart.

It had to be, that she felt; it was at once their union and their parting. Their common destiny was but for a moment, and that moment had come and gone. All that now retrained for them was death—destruction, with all things living; and she looked forward to this, as a man watches for the dawn after a sleepless night. Marianne stood aside; she dimly perceived that something vital was going on, that something inevitable had happened which would admit of no interference. Gorgo, as she freed herself from Constantine's embrace, stood strangely solemn and unapproachable. To the simple matron she was an inscrutable riddle to which she could find no clue; but she was pleased, nevertheless, when Gorgo came up to her and kissed her hand. She could not utter a word, for she felt that whatever she might say, it would not be the right thing; and it was a real relief to her to busy herself over the removal of the body, in which she could be helpful.

Gorgo had covered the dead face; and when old Damia had been carried down to the thalamos and laid in state on the bridal bed, she strewed the couch with flowers.

Meanwhile, the priest of Saturn had been found, and he declared in all confidence that no power on earth could have recalled this departed soul. Damia's sudden end and the girl's great grief went to his faithful heart, and he gladly acceded to Gorgo's request that he would wait for her by the garden-gate and escort her to the Serapeum. When he had left them she gave the keys of her grandmother's chests and cupboards into Marianne's keeping; then she went into the adjoining room, where Constantine had been waiting while she decked the bed of death, and bid him a solemn, but apparently calm, farewell. He put out his arm to clasp her to his heart, but this she would not permit; and when he besought her to go home with them she answered sadly, "No, my dearest... I must not; I have other duties to fulfil."

"Yes," he replied emphatically, "and I, too—I have mine. But you have given yourself to me. You are my very own; you belong to me only, and not to yourself; and I desire, I command you to yield to my first request. Go with my mother, or stay here, if you will,

with the dead. Wherever your father may be, it is not, cannot be, the right place for you —my betrothed bride. I can guess where he is. Oh! Gorgo, be warned.

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“The fate of the old gods is sealed. We are the stronger and to-morrow, yes to-morrow —by your own head, by all I hold dear and sacred!—Serapis will fall!”

“I know it,” she said firmly. “And you are charged to lay hands on the god?”

“I am, and I shall do it.”

She nodded approbation and then said submissively and sweetly: “It is your duty, and you cannot do otherwise. And come what may we are one, Constantine, forever one. Nothing can part us. Whatever the future may bring, we belong to each other, to stand or fall together. I with you, you with me, till the end of time.” She gave him her hand and looked lovingly into his eyes; then she threw herself into his mother’s arms and kissed her fondly.

“Come, come with me, my child,” said Marianne; but Gorgo freed herself, exclaiming: “Go, go; if you love me leave me; go and let me be alone.”

She went back into the thalamos where the dead lay at peace, and before the others could follow her she had opened a door hidden behind some tapestry near the bed, and fled into the garden.

CHAPTER XXI.

The night was hot and gloomy. Heavy clouds gathered in the north, and wreaths of mist, like a hot vapor-bath, swayed over the crisply-foaming wavelets that curled the lustreless waters of the Mareotis Lake. The moon peeped, pale and shrouded, out of a russet halo, and ghostly twilight reigned in the streets, still heated by the baked walls of the houses.

To the west, over the desert, a dull sulphurous yellow streaked the black clouds, and from time to time the sultry air was rent by a blinding flash sent across the firmament from the north. There was a hot, sluggish wind blowing from the southwest, which drove the sand across the lake into the streets; the fine grit stung: and burnt the face of the wanderer who hurried on with half-closed eyes and tightly-shut lips. A deep oppression seemed to have fallen on nature and on man; the sudden gusts of the heated breeze, the arrow-like shafts of lightning, the weird shapes and colors of the clouds, all combined to give a sinister, baleful and portentous aspect to this night, as though skies and waters, earth and air were brooding over some tremendous catastrophe.

Gorgo had thrown a veil and handkerchief round her head and followed the priest with an aching brow and throbbing heart. When she heard a step behind her she started-for it might be Constantine following her up; when a gust of wind flung the stinging sand in

her face, or the storm-flash threw a lurid light on the sky, her heart stood still, for was not this the prelude to the final crash.

She was familiar with the way they were going, but its length seemed to have stretched tenfold. At last, however, they reached their destination. She gave the pass-word at the gate of her father's timber-yard and exchanged the signs agreed upon; in a few minutes she had made her way through the piles of beams and planks that screened the entrance to the aqueduct—a slave who knew her leading the way with a light—and she and her companion entered the underground passage.

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It was hot and close; bats, scared by the flare of the torch, fluttered round her with a ghostly rustle, startling and disgusting her; still, she felt less alarm here than outside; and when, as she went forward she thought of the great temple she was coming to, of its wonderful beauty and solemn majesty, she only cared to press onward to that refuge of ineffable splendor where all would be peace. To die there, to perish there with her lover, did not seem hard; nay, she felt proud to think that she might await death in the noblest edifice ever raised to a god by mortal hands. Here Fate might have its way; she had known the highest joy she had ever dreamed of, and where on earth was there a sublimer tomb than this sanctuary of the sovereign of the universe, whose supremacy even the other gods acknowledged with trembling!

She had known the sacred halls of the temple from her childhood, and she pictured them as filled with thousands of lofty souls, united in this supreme hour by one feeling and one purpose. She even fancied she could hear the inspired and heartfelt strains of the enthusiasts who were prepared to give their lives for the god of their fathers, that she breathed the odor of incense and burnt sacrifices, that she saw the chorus of youths and maidens, led by priests and dancing with solemn grace in mazy circles round the flower-decked altars. There among the elders who had gathered round Olympius to meditate devoutly on the coming doom and on the inmost meaning of the mysteries—among the adepts who were anxiously noting, in the observatories of the Serapeum, the fateful courses of the stars, the swirling of the clouds and the flight of birds, she would doubtless find her father; and the fresh wound bled anew as she remembered that she was the bearer of news which must deeply shock and grieve him. Still, no doubt, she would find him wrapped in dignified readiness for the worst, sorrowing serenely for the doomed world, and so her melancholy message would come to a prepared and resigned heart.

She had no fear of the crowd of men she would find in the Serapeum. Her father and Olympius were there to protect her, and Dame Herse, too, would be a support and comfort; but even without those three, on such a night as this—the last perhaps that they might ever see—she would have ventured without hesitation among thousands, for she firmly believed that every votary of the gods was awaiting his own end and the crash of falling skies with devout expectancy, and perhaps with not less terror than herself.

These were her thoughts as she and her guide stopped at a strong door. This was presently opened and they found themselves in an underground chamber, devoted to the mysteries of the worship of Serapis, in which the adepts were required to go through certain severe ordeals before they were esteemed worthy to be received into the highest order of the initiated—the Esoterics. The halls and corridors which she

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now went through, and which she had never before seen, were meagrely lighted with lamps and torches, and all that met her eye filled her with reverent awe while it excited her imagination. Everything, in fact—every room and every image—was as unlike nature, and as far removed from ordinary types as possible, in arrangement and appearance. After passing through a pyramidal room, with triangular sides that sloped to a point, she came to one in the shape of a polygonal prism. In a long, broad corridor she had to walk on a narrow path, bordered by sphinxes; and there she clung tightly to her guide, for on one side of the foot-way yawned a gulf of great depth. In another place she heard, above her head, the sound of rushing waters, which then fell into the abyss beneath with a loud roar. After this she came upon a large grotto, hewn in the living rock and defended by a row of staring crocodiles' heads, plated with gold; the heavy smell of stale incense and acrid resins choked her, and her way now lay over iron gratings and past strangely contrived furnaces. The walls were decorated with colored reliefs: Tantalus, Ixion, and Sisyphus toiling at his stone, looked down on her in hideous realism as she went. Rock chambers, fast closed with iron doors, as though they enclosed inestimable treasures or inscrutable secrets, lay on either hand, and her dress swept against numerous images and vessels closely shrouded in hangings.

When she ventured to look round, her eye fell on monstrous forms and mystical signs and figures; if she glanced upwards, she saw human and animal forms, and mixed with these the various constellations, sailing in boats—the Egyptian notion of their motions—along the back of a woman stretched out to an enormous length; or, again, figures by some Greek artist: the Pleiades, Castor and Pollux as horsemen with stars on their heads, and Berenice's star-gemmed hair.

The effect on the girl was bewildering, overpowering, as she made her way through this underground world. The things she had glimpses of were very sparsely illuminated, nay scarcely discernible, and yet appallingly real; what mysteries, what spells might not be hidden in all she did not see! She felt as if the end of life, which she was looking for, had already begun, as if she had already gone down, alive, into Hades.

The path gradually sloped upwards and at last she ascended, by a spiral staircase, to the ground-floor of the temple. Once or twice she had met a few men, but solemn silence reigned in those subterranean chambers.

The sound of their approaching and receding steps had only served to make her aware of the complete stillness. This was just as it should be—just as she would have it. This peace reminded her of the profound silence of nature before a tempest bursts and rages.

Gorgo took off her veil as she went up the stairs, shook out the folds of her dress, and assumed the dignified and reverent demeanor which became a young girl of rank and



position when approaching the altars of the divinity. But as she reached the top a loud medley of noises and voices met her ear-flutes, drums?—The sacred dance, she supposed, must be going on.

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She came out into a room on one side of the hypostyle; her companion opened a high door, plated with gilt bronze and silver, and Gorgo followed him, walking gravely with her head held high and her eyes fixed on the ground, into the magnificent hall where the sacred image sat enthroned in veiled majesty. They crossed the colonnade at the side of the hypostyle and went down two steps into the vast nave of the temple.

The wild tumult that she had heard on first opening the door had surprised and puzzled her; but now, as she timidly looked up and around her, she felt a shock of horror and revulsion such as might come over a man who, walking by night and believing that he is treading on flowers, suddenly finds that the slimy slope of a bottomless bog is leading him to perdition. She tottered and clutched at a statue, gazing about her, listening to the uproar, and wondering whether she were awake or dreaming.

She tried not to see and hear what was going on there; it was revolting, loathsome, horrible; but it was too manifest to be overlooked or ignored; its vulgarity and horror forced it on her attention. For some time she stood spell-bound, paralyzed; but then she covered her face with her hands; maidenly shame, bitter disillusion, and pious indignation at the gross desecration of all that she deemed most sacred and inviolable surged up in her stricken soul, and she burst into tears, weeping as she had never wept in all her life before. Sobbing bitterly, she wrapped her face in her veil, as though to protect herself from storm and chill.

No one heeded her; her companion had left her to seek her father. She could only await his return, and she looked round for a hiding place. Then she observed a woman in mourning garb sitting huddled at the foot of the statue of justice; she recognized her as the widow of Asclepiodorus and breathed more freely as she went up to her and said, between her sobs "Let me sit by you; we can mourn together."

"Yes, yes, come," said the other; and without enquiring what Gorgo's trouble might be, moved only by the mysterious charm of finding another in like sorrow with herself, she drew the girl to her and bending over her, at length found relief in tears.

The two weeping women sat in silence, side by side, while in front of them the orgy went on its frantic course. A party of men and women were dancing down the hall, singing and shouting. Flutes yelled, cymbals clanged, drums rattled and droned, without either time or tune. Drunken pastophori had flung open the rooms where the vestments and sacred vessels were kept, and from these treasuries the ribald mob had dragged forth panther-skins such as the priests wore when performing the sacred functions, brass cars for carrying sacrifices, wooden biers on which the images of the gods were borne in solemn processions, and other precious objects. In a large room adjoining, a party of students and girls were concocting some grand scheme for which they needed much time and large supplies of wine; but most of those who had possessed themselves of the plunder had taken it into the hypostyle and were vying with each other in extravagant travesties.

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A burly wine-grower was elected to represent Dionysus and was seated with nothing but some wreaths of flowers to cover his naked limbs, in a four-wheeled sacrificial car of beaten brass. An alabaster wine-jar stood between his fat knees, and his heavy body rolled with laughter as he was drawn in triumph through the sacred arcades by a shouting rabble, as fast as they could run. Numbers of the intoxicated crew, mad with excitement and wine, had cast off their clothes which lay in heaps between the pillars, soaking in puddles of spilt wine. In their wild dance the girls' hair had fallen about their heated faces, tangled with withered leaves and faded flowers, and the men, young and old alike, leaped and waltzed like possessed creatures, flourishing thyrsus-staves and the emblems of the lusty wine-god.

A small band of priests and philosophers ventured into the chaos in the hope of quelling the riot, but a tipsy flute-player placed himself in front of them and throwing back his head blew a furious blast to heaven on his double pipe, shrill enough to wake the dead, while a girl seconded him by flinging her tambourine in the face of the intruding pacificators. It bounced against the shaft of a column, and then fell on the shaven head of a priestling, who seized it and tossed it back. The game was soon taken up, and before long, one tambourine after another was flying over the heads of the frenzied crew. Every one was eager to have one, and sprung to catch them, scuffling and struggling and making the parchment sound on his neighbor's head.

Some of the women had jumped on to the processional biers and were being carried round the hall by staggering youths, screaming with alarm and laughter; if one of them lost her balance and fell she was captured with shrieks of merriment and forced to mount her insecure eminence again. Presently the car of Dionysus came to wreck over the body of an unconscious toper, but no one stopped to set it right; and though the hapless representative of the god howled loudly to them to stop while he extricated himself from the machine, in which he had stuck, it was in vain; the score or so of youths who were dragging it tore on, passing close by Gorgo, who noted with indignation, that the brasswork of the axles was cutting deeply into the splendid mosaic of the pavement. At last the burly god fell out by his sheer weight, and his followers restored him to consciousness by taking him by the heels and dipping his towzled and bleeding head into a huge jar of wine and water. Then some hundreds of his drunken votaries danced madly round the rescued god; and as all the tambourines were split and the flute-players had no breath left, time was kept by beating with thyrsus-staves against the pillars, while three men, who had found the brazen tubas among the temple vessels, blew with all their might and main.

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Strong opposition, however, was roused by this mad uproar. A party of worshippers, in the first place, rebelled against it; these had been standing with veiled heads, near the statue of Serapis, muttering exorcisms after a Magian and howling lamentably at intervals; then a preacher, who had succeeded in collecting a little knot of listeners, bid the trumpeters cease; and finally, a party of actors and singers, who had assembled in the outer hall to perform a satira play, tried to stop them, though they themselves were making such a noise that the trumpet-blast could have affected them but little. When the players found that remonstrance had no effect they rushed into the hypostyle and tried to reduce the musicians to silence by force.

Then a frenzied contest began; but the combatants were soon separated; the actors and their antagonists fell on each other's necks, and a Homeric poet, who had compiled an elegy for the evening on the "Gods coerced by the hosts of the new superstition," made up simply of lines culled from the Iliad and Odyssey, seized this favorable opportunity. He had begun to read it at the top of his voice, screaming down the general din, when everything was forgotten in the excitement caused by the entrance of a procession which was the successful result of many raids on the temple-treasures and lumber-rooms.

A storm of applause greeted its appearance; the tipsiest stammered out his approval, and the picture presented to drunken eyes was indeed a beautiful and gorgeous one. On a high platform-intended for the display of a small image of Serapis and certain symbols of the god, at great festivals—Glycera, the loveliest hetaira of the town, was drawn in triumph through the temple. She reclined in a sort of bowl representing a shell, placed at the top of the platform, and on the lower stages sat groups of fair girls, swaying gently with luxurious grace, and flinging flowers down to the crowd who, with jealous rivalry, strove to catch them. Everyone recognized the beautiful hetaira as Aphrodite, and she was hailed, as with one voice, the Queen of the World. The men rushed forward to pour libations in her honor, and to join hands and dance in a giddy maze round her car.

"Take her to Serapis!" shouted a drunken student. "Marry her to the god. Heavenly Love should be his bride!"

"Yes—take her to Serapis," yelled another. "It is the wedding of Serapis and Glycera."

The crazy rabble pushed the machine towards the curtain, with the beautiful, laughing woman on the top, and her bevy of languishing attendants.

Until this instant the vivid lightning outside, and the growling of distant thunder had not been heeded by the revellers, but now a blinding flash lighted up the hall and, at the same instant, a tremendous peal crashed and rattled just above them, and shook the desecrated shrine. A sulphurous vapor came rolling in at the openings just below the roof, and this first flash was immediately followed by another which seemed to have rent

the vault of heaven, for it was accompanied by a deafening and stunning roar and a terrific rumbling and creaking, as though the metal walls of the firmament had burst asunder and fallen in on the earth—on Alexandria—on the Serapeum.

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The whole awful force of an African tempest came crashing down upon them; the wild revel was stilled; the trembling toppers dropped their cups, fevered checks turned pale, the dancers parted and threw up their hands in agonized supplication, words of lust and blasphemy died on their lips and turned to prayers and muttered charms. The terrified nymphs that surrounded Venus sprang from the car, and the foam-born goddess in the shell tried to free herself from the garlands and gauzes in which she was involved, shrieking aloud when she perceived that she could not descend unaided from her elevated position. Other voices mingled with hers—lamenting, cursing, and entreating; for now the rainclouds burst, and through the window-openings poured a cold flood, chilling and wetting the drunken mob within.

The storm raved through the halls and corridors; lightning and thunder raged fiercely overhead; and the terrified wretches, suddenly sobered, rushed about or huddled together, like ants whose nest has been upturned. And into the midst of this dismayed throng rushed Orpheus, the son of Karnis, who had been till now on guard on the roof, crying out: “The world is coming to an end, the heavens are opening! Father—where is my father?”

And everyone believed him; they snatched off their garlands, tore their hair and gave themselves up to the utmost despair. Wailing, sobbing, howling-furious, but impotent, they appealed to each other; and though they had no hope of living to see another morning, or perhaps another hour, each one thought only of himself, of his garments, and of how he might best cover his limbs that shivered with terror and cold. From the Scuffling mob round the heaps of cast-off clothes came deep groans, piteous weeping, the shrieks of women, and the despairing moans of the panic-stricken wretches.

It was a fearful scene, at once heart-rending and revolting; Gorgo looked on, gnashing her teeth with rage and disgust, and only wishing for the end of the world and of her own life as a respite from it all. These crazed and miserable wretches, cowardly fools, these beasts in the guise of human beings, deserved no better than to perish; but was it conceivable that the supreme being should destroy the whole of the beautiful and wisely-planned world for the sake of this base and loathsome rabble.

It thundered, it lightened, the foundations of the temple shook—but she no longer looked for the final crash; she had ceased to believe in the majesty, the power and the purity of the divinity behind the veil. Her cheeks burnt with shame, she felt it a disgrace ever to have been numbered among his adherents; and, as the howling of the terrified crowd grew every moment louder and wilder, the memory of Constantine’s grave and fearless manliness rose before her, in all its strength and beauty. She was his, his wholly and forever; and for the future all that was his should be hers: his love, his home, his noble purpose—and his God.

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CHAPTER XXII.

The doubtful light of dawn was beginning to break through the storm-clouds as they exhausted their fury on the Serapeum, but the terrified heathen did not notice it. No captain, no prophet, no comforter had come to revive their courage and hopes; for Olympius and his guests, the leaders of the intellectual life of Alexandria—and among them the chief priests of the sanctuary—were tardy in making their appearance.

The lightning-flash which had fallen on the brassplated cupola, and then discharged its force along a flagstaff, had alarmed even the sages and philosophers; and the Symposium had come to an abrupt end but little more dignified than the orgy in the temple-halls. Few, to be sure, of the high-priest's friends had allowed themselves to be so far scared as to betray their terrors frankly; on the contrary, when the crack of doom really seemed to have sounded, rhetoric and argument grew even more eager than before round Olympius' table; and Gorgo's opinion of her fellow-heathen might not have been much raised if she could have heard Helladius, the famous philologist and biographer, reciting verses from "Prometheus bound," his knees quaking and lips quivering as he heard the thunder; or seen Ammonius, another grammarian who had written a celebrated work on "The Differences of Synonyms," rending his robe and presenting his bared breast as a target to the lightning, with a glance round at the company to challenge their admiration. His heroic display was, unfortunately, observed by few; for most of them, including Eunapius, a neo-platonic philosopher distinguished as a historian and an implacable foe of the Christians, had wrapped their heads in their robes and were awaiting the end in sullen resignation. Some had dropped on their knees and were praying with uplifted hands, or murmuring incantations; and a poet, who had been crowned for a poem entitled: "Man the Lord and Master of the Gods," had fainted with fear, and his laurel-wreath had fallen into a dish of oysters.

Olympius had risen from his place as Symposiarch and was leaning against a door-post awaiting death with manly composure. Father Karnis, who had made rather too free with the wine-cup, but had been completely sobered by the sudden fury of the storm, had sprung up and hastened past the high-priest to seek his wife and son; he knew they could not be far off, and desired to perish with them.

Porphyrius and his next neighbor, Apuleius, the great physician, were among those who had covered their faces. Porphyrius could look forward more calmly than many to the approaching crisis; for, as a cautious man and far-seeing merchant, he had made provision for every contingency. If, in spite of a Christian victory, the world should still roll on, and if the law which declared invalid the will of an apostate should be enforced against him, a princely fortune, out of the reach of Church or State, lay safe in the hands of a wealthy and trustworthy friend for his daughter's use; if, on the other hand, heaven and earth met in a common doom, he had by him an infallible remedy against a lingering and agonizing death.

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The whole party had sat during some long and anxious minutes, listening to the appalling thunder-claps, when Orpheus rushed into the banqueting-room, with the same frenzied and terror-stricken haste as before, among the revellers, crying: "It is the end—all is over! The world is falling asunder! Fire is come down from heaven! The earth is in flames already—I saw it with my own eyes! I have come down from the roof. . . .

"Father! Where is my father?"

At this news the company started up in fresh alarm, Pappus, the mathematician, cried out: "The conflagration has begun! Flame and fire are falling from the skies!"

"Lost-lost!" wailed Eunapius; while Porphyrius hastily felt in the folds of his purple garment, took out a small crystal phial and went, pale but calm, up to the high-priest. He laid his hand on the arm of the friend whom he had looked up to all his life with affectionate admiration, and said with an expression of tender regret:

"Farewell. We have often disputed over the death of Cato—you disapproving and I approving it. Now I follow his example. Look—there is enough for us both."

He hastily put the phial to his mouth, and part of the liquid had passed his lips before Olympius understood the situation and seized his arm. The effect of the deadly fluid was instantly manifest; but Porphyrius had hardly lost consciousness when Apuleius had rushed to his side. The physician had succumbed to the universal panic and resigned himself doggedly to Fate; but as soon as an appeal was made to his medical skill and he heard a cry for help, he had thrown off the wrapper from his head and hastened to the merchant's side to combat the effects of the poison, as clear-headed and decisive as in his best hours by the bed of sickness or in the lecture-room.

When the very backbone of the soul seems to be broken, a sense of duty is the one and last thing that holds it together and keeps it upright; and nature has implanted in us such a strong and instinctive regard for life—which we are so apt to condemn—that even within a few paces of the grave we cherish and foster it as carefully as in its prime, when the end seems still remote.

The merchant's desperate deed had been done under the very eyes of Orpheus, and the newer horror so completely overshadowed the older, that he hastened unbidden to help the physician lay the unconscious man on the nearest couch; but then he went off again in search of his parents. Olympius, however, who at the sight of his friend's weakness had suddenly comprehended how much depended, in these last hours, on his own resolute demeanor, detained the youth, and sternly desired him to give an exact and clear account of what had happened on the roof. The young musician obeyed; and his report was certainly far from reassuring.



A ball of fire had fallen with a terrific noise on the cupola, mingling with flames that seemed to rise like streams of fire from the earth. Then, again the heavens had opened with a blinding flash and Orpheus had seen—with his own eyes seen—a gigantic monster—an uprooted mountain perhaps—which had slowly moved towards the back-wall of the Serapeum with an appalling clatter; and not rain, but rivers, rushing torrents of water, had poured down on the men on guard.

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"It is Poseidon," cried the lad, "bringing up the ocean against the temple, and I heard the neighing of his horses. It was not an illusion, I heard it with my own ears...."

"The horses of Poseidon!" interrupted Olympius. "The horses of the Imperial cavalry were what you heard!"

He ran to the window with the activity of a younger man and, lifting the curtain, looked out to the eastward. The storm had vanished as rapidly as it had come up and it was day. Over the rosy skirts of Eos hung a full and heavy robe of swelling grey and black clouds, edged with a fringe of sheeny gold. To the north a sullen flash now and then zigzagged across the dark sky, and the roll of the thunder was faint and distant; but the horses whose neighing had affrighted Orpheus were already near; they were standing close to the southern or back-wall of the temple, in which there was no gate or entrance of any kind. What object could the Imperial cavalry have in placing themselves by that strong and impenetrable spot?

But there was no time for much consideration, for at this instant the gong, which was sounded to call the defenders of the Serapeum together, rang through the precincts.

Olympius needed no spur or encouragement. He turned to his guests with the passion and fire of a fanatical leader, of the champion of a great but imperilled cause, and bid them be men and stand by him to resist the foe till death. His voice was husky with excitement as he spoke his brief but vehement call to arms, and the effect was immense, precisely because the speaker, carried away by the tide of feeling, had not tried to impress the learned and eloquent men whom he addressed by any tricks of elocution or choice of words. They, too, were fired by the spark of the old man's enthusiasm; they gathered round him, and followed him at once to the rooms where the weapons had been deposited for use.

Breastplates girt on to their bodies, and swords wielded in their hands made soldiers of the sages at once, and inspired them with martial ardor. Little was spoken among these heroes of "the mighty word." They were bent on action. Olympius had desired Apuleius to go into his private room adjoining the hypostyle with Porphyrius, on whose senseless and rigid state no treatment had as yet had any effect. Some of the temple-servants carried the merchant down a back staircase, while Olympius hastily and silently led his comrades in arms up the main steps into the great halls of the temple.

Here the chivalrous host were doomed to surprise and disappointment greater than the most hopeless of them was prepared to meet. Olympius himself for a moment despaired; for his ecstatic adherents had during the night turned to poltroons and tipplers, and the sacred precincts of the sanctuary looked as if a battle had been fought and lost there. Broken and bruised furniture, smashed instruments, garments torn and wet, draggled wreaths, and faded flowers were strewn in every direction. The red wine lay in pools like blood on the scarred beauties of the inlaid pavement; here and there, at

the foot of a column, lay an inert body— whether dead or merely senseless who could guess?—and the sickening reek of hundreds of dying lamps filled the air, for in the confusion they had been left to burn or die as they might.

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And how wretched was the aspect of the sobered, terror-stricken, worn-out men and women. An obscure consciousness of having insulted the god and incurred his wrath lurked in every soul. To many a one prompt death would have seemed most welcome, and one man—a promising pupil of Helladius, had actually taken the leap from existence into the non-existence which, as he believed, he should find beyond the grave; he had run his head violently against a pillar, and lay at the foot of it with a broken skull.

With reeling brains, aching brows, and dejected hearts, the unhappy creatures had got so far as to curse the present; and those who dared to contemplate the future thought of it only as a bottomless abyss, towards which the flying hours were dragging them with unfelt but irresistible force. Time was passing—each could feel and see that; night was gone, it would soon be day; the storm had passed over, but instead of the inexorable powers of nature a new terror now hung over them: the no less inexorable power of Caesar. To the struggle of man against the gods there was but one possible end: Annihilation. In the conflict of man against man there might yet be, if not victory, at least escape. The veteran Memnon, with his one arm, had kept watch on the temple-roof during that night's orgy, planning measures for repulsing the enemy's attack, till the storm had burst on him and his adherents with the "artillery of heaven." Then the greater portion of the garrison had taken refuge in the lower galleries of the Serapeum, and the old general was left alone at his post, in the blinding and deafening tempest. He threw his remaining arm round a statue that graced the parapet of the roof to save himself from being swept or washed away; and he would still have shouted his orders, but that the hurricane drowned his voice, and none of his few remaining adherents could have heard him speak. He, too, had heard the champing of horses and had seen the moving mountain which Orpheus had described. It was in fact a Roman engine of war; and, faithful though he was to the cause he had undertaken, something like a feeling of joy stirred his warrior's soul, as he looked down on the fine and well-drilled men who followed the Imperial standards under which he had, ere now, shed his best blood. His old comrades in arms had not forgotten how to defy the tempest, and their captains had been well advised in preparing to attack first what seemed the securest side of the temple. The struggle, he foresaw, would be against tried soldiers, and it was with a deep curse and a smile of bitter scorn that he thought of the inexperienced novices under his command. It was only yesterday that he had tried to moderate Olympius' sanguine dreams, and had said to him: "It is not by enthusiasm but by tactics that we defeat a foe!"

The skill and experience he had to contend with were in no respect inferior to his own; and he would know, only too soon, what the practical worth might be of the daring and enthusiastic youths whom he had undertaken to command, and of whom he still had secret hopes for the best.

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The one thing to do was to prevent the Christians from effecting the breach which they evidently intended to make in the back-wall, before the Libyan army of relief should arrive; and, at the same time, to defend the front of the temple from the roof. There was a use for every one who could heave a stone or flourish a sword; and when he thought over the number of his troops he believed he might succeed in holding the building for some considerable time. But he was counting on false premises, for he did not know how attractive the races had proved to his “enthusiastic youth” and how great a change had come over most of them.

As soon as the wind had so far subsided that he could stand alone, he went to collect those that still remained, and to have the brass gong sounded which was to summon the combatants to their posts. Its metallic clang rang loud and far through the dim dawn; a deaf man might have heard it in the deepest recess of the sanctuary—and yet the minutes slipped by—a quarter of an hour—and no one had come at its call. The old captain’s impatience turned to surprise, his surprise became wrath. The messengers he sent down did not return and the great moving shed of the Romans was brought nearer and nearer to the southern side of the temple, screening the miners from the rare missiles which the few men remaining with him cast clown by his orders.

The enemy were evidently making a suitable foundation on which to place the storming engine—a beam with a ram’s head of iron—to make a breach in the temple-wall. Every minute’s delay on the part of the besieged was an advantage to the enemy. A hundred-two hundred more hands on the roof, and their tactics might yet be defeated.

Tears of rage, of the bitter sense of impotence, started to the old soldier’s eyes; and when, at length, one of his messengers came back and told him that the men and women alike seemed quite demented, and all and each refused to come up on the roof, he uttered a wrathful curse and rushed down-stairs himself.

He stormed in on the trembling wretches; and when he beheld with his own eyes all that his volunteers had done during that fateful night, he raved and thundered; asked them, rather confusedly perhaps, if they knew what it was to be expected to command and find no obedience; scolded the refractory, driving some on in front of him; and then, as he perceived that some of them were making off with the girls through the door leading to the secret passage, he placed himself on guard with his sword drawn, and threatened to cut down any who attempted to escape.

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In the midst of all this Olympius and his party had come into the ball and seeing the commander struggling, sword in hand, with the recalcitrant fugitives, where the noise was loudest, he and his guests hastened to the rescue and defended the door against the hundreds who were crowding to fly. The old man was grieved to turn the weapons they had seized in their sacred ardor, against the seceders from their own cause; but it had to be. While the loyal party—among them Karnis and Orpheus—guarded the passage to the underground rooms with shield and lance, Olympius took council of the veteran captain, and they rapidly decided to allow all the women to depart at once and to divide the men into two parties—one to be sent to fight on the roof, and the other to defend the wall where the Roman battering-ram was by this time almost ready to attack.

The high-priest took his stand boldly between his adherents and the would-be runaways and appealed to them in loud and emphatic tones to do their duty. They listened to him silently and respectfully; but when he ended by stating that the women were commanded to withdraw, a terrific outcry was raised, some of the girls clung to their lovers, while others urged the men to fight their way out.

Several, however, and among them the fair Glycera who a few hours since had smiled down triumphantly on her worshippers as Aphrodite, availed themselves at once of the permission to quit this scene of horrors, and made their way without delay to the subterranean passages. They had adorers in plenty in the city. But they did not get far; they were met by a temple-servant flying towards the great hall, who warned them to return thither at once: the Imperial soldiers had discovered the entrance to the aqueduct and posted sentries in the timber-yard. They turned and followed him with loud lamentations, and hardly had they got back into the temple when a new terror came upon them: the iron battering-ram came with a first heavy shock, thundering against the southern wall.

The Imperial troops were in fact masters of the secret passage; and they had begun the attack on the Serapeum in earnest. It was serious—but all was not yet lost; and in this fateful hour Olympius and Memnon proved their mettle. The high-priest commanded that the great stone trap-doors should be dropped into their places, and that the bridges across the gulfs, in the underground rooms reserved for the initiated, should be destroyed; and this there was yet time to do, for the soldiers had not yet ventured into those mysterious corridors, where there could not fail to be traps and men in ambush. Memnon meanwhile had hurried to the spot where the battering-ram had by this time dealt a second blow, shouting as he went to every man who was not a coward to follow him.

Karnis, Orpheus and the rest of the high-priest's guests obeyed his call and gathered round him; he commanded that everything portable should be brought out of the temple to be built into a barricade behind the point of attack, and that neither the most precious and beautiful statues, nor the brass and marble stelae and altar-slabs should be spared. Screened by this barricade, and armed with lances and bows—of which there

were plenty at hand—he proposed, when the breach was made, to check the further advance of the foe.

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He was not ill-pleased that the only way of escape was cut off; and as soon as he had seen the statues dragged from their pedestals, the altar-stones removed from the sacred places they had filled for half a century, benches and jars piled together and a stone barricade thus fairly advanced towards completion, he drafted off a small force for the defences on the roof. There was no escape now; and many a one who, to the very last, had hoped to find himself free, mounted the stairs reluctantly, because he would there be more immediately in the face of the foe than when defending the breach.

Olympius distributed weapons, and went from one to another, speaking words of encouragement; presently he found Gorgo who, with the bereaved widow, was still sitting at the foot of the statue of justice. He told her that her father was ill, and desired a servant to show her the way to his private room, that she might help the leech in attending on him. Berenice could not be induced to stir; she longed only for the end and was persuaded that it could not be far off. She listened eagerly to the blows of the battering-engine; each one sounded to her like a shock to the very structure of the universe. Another—and another—and at last the ancient masonry must give way and the grave that had already opened for her husband and her son would yawn to swallow her up with her sorrows. She shuddered and drew her hood over her face to screen it from the sun which now began to shine in. Its light was a grievance to her; she had hoped never to see another day.

The women, and with them a few helpless weaklings, had withdrawn to the rotunda, and before long they were laughing as saucily as ever.

From the roof blocks of stone and broken statues were hailing down on the besiegers, and in the halls below, the toiler who paused to wipe the sweat from his brow would brook no idleness in his comrade; the most recalcitrant were forced to bestir themselves, and the barricade inside the southern wall soon rose to a goodly height. No rampart was ever built of nobler materials; each stone was a work of art and had been revered for centuries as something sacred, or bore in an elegant inscription the memorial of noble deeds. This wall was to protect the highest of the gods, and among the detachment told off to defend it, were Karnis, his son, and his wife.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Gorgo sat by the bed of her apparently lifeless father, gazing fondly at the worn and wax-like features, and listening to his breathing, now soft and easy and again painful and convulsive, as it fluttered through his nostrils. She held his cold damp hand tightly clasped, or stroked it gently, or now and then, when his closed eyelids quivered, raised it tenderly to her lips.

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The room in which they were lay on one side of the hypostyle and behind the right-hand—or western—colonnade; more forward, therefore, than the veiled statue and to its left hand. The noise of the toilers at the barricade and the crash of the blows of the battering-ram came up from just below, and at each thud of the engine the senseless man started convulsively and a look of intense pain crossed his face. But, though it was indeed grievous to Gorgo to see her father suffering, though she told herself again and again that, ere long, the sanctuary must fall into the hands of the Christians, she felt safe, thankful and sheltered up here, in her old friend's half-lighted and barely-furnished room, shut off, at any rate, from the frenzied wretches of whom she thought only with loathing and fear.

She was wearied out with her night of unrest, but the agitation and excitement she had gone through were still vividly present to her mind, and even on the comfortable couch in her own snug room at home her perturbed spirit would have prevented her sleeping. Her brain was still in a ferment, and here, in comparative peace, she had time to think over all she had gone through during the last few hours, and the catastrophes that had befallen her grandmother and her father. She had exchanged but few words with the physician, who was still unceasingly busy in trying to restore his patient to consciousness, and who had assured her that he had every hope of her father's recovery.

But at length the girl looked up with an eager gaze and said, sadly enough: "You said something about an antidote to poison, Apuleius? Then my father tried to escape the final destruction by attempting to kill himself.—Is it so?"

The leech looked at her keenly, and after confirming her suspicion and explaining to her exactly how the fateful deed had been accomplished, he went on:

"The storm had completely unnerved him—it unmanned us all—and yet that was only the prelude to the tremendous doom which is hanging over the universe. It is at hand; we can hear its approach; the stones are yielding! the Christian's engines are opening the way for it to enter!"

Apuleius spoke in a tone of sinister foreboding, and the falling stones dislodged by the battering-ram thundered a solemn accompaniment to his prophecy. Gorgo, turned pale; but it was not the physician's ominous speech that alarmed her, but the quaking of the walls of the room. Still, the Serapeum was built for eternity; the ram might bring down a wall, but it could not destroy or even shake the building itself.

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Outside, the hubbub of fighting men grew louder and louder every minute, and Apuleius, increasingly anxious, went to the door to listen. Gorgo could see that his hands trembled! he—a man—was frightened, while she felt no anxiety but for her suffering father! Through that breach Constantine would enter—and where he commanded she was safe. As to the destruction of the universe—she no longer believed in it. When the physician turned round and saw her calmly and quietly wiping the cold drops from the sick man's brow, he said gloomily: "Of what use is it to shut our eyes like the ostrich. They are fighting down there for life or death—we had better prepare for the end. If they venture—and they will—to lay a sacrilegious hand on the god, besiegers and besieged alike—the whole world together, must perish."

But Gorgo shook her head. "No, no," she cried, with zealous confidence. "No, Apuleius, Serapis is not what you believe him to be; for, if he were, would he suffer his enemies to overthrow his temple and his image? Why does he not, at this supreme moment, inspire his worshippers with courage? I have seen the men—mere boys—and the women who have assembled here to fight for him. They are nothing but drivellers and triflers. If the master is like his men it serves him right if he is overthrown; to weep for him would be waste of woe!"

"And can the daughter of Porphyrius say this?" exclaimed the leech.

"Yes, Apuleius, yes. After what I have seen, and heard, and endured this night, I cannot speak otherwise. It was shameful, horrible, sickening; I could rage at the mere thought of being supposed to be one of that debased crew. It is disgrace and ignominy even to be named in the same breath! A god who is served as this god has been is no god of mine! And you—you are learned—a sage and a philosopher—how can you believe that the God of the Christians when he has conquered and crippled yours, will ever permit Serapis to destroy His world and the men He created?"

Apuleius drew himself up. "Are you then a Christian?" he asked swiftly and sternly.

But Gorgo could not reply; she colored deeply and Apuleius vehemently repeated his question: "Then you really are a Christian?"

She looked frankly in his face: "No," she said, "I am not; but I wish I were."

The physician turned away with a shrug; but Gorgo drew a breath of relief, feeling that her avowal had lifted a heavy burthen from her soul. She hardly knew how the bold and momentous confession had got itself spoken, but she felt that it was the only veracious answer to the physician's question.

They spoke no more; she was better pleased to remain silent, for her own utterance had opened out to her a new land of promise—of feeling and of thought.

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Her lover henceforth was no longer her enemy; and as the tumult of the struggle by the breach fell on her ear, she could think with joy of his victorious arms. She felt that this was the purer, the nobler, the better cause; and she rejoiced in the love of which he had spoken as the support and the stay of their future life together—as sheltering them like a tower of strength and a mighty refuge. Compared with that love all that she had hitherto held dear or indispensable as gracing life, now seemed vain and worthless; and as she looked at her father's still face, and remembered how he had lived and what he had suffered, she applied those words of Paul which Constantine had spoken at their meeting after his return, to him, too; and her heart overflowed with affection towards her hapless parent. She knew full well the meaning of the deep lines that marked his lips and brow; for Porphyrius had never made any secret of his distress and vexation whenever he found himself compelled to confess a creed in which he did not honestly believe. This great falsehood and constant duplicity, this divided allegiance to two masters, had poisoned the existence of a man by nature truthful; and Gorgo knew for whose sake and for what reasons he had subjected himself to this moral martyrdom. It was a lesson to her to see him lying there, and his look of anguish warned her to become, heart and soul, a Christian as she felt prompted. She would confess Christ for love's sake-aye, for love's sake; for in this hour the thing she saw most clearly in the faith which she purposed to adopt, and of which Constantine had so often spoken to her with affectionate enthusiasm, was Everlasting Love.

Never in her life had she felt so much at peace, so open to all that was good and beautiful; and yet, outside, the strife grew louder and more furious; the Imperial tuba sounded above the battle-cry of the heathen, and the uproar of the struggle came nearer and nearer.

The battering-ram had made a large breach in the southern wall, and, protected by their shed, the heavy-armed infantry of the twenty-second legion had forced their way up; but many a veteran had paid for his rashness with his life, for the storming party had been met by a perfect shower of arrows and javelins. Still, the great shield had turned many a spear, and many an arrow had glanced harmless from the brazen armor and helmets; the men that had escaped pressed onwards, while fresh ranks of soldiers made their way in, over the bodies of the fallen. The well-drilled foe came creeping up to the barricade on their knees, and protected by bronze bucklers, while others, in the rear, flung lances and arrows over their heads at the besieged. A few of the heathen fell, and the sight of their blood had a wonderful effect on their comrades. Rage surged up in the breasts of the most timid, and fear vanished before the passion for revenge; cowardice turned to martial ardor, and philosophers and artists thirsted for blood. The red glare of strife danced before the eyes of the veriest book-worm; fired by the terrible impulse to kill, to subdue, to destroy the foe, they fought desperately and blindly, staking their lives on the issue.

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Karnis, that zealous votary of the Muses, stood with Orpheus, on the very top of the barricade throwing lance after lance, while he sang at the top of his voice snatches of the verses of Tyrtæus, in the teeth, as it were, of the foe who were crowding through the breach; the sweat streamed from his bald head and his eye flashed fire. By his side stood his son, sending swift arrows from an enormous bow. The heavy curls of his hair had come unbound and fell over his flushed face. When he hit one of the Imperial soldiers his father applauded him eagerly; then, collecting all his strength, flung another lance, chanting a hexameter or a verse of an ode. Herse crouched half hidden behind a sacrificial stone which lay at the top of the hastily-constructed rampart, and handed weapons to the combatants as they needed them. Her dress was torn and blood-stained, her grey hair had come loose from the ribbands and crescent that should have confined it; the worthy matron had become a Megaera and shrieked to the men: "Kill the dogs! Stand steady! Spare never a Christian!"

But the little garrison needed no incitement; the fevered zeal which possessed them wholly, seconded their thirst for blood and doubled their strength.

An arrow, shot by Orpheus, had just glanced over the breastplate and into the throat of a centurion who had already set foot on the lowest step, when Karnis suddenly dropped the spear he was preparing to fling and fell without a cry. A Roman lance had hit him, and he lay transfixed by the side of a living purple fount, like a rock in the surf from which a sapling has sprung. Orpheus saw his father's life-blood flowing and fell on his knees by his side; but the old man pointed to the bow that his son had cast aside and murmured eagerly: "Leave me—let me be. What does it matter about me? Fight—for the gods—I say. For the gods! Go on, aim truly!"

But the lad would not leave the dying man, and seeing how deeply the spear had struck to the old man's heart he groaned aloud, throwing up his arms in despair. Then an arrow hit his shoulder, another pierced his neck, and he, too, fell gasping for breath. Karnis saw him drop, and painfully raised himself a little to help him; but it was too much for him; he could only clench his fist in helpless fury and chant, half-singing, half-speaking, as loud he was able, Electra's curse:

"This my last prayer, ye gods, do not disdain!
For them turn day to night and joy to pain!"

But the heavy infantry, who by this time were crowding through the breach, neither heard nor heeded his curse. He lost consciousness and did not recover it till Herse, after lifting up her son and propping him against a plinth, pressed a cloth against the stump of the lance still remaining in the wound to staunch the swiftly flowing blood, and sprinkled his brow with wine. He felt her warm tears on his face, and as he looked up into her kind, faithful eyes, brimming

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over with tears of sympathy and regret, his heart melted to tenderness. All the happiest hours of the life they had spent together crowded on his memory; he answered her glance with a loving and grateful gaze and painfully held out his hand. Herse pressed it to her lips, weeping bitterly; but he smiled up at her, nodding his head and repeating again and again the line from Lucian: "Be comforted: you, too, must soon follow."

"Yes, yes—I shall follow soon," she repeated with sobs. "Without you, without either of you, without the gods—what would become of me here."

And she turned to her son who, fully conscious, had followed every word and every gesture of his parents and tried himself to say something. But the arrow in his neck choked his breath, and it was such agony to speak that he could only say hoarsely: "Father mother!" But these poor words were full of deep love and gratitude, and Karnis and Herse understood all he longed to express.

Tears choked the poor woman's utterance so that neither of the three could say another word, but they were at any rate close together, and could look lovingly in each other's eyes. Thus passed some few minutes of peace for them, in spite of the blare of trumpets, and shrieks and butchery; but Herse's kerchief was dyed and soaked with her husband's blood, and the old man's eyes were glazed and staring as they wandered feebly on the scene, as though to get a last general picture of the world in which they had always sought to see only what was fair. Suddenly they remained fixed on the face of a statue of Apollo, which had been flung on to the barricade; and the longer they dwelt on the beautiful countenance of the god the more they sparkled with a clear transfigured gleam. Once more, with a final effort, he raised his heavy hand and pointed to the sun-crowned head of the immortal youth while he softly murmured:

"He—he—all that was fair in existence—Orpheus, Herse—we owe it all to him. He dies with us.—They—the enemy—in conquering us conquer thee! They dream of a Paradise beyond death; but where thou reignest, O Phoebus, there is bliss even on earth! They boast that they love death and hate life; and when they are the victors they will destroy lute and pipe, nay, if they could, would exterminate beauty and extinguish the sun. This beautiful happy world they would have dark, gloomy, melancholy, hideous; thy kingdom, great Phoebus, is sunny, joyful and bright...!" Here his strength failed him; but presently he rallied once more and went on, with eager eyes: "We crave for light, for music, lutes and pipes—for perfumed flowers on careless brows—we—hold me up Herse— and thou, heal me, O Phoebus Apollo!—Hail, all hail! I thank thee—thou hast accepted much from me and hast given me all! Come, thou joy of my soul! Come in thy glorious chariot, attended by Muses and Hours! See, Orpheus, Herse—do you see Him coming?"



He pointed with a confident gesture to the distance; and his anxious eyes followed the indication of his hand; he raised himself a little by a last supreme effort; but instantly fell back; his head sank on the bosom of his faithful partner and a stream of blood flowed from his quivering lips. The votary of the Muses was dead; and a few minutes after Orpheus, too, fell senseless.



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War-cries and trumpet-calls rang and echoed through the Serapeum. The battle was now a hand-to-hand fight; the besiegers had surmounted the barricade and stood face to face with the heathen. Herse saw them coming; she snatched the dart from her husband's wound, and fired by hatred and a wild thirst for vengeance, she rushed upon the besiegers with frantic and helpless fury, cursing them loudly. She met the death she craved; a javelin struck her and she fell close to her husband and son. Her death struggle was a short one; she had only time and strength to extend a hand to lay on each before she herself was a corpse.

The battle raged round the heap of dead; the Imperial troops drove the garrison backwards into the temple-halls, and the plan of attack which had been agreed upon at a council of war held in the palace of the Comes, was carried out, point by point, with cool courage and irresistible force. A few maniples pursued the fugitives into the main entrance hall, helped them to force the gates open, and then drove them down the slope and steps, over the stones that had been heaped up for protection, and into the very arms of the division placed in front of the temple. These at once surrounded them and took them prisoners, as the hunter traps the game that rushes down upon him when driven by the dogs and beaters. Foremost to fly were the women from the rotunda, who were welcomed with acclamations by the soldiers.

But those who now tried to defend themselves found no quarter. Berenice had picked up a sword that was lying on the ground and had opened a vein with the point of it; her body, bathed in blood, was found at the foot of the statue of justice.

No sooner had the Christians mastered the barricade than a few maniples had been sent up to the roof, and the defenders had been compelled to surrender or to throw themselves from the parapet. Old Memnon, who had been fighting against his Imperial master and could hope for no mercy, sprang at once into the gulf below, and others followed his example; for the end of all things was now close at hand, and to the nobler souls to die voluntarily in battle for great Serapis seemed finer and worthier than to languish in the enemy's chains.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The terrific storm of the preceding night had thrown the whole city into dismay. Everyone knew the danger that threatened Serapis, and what must ensue if he were overthrown; and everyone had thought that the end of the world had indeed come. But the tempest died away; the sun's bright glow dispersed the clouds and mist; sea and sky smiled radiantly blue, and the trees and herbage glistened in revived freshness.

Not yet had the Romans dared to lay hands on the chief of the gods, the patron and protector of the city. Serapis had perhaps sent the lightning, thunder and rain as a

message to warn his foes. If only they might abstain from the last, worst crime of desecrating his image!

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Nor was this the hope of the heathen only; on the contrary: Jews and Christians no less dreaded the fall of the god and of his temple. He was the pride, the monumental glory of the city of Alexander; the centre of foundations and schools which benefited thousands. The learning which was the boast of Alexandria dwelt under his protection; to the Serapeum was attached a medical Faculty which enjoyed the reputation of being the first in the world; from its observatory the course of the year was forecast and the calendar was promulgated. An hour's slumber in its halls brought prophetic dreams, and the future must remain undivined if Serapis were to fall, for the god revealed it to his priests, not merely by the courses and positions of the stars, but by many other signs; and it was a delight and a privilege to look forward from the certain, tangible present to the mysteries of the morrow.

Even Christian seers answered the questionings of their followers in a way which portended the worst, and it was a grief to many of the baptized to think of their native city without Serapis and the Serapeum, just as we cannot bear to cut down a tree planted by the hand of an ancestor, even though it may darken our home. The temple ought to be closed, bloody sacrifices to the god should be prohibited—but his image—the noblest work of Bryaxis—to mutilate, or even to touch that would be a rash, a fateful deed, treason to the city and an outrage on the world.

Thus thought the citizens; thus, too, thought the soldiers, who were required by military discipline to draw the sword against the god in whom many of them believed.

As the news spread that the troops were to attack the Serapeum early next morning, thousands of spectators collected, and filled the temple itself in breathless anxiety to watch the issue of the struggle.

The sky was as clear and blue as on any other fine day; but over the sea to the north lay a light stratum of clouds—the harbingers perhaps of the appalling blackness which the god would presently bring up against his enemies.

The men who had defended the Serapeum were led away; it had been determined in a council of war that they should be treated with clemency, and Cynegius had proclaimed free and full pardon to every prisoner who would swear never, for the future, to sacrifice to the god or worship in his temple.

Not one of the hundreds who had fallen into the hands of the Romans had refused to take the oath; they dispersed at once, though with suppressed fury, many of them joining the crowd who stood waiting and watching for the next step to be taken by the Romans—for the final crash of the universe, perhaps.

The doors of the temple were thrown wide open; the temple-servants and hundreds of soldiers were busied in clearing the steps and approaches of the stones and fragments of statuary with which the heathen had encumbered them. As soon as this task was

finished the dead and wounded were removed; among those who still breathed was Orpheus, the son of Karnis. Those who had been so happy as to escape in the defence of the sanctuary and had mingled with the crowd were besieged with questions, and all agreed that the statue of the god was as yet inviolate.

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The citizens were relieved, but ere long were startled by a new alarm; an Ala of heavy cavalry came upon the scene, opening a way for an immensely long procession whose chanted psalms rang out from afar, loud above the cries and murmurs of the mob, the clatter of harness, and stamping of horses. It was clear now where the monks had been. They were not usually absent when there was a skirmish with the heathen; but, till this moment, they had been seen only in twos or threes about the Serapeum. Now they came forward shouting a psalm of triumph, their eyes glaring, wilder and more ruthless than ever.

The Bishop marched at their head, in his vestments, under a magnificent canopy; his lofty stature was drawn to its full height and his lips were firmly closed.

He looked like a stern judge about to mount the tribunal to pronounce sentence with inexorable severity on some execrable crime.

The crowd quailed.

The Bishop and the monks in the Serapeum, meant the overthrow of the statue of the sovereign god—death and destruction. The boldest turned pale; many who had left wife and children at home stole away to await the end of the world with those they loved; others remained to watch the menaced sanctuary, cursing or praying; but the greater number, men and women alike, crowded into the temple, risking their lives to be present at the stupendous events about to be enacted there and which promised to be a drama of unequalled interest.

At the bottom of the ascent the Comes rode forth to meet the Bishop, leaped from his saddle and greeted him with reverence. The Imperial legate had not made his appearance; he had preferred to remain for the present at the prefect's house, intending to preside, later in the day, at the races as the Emperor's representative, side by side with the Prefect Evagrius—who also kept aloof during the attack on the Serapeum. After a brief colloquy, Romanus signed to Constantine, the captain of the cavalry; the troop dismounted, and, led by their officer, marched up the slope that led to the great gate of the Serapeum. They were followed by the Comes with his staff; next to him pale and somewhat tremulous came some of the city officials and a few Christian members of the senate; and then the Bishop—who had preferred to come last—with all the Christian priesthood and a crowd of chanting monks. The train was closed by a division of heavy-armed infantry; and after them the populace rushed in, unchecked by the soldiers who stood outside the temple.

The great halls of the Serapeum had been put in order as well as possible in so short a time. Of all those who, the day before, had crowded in to defend the god and his house, none were left but Porphyrius and those who were nursing him. After a long and agonizing period of silence heavy fists came thundering at the door. Gorgo started up to unbolt it, but Apuleius held her back; so it was forced off its hinges and thing into the

temple-aisle on which the room opened. At the same instant a party of soldiers entered the room and glanced round it enquiringly.

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The physician turned as pale as death, and sank incapable of speech on a seat by his patient's couch; but Gorgo turned with calm dignity to the centurion who led the intruders, and explained to him who she was, and that she was here under the protection of the leech to tend her suffering father. She concluded by asking to speak with Constantine the prefect of cavalry, or with the Comes Romanus, to whom she and her father were well known.

There was nothing unusual in a sick man being brought into the Serapeum for treatment, and the calm, undoubting superiority of Gorgo's tone as well as the high rank of the men whose protection she appealed to, commanded the centurion's respectful consideration; however, his orders were to send every one out of the temple who was not a Roman soldier, so he begged her to wait a few minutes, and soon returned with the legate Volcatius, the captain of his legion. This knightly patrician well knew—as did every lover of horses—the owner of the finest stable in Alexandria, and was quite willing to allow Gorgo and Apuleius to remain with their patient; at the same time he warned them that a great catastrophe was imminent. Gorgo, however, persisted in her wish to be by her father's side, so he left her a guard to protect them.

The soldiers were too busy to linger; instead of replacing the door they had torn down, they pushed it out of their way; and Gorgo, seeing that her father remained in precisely the same condition, drew back the curtain which was all that now divided them from the hypostyle, and looked out over the heads of a double row of soldiers. They were posted close round the lower step of the platform that raised the hypostyle above the nave and the colonnades on each side of it.

In the distance Gorgo could see a vast body of men slowly approaching in detachments, and with long pauses at intervals. They stopped for some time in the outer hall, and before they entered the basilica twenty Christian priests came in with strange gestures and a still stranger chant; these were exorcists, come to bann the evil spirits and daemons that must surely haunt this high place of idolatry and abominations. They carried crosses which they flourished like weapons against an unseen foe, and touched the columns with them, the pavement and the few remaining statues; they fell on their knees, making the sign of the cross with the left hand; and, finally, they ranged themselves like soldiers in three ranks in front of the niche containing the statue, pointed their crosses at the god, and recited in loud, angry, and commanding tones the potent anathemas and mysterious formulas which they thought calculated to expel the most reprobate and obdurate of all the heathen devils. A host of acolytes, following at their heels, swung their censers about the plague-spot—the shrine of the king of idols; while the exorcists dipped wands into a cauldron carried by their attendants, and sprinkled the mystical figures on the hanging and on the mosaic pavement.

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All this occupied several minutes. Then—and Gorgo's heart beat high— then Constantine came in, armed and equipped, and behind him an Ala of picked men, the elite of his troop; bearded men with tanned and scarred faces. Instead of swords they carried axes, and they were followed by sappers bearing tall ladders which, by Constantine's orders, they leaned up against the niche. The infantry ranged under the colonnades at the sides were evidently startled at the sight of these ladders, and Gorgo could perceive by the trembling of the curtain near which she and Apuleius were standing, how deeply the physician was agitated. It was as though the axe had been displayed with which a king was about to be decapitated.

Now the Bishop came in with the municipal dignitaries; priests and monks, chanting as they walked, filled the broad hall, incessantly making the sign of the cross; and the crowd that poured into the hypostyle pressed as far forward as they were allowed by the chain which the soldiers held outstretched between them and their superiors.

The populace—heathen and Christian of every sect and degree—filled the aisles, too; but the chain also kept them off the upper end, on to which the room opened in which Porphyrius lay; so that Gorgo's view of the curtain and apse remained unhindered.

The psalm rang loudly through the temple-courts above the murmur and grumble of the angry, terrified and expectant mob. They were prepared for the worst; each one knew the crime which was to be perpetrated, and yet few, perhaps, really believed that any one would dare to commit it. Whichever way she looked Gorgo saw only white faces, stamped with passion, dismay, and dread. The very priests and soldiers themselves had turned pale, and stood with bloodless cheeks and set teeth, staring at the ground; some, to disguise their alarm, cast wrathful and defiant glances at the rebellious mob, who tried to drown the psalm-singing in loud menaces and curses, and the echoes of the great building doubled their thousand voices.

A strange unrest seethed in this dense mass of humanity. The heathen were trembling with rage, clutching their amulets and charms, or shaking angry fists; the Christians thrilled with anxiety and pious zeal, and used their hands to lift the cross or to ward off the evil one with outstretched fingers. Every face and every gesture, the muttered curses and pious hymns—all showed that some terrible and fateful event was impending over all. Gorgo herself felt as though she were standing on the brink of a crater, while air and earth heaved around her; she felt and saw the eruption of the volcano threatening, every instant, to burst at her feet, and to choke and ruin every living thing.

The uproar among the heathen grew louder and louder; fragments of stone and wood came flying towards the spot where the Bishop and officials were standing; but, suddenly, the tumult ceased, and, as if by a miracle, there was silence—perfect silence—in the temple. It was as though at a sign from the Omnipotent Ruler the storm-lashed ocean had turned to the calm of a land-locked lake. At a nod from the Bishop some

acolytes had stepped up to the niche where the statue of the god was shrouded and the curtain, which till now had hidden it, slowly began to fall.

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There sat Serapis, looking down in majestic indifference, as cold and unapproachable as if his sublime dignity was far removed above the petty doings of the crawling humanity at his feet; and the effect was as impressive now as it had been the evening before. How beautiful—how marvellously grand and lofty was this work of human hands! Even the Christians could not repress a low, long-drawn murmur of surprise, admiration, and astonishment. The heathen were at first silent, overcome by pious awe and ecstasy; but then they broke out in a loud and triumphant shout, and their cries of “Hail to Serapis!” “Serapis, reign forever!” rang from pillar to pillar and echoed from the stony vault of the apse and ceiling.

Gorgo crossed her hands over her bosom as she saw the god revealed in his glorious beauty. Spotlessly pure, complete and perfect, the noble statue stood before her; an idol indeed, and perishable—but still divine as a matchless work, wrought by the loving hands of a votary of the god, inspired by the immortals. She gazed spell-bound on the form which, though human, transcended humanity as eternity transcends time, as the light of the sun transcended the blazing beacon on Pharos; and she said to herself that it was impossible that an irreverent hand should be laid on this supremely lovely statue, crowned with the might of undying beauty.

She saw that even the Bishop drew back a step when the curtain had fallen, and his lips parted involuntarily to utter a cry of admiration like the others; but she saw, too, that he closed them again and pressed them more firmly together; that his eye sparkled with a fiercer light as the shout of the heathen rose to heaven, that the knotted veins on his high forehead swelled with rage as he heard the cry of “Serapis, Hail, all hail!” Then she noted the Comes, as he whispered soothing words in the prelate’s ear, praying him perhaps to spare the statue—not as an idol, but as a work of art; as he turned from Theophilus with a shrug; and then—her heart stood still, and she had to cling to the curtain—he pointed to the statue, with a nod of intelligence to Constantine. The young officer bowed with military formality and gave a word of command to his men, which was drowned by the wild cries of the heathen as soon as they apprehended with dismay what its import was.

The veterans were stirred. A subaltern officer, putting the standard he bore into the hands of the man next to him and taking his axe from him instead, rushed towards the statue, gazed up at it—and then, letting the axe sink, withdrew slowly to rejoin the others who still stood hesitating, looking at each other with doubting and defiant eyes.

Once more Constantine shouted his order, louder and more positively than before; but the men did not move. The subaltern flung his axe on the ground and the rest followed his example, pointing eagerly to the god, and vehemently adjuring their prefect—refusing apparently to obey his commands—for he went to the recalcitrant standard-bearer, a grey-haired veteran, and laying his hand on the man’s shoulder shook him angrily, evidently threatening him and his comrades.

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In these brave souls a struggle was going on, between their sense of discipline and devotion to their fine young leader, and their awe of the god; it was visible in their puzzled faces, in their hands raised in supplication. Constantine, however, relentlessly repeated his order; and, when they still refused to obey, he turned his back on their ranks with a gesture of bitter contempt, and shouted his commands to the infantry posted by the colonnade behind which Gorgo was watching all these proceedings.

But these also were refractory. The heathen were triumphant, and encouraged the soldiers with loud cries to persist.

Constantine turned once more to his own men, and finding them obstinate in their disobedience, he went forward himself to where the ladders were standing, moved one of them from the wall and leaned it up against the body of the statue, seized the axe that lay nearest, and mounted from rung to rung. The murmurs of the heathen were suddenly silenced; the multitude were so still that the least sound of one plate of armor against another was audible, that each man could hear his neighbor breathe, and that Gorgo fancied she could hear her own heart throb.

The man and the god stood face to face, and the man who was about to lay hands on the god was her lover. She watched his movements with breathless interest; she longed to call out to him, to follow him as he mounted the ladder, to fall on his neck and keep him from committing such sacrilege—not out of fear of the ruin he might bring upon the world, but only because she felt that the first blow he should deal to this beautiful and unique work of art might wreck her love for him, as his axe would wreck the ivory. She was not afraid for him; he seemed to her inviolable and invulnerable; but her whole soul shuddered at the deed which he was steeling himself to perpetrate. She remembered their happy childhood together, his own artistic attempts, the admiration with which he had gazed at the great works of the ancient sculptors—and it seemed impossible that he, of all men he, should lay hands on that masterpiece, that he, of all men, should be the one to insult, mutilate and ruin it. It was not—could not be true!

But there he was, at the top of the ladder; he passed the axe from his left hand to his right, and leaning back a little, looked at the head of the god from one side. She could see his face plainly, and note every movement and look; she watched him keenly, and saw the loving and compassionate expression with which he fixed his gaze on the noble features of Serapis, saw him clutch his left hand to his heart as if in pain. The crowd below might fancy that he lacked courage, that he was absorbed in prayer, or that his soul shrank from dealing the fateful blow to the great divinity; but she could see that he was bidding a silent farewell, as it were, to the sublime work of an inspired artist, which it pained and shocked him to destroy.

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And this comforted her; it gave her views of the situation a new direction, and suggested the question whether he, a soldier and a Christian, when commanded by his superior to do this deed ought to shrink or hesitate, if he were indeed, heart and soul, what, after all, he was. Her eyes clung to him, as a frightened child clings to its mother's neck; and the expectant thousands, in an agony of suspense, like her, saw nothing but him.

Stillness more profound never reigned in the heart of the desert than now in this vast and densely-crowded hall. Of all man's five senses only one was active: that of sight; and that was concentrated on a single object a man's hand holding an axe. The hearts of thousands stood still, their breath was suspended, there was a singing in their ears, a dazzling light in their eyes—eyes that longed to see, that must see—and that could not; thousands stood there like condemned criminals, whose heads are on the block, who hear the executioner behind them, and who still, on the very threshold of death, hope for respite and release.

Gorgo found no answer to her own questionings; but she, too, wanted to see—must see. And she saw Constantine close his eyes, as though he dared not contemplate the deed that Fate had condemned him to do; she saw him lay his left hand on the god's sacred beard, saw him raise his right for the fatal blow—saw, heard, felt the axe crash again and again on the cheek of Serapis—saw the polished ivory fall in chips and shavings, large and small, on the stone floor, and leap up with an elastic rebound or shiver into splinters. She covered her face with her hands and hid her head in the curtain, weeping aloud. She could only moan and sob, and feel nothing, think nothing but that a momentous and sinister act had been perpetrated. An appalling uproar like the noise of thunder and the beating of surf rose up on every side, but she heeded it not; and when at length the physician called her by her name, when she turned from the curtain and once more looked out, instead of the sublime image of the god she saw in the niche a shapeless log of wood, a hideous mass against which several ladders were propped, while the ground was heaped and strewn with scraps of ivory, fragments of gold-plate, and chips of marble. Constantine had disappeared; the ladders and the plinth of the statue were covered with a swarm of soldiers and monks who were finishing the work of destruction. As soon as the young officer had struck the first blow, and the god had submitted in abject impotence, they had rushed upon him and saved their captain the trouble of ending the task he had begun.

The great idol was desecrated. Serapis was no more—the heaven of the heathen had lost its king. The worshippers of the deposed god, sullen, furious, and bitterly disabused, made their way out of the temple and looked up at the serene blue sky, the unclouded sunshine, for some symptoms of an avenging tempest; but in vain.

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Theophilus had also quitted the scene with the Comes, leaving the work of devastation in the competent hands of the monks. He knew his skin-clad adherents well; and he knew that within a very few days not an idol, not a picture, not a token would remain intact to preserve the memory of the old gods; a thousand slaves charged to sweep the Serapeum from the face of the earth would have given his impatience twenty times as long to wait. The Comes went off at once to the Hippodrome, preceded by hundreds who had hurried off to tell the assembled multitude that Alexandria had lost her god.

Constantine, however, had not left the temple; he had withdrawn into one of the aisles and seated himself on the steps, where he remained, sunk in thought and gazing at the ground. He was a soldier and took service and discipline in earnest. What he had done he had been forced to do; but no one could guess how hard it had been to him to fulfil this terrible duty. His own act was abominable in his eyes, and yet he would have done it again to-morrow, if it had again been required of him under similar circumstances. He bewailed the beautiful statue as a lost treasure of art; but he felt that it was indispensable that it should perish out of the world. And at the same time he thought of Gorgo, wondering how she—who had only the day before pledged herself to him, whom he loved with fervent passion, to whom, as he well knew, his faith was something monstrous in its contempt for beauty—would bear to learn that he, her lover, was the man who, like some coarse barbarian, had defaced this noble work and ruined this vision of beauty, no less dear to him than it was to her. Still, as he sat brooding and searching the very depths of his soul, he could not help feeling that he had certainly acted rightly and would do the same again, even at the risk of losing her. To him Gorgo, was the noblest of God's creatures, and how could he have borne to go through life at her side with a stain on his honor? But he did not conceal from himself the fact that his deed had opened a wide gulf between them; and it was with deep pathos that his thoughts recurred to the antique conception of tragedy—of fate which pursues its innocent victims as though they were guilty. This day perhaps would witness the sunset of his life's joy, would drive him forth once more to war—to fight, and do nothing but fight, till death should meet him on the battle-field. And as he sat there his eyes grew dim and heavy and his head fell on his heaving breast.

Suddenly he felt a light touch on his shoulder, and turning round, he saw Gorgo standing with her hand outstretched; he started to his feet, seized it with eager passion and looking sadly into the young girl's eyes said, with deep emotion:

"I would I might hold this hand forever—but you will leave me, you will turn from me when I tell you of the deed that mine has done."

"I know it," she said firmly. "And it was a hard task even for you—a painful duty—was it not?"

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"Terrible! horrible!" he exclaimed with a shudder, as he recalled the feelings of that momentous instant. She looked sympathetically into his eyes.

"And you did it," she cried, "because you felt that you must and will be wholly what you profess to be? It is right—the only right; I feel it so. I will try to imitate you, and rise above the half-heartedness which is the bane of existence, and which makes the firm path of life a trembling, swaying bridge. I am yours, wholly yours; I have none other gods but yours, and for love of you I will learn to love your God—for you have often and often called him a God of Love."

"And He is a God of Love!" cried Constantine, "and you will know him and confess him even without teaching; for our Saviour lives in every heart that is filled with love. Oh! Gorgo, I have destroyed that beautiful idol, but I will let you see that even a Christian can duly value and cherish beauty in his home and in his heart."

"I am sure of it," she exclaimed joyfully. "The world goes on its way and does not quake, in spite of the fall of Serapis; but I feel as though in my inmost soul a world had perished and a new one was created, nobler and purer, and perhaps even more lovely than the old one!"

He pressed her hand to his lips; she signed to him to follow her and led the way to her father's couch. Porphyrius was sitting up, supported in the physician's arms; his eyes were open, and as they entered he greeted them with a faint smile.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Great happiness, and mingled therefor with bitter sorrow It is not by enthusiasm but by tactics that we defeat a foe Rapture and anguish—who can lay down the border line

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